

MEDITATIONS FOR TEVET

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
mercy and truth go before you.¹



Mercy³

But You, O Lord, are a G-d merciful (*rachem*) and gracious (*chanan*), Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness (*hesed*) and truth.⁴

¹ Psalm 89:14

² Image by Raja Selvaraj, released under Creative Commons license.

³ The fullness of Biblical mercy is revealed in a combination of three Hebrew words:

1. *Rachem* - the Hebrew word most often translated as mercy in the Tanakh. Related to the Hebrew word for womb, *rachem* is a tender, protected place where life springs forth. To live in G-d's *rachem* is to live in G-d's womb.

2. *Hesed* - a Hebrew word most often translated as loving-kindness but also at times as mercy. *Hesed* is relational mercy, covenantal faithfulness and love.

3. *Chanan* - the third Hebrew word translated as mercy. It touches on mercy in the context of pity, forgiveness, and grace.

⁴ Psalm 86:15

According to the Midrash, G-d first intended to rule with stern justice the world He created. Realizing, however, that it would not endure, He gave precedence to divine mercy, allying it with divine justice.

An old tradition maintains the the Holy One, blessed be He, prays. What kind of prayer? Abba Arika (Rab), a celebrated sage who died in 247, suggested the following:

May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, that My mercy may prevail over My other attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and on their behalf stop short of the limit of stern justice.⁵

Mercy rather than justice is regarded as the outstanding attribute of G-d. The rabbis speak of the “thirteen attributes of compassion” (Exodus 34:6-7). While one of the most often used synonyms of G-d is “Compassionate One” (*Rahmana*), no synonym has been coined to denote the Lord as dispenser of justice.⁶

The following meditations are taken from the writings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In this tenth Hebrew month of Tevet may we draw closer to the heart of G-d and His desire to continually and unceasingly reach out in mercy and compassion to a broken world.

TEVET - 1

G-d’s concern for justice grows out of His compassion for man. The prophets do not speak of a divine relationship to an absolute principle or idea, called justice. They are intoxicated with the awareness of G-d’s relationship to His people and to all men. Justice is not important for its own sake; the motivation for justice, and the validity of its exercise lie in the blessings it brings to man. For justice, as stated above, is not an abstraction, a value. Justice exists in relation to a person, and is something done by a person. An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt. What is the image of a person? A person is a being whose anguish may reach the heart of G-d”

The Prophets, 276

TEVET - 2

His law is mercy; His mercy is law.

Man Is Not Alone, 118

⁵ *Berachot 7a*

⁶ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion For Truth*, 131

TEVET - 3

Compassion is the key. It is better to limit belief in G-d's power than to dampen faith in G-d's mercy. Rabbi Akiva viewed all history through the lens of trust in G-d's mercy. G-d participates in His creatures' suffering...⁷

Rabbi Heschel quoting Rabbi Akiva in
Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations, 119

TEVET - 4

G-d...is all concern, too merciful to remain aloof to His creation. He not only rules the world in majesty of His might; He is personally concerned and even stirred by the conduct and fate of man. "His mercy is upon all His works" (Psalm 145:9).

Man Is Not Alone, 244

TEVET - 5

Between mercy and power, mercy takes precedence - and to the mercy of Heaven there is no limit.

Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations, 121

TEVET - 6

Everything depends on G-d's mercy.

Ibid., 184

TEVET - 7

Are we worthy of entering into His mercy, of being a matter of concern to Him? The answer is given in prayer. Prayer is the affirmation of the preciousness of man.

The Insecurity of Freedom, 256

TEVET - 8

Prayer is more than a cry out of anguish. It is rather a moment of sensing His mercy.

Ibid., 257

TEVET - 9

What obtains between man and G-d is not mere submission to His power or dependence upon His mercy. The plea is not to obey what He wills but to do what He is.

⁷ In considering G-d's omnipotence and G-d's goodness in relation to suffering.

TEVET - 10

If the rise of the sun is but a daily routine of nature, there is no reason to say, *In mercy Thou gives light to the earth and to those who dwell on it...every day constantly.*

Ibid., 36

TEVET - 11

Beyond all mystery is the mercy of G-d. It is a love, a mercy that transcends the world, its value and merit. To live by such a love, to reflect it, however numbly, is the test of religious existence.

G-d in Search of Man, 162

TEVET- 12

To imitate G-d, to act as he acts in mercy and love, is the way of enhancing our likeness. Man becomes what he worships.

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays, 86

TEVET - 13

Man is and has the instrument of G-d, which he may or may not use in consonance with the grand design. Life is clay, and righteousness the mold in which G-d wants history to be shaped. But human beings, instead of fashioning the clay, deform the shape. G-d needs mercy, righteousness; His needs cannot be satisfied in space, by sitting in pews, by visiting temples, but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man is charged with G-d's mission.

Insecurity of Freedom, 97

TEVET - 14

"I will betroth you to myself forever; I will betroth you to myself in righteousness and in justice, in kindness and in mercy. I will betroth you to myself in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord." It is an act of betrothal, a promise to marry...It is an act of G-d, falling in love with His people. But the engagement depends on righteousness, justice, kindness, mercy.

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays, 132

TEVET - 15

Even G-d's relation to the world is characterized by the polarity of justice and mercy... Taken abstractedly, both terms seem to be mutually exclusive, yet in actual living they involve each other; the separation of the two is fatal to both.

G-d in Search of Man, 341

TEVET - 16

It is true that not only the world He created but even His relation to the world is characterized by the polarity of justice and mercy...When His justice is imposed, His mercy is afflicted. Yet in His own being he is One.

Insecurity of Freedom, 137

TEVET - 17

G-d does not judge the deeds of man impassively, in a spirit of cool detachment. His judgment is imbued with a feeling of intimate concern. He is the father of all men, not only a judge; He is a lover engaged to his people, not only a king. G-d stands in a passionate relationship to man. His love or anger, His mercy or disappointment is an expression of His profound participation in the history of Israel and all men.

Ibid., 160

TEVET - 18

He who lives by faith finds himself in the community of countless men of all ages, of all nations, to whom it was shown...that love of mercy is stronger than power.

Man is Not Alone, 163

TEVET - 19

What sense is there in imploring the mercy of G-d?... The fact that man with undaunted sincerity pours into prayer the best of his soul springs from the conviction that there is a realm in which the acts of faith are puissant and potent, that there is an order in which things of spirit can be of momentous consequence.

Ibid., 239,240

TEVET - 20

When G-d came to create the world and reveal what was hidden in the depths and disclose the light out of darkness, they were all wrapped in one another, and therefore light emerged from darkness, and from the impenetrable came forth the profound. So, too... from mercy issues judgement...

G-d in Search of Man, 371

TEVET - 21

The psalmist's great joy is in proclaiming: "Truth and mercy have met together" (Psalm 85:11). Yet frequently faith and lack of mercy enter a union, out of which bigotry is born.

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays, 238

TEVET- 22

His is only a single way: His power is His love, His justice is His mercy. What is divergent to us is one in Him.

Man is Not Alone, 119

TEVET - 23

There exists a harmony between the good deeds of a human and the Infinite Holiness, between the compassion of a human being and the mercy of the Eternal. The spirituality that flows from our actions is not fleeting, transient, or solitary in a silent cosmos. The music of refined actions, the melody of a noble soul, is woven into the tapestry or eternal music which G-d Himself composed.

Ibid., 62

TEVET - 24

It takes a great effort to realize before Whom we stand. It is a knowledge in which the whole person is involved; the mind, the heart, body, and soul. To know it is to forget everything including the self. At best, we can only attain it for an instant...

What then is left for us to do except to pray for the ability to pray, to bewail our ignorance of living in His presence? And even if such prayer is tinted with vanity, His mercy accepts and redeems our feeble efforts.

G-d in Search of Man, 407

TEVET - 25

The Sabbath is more than a day...It is eternity within time...Every Friday eve we must kindle the lights in the soul, enhance our mercy, deepen our sensitivity.

Ibid., 418

TEVET - 26

In beseeching Him for bread, there is one instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger nor to food, but to His mercy. This instant is prayer. We start with a personal concern and live to feel the utmost.

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays, 349

TEVET - 27

Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will upon G-d; he seeks to impose G-d's will and mercy upon himself.

Ibid., 259

TEVET - 28

Burnt offerings, sacrifices are an important part of Biblical piety. And yet, I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, understanding (knowledge) of G-d, rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6).

G-d in Search of Man, 27

TEVET - 29

The cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous, if there is no cry for eternal life prior to descending to the grave. Eternity is not perpetual future but perpetual present. He has planted in us the seed of eternal life. The world to come is not only a hereafter but also a here-now.

Our greatest problem is not how to continue but how to return. "How can I repay unto the Lord all His bountiful dealings with me?" (Psalm 116:12). When life is an answer, death is a homecoming. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:14). For our greatest problem is but a resonance of G-d's concern: How can I repay unto man all his bountiful dealings with me? "For the mercy of G-d endureth forever."

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays, 378