

THE NESIYA INSTITUTE  
High Holy Day Study Guide  
5771/2010

CALLING OUT FOR GOODNESS:  
ALONE & TOGETHER



וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל-פְּנֵיו, וַיִּקְרָא:  
ה', ה', אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן –  
אֲרַךְ אַפַּיִם, וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת.  
נָצַר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים, נִשָּׂא עֵוֹן וּפְשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה;  
וַיִּקְהַה...  
– תְּפִילַת יָמִים נוֹרָאִים

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed:  
"The Lord! The Lord! A God Compassionate and Gracious,  
Slow to Anger, Abounding in Kindness and Faithfulness,  
extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin;  
and Cleanses..."  
– *from the High Holiday Prayer Service*



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## Sources for Reflection

### TRANSFORMING GOD

R. Yochanan said: "And God passed before him and said [the thirteen attributes]..." – If the text had not written this, it would have been impossible to state. This text teaches that God wrapped himself [in a *tallit*] like a cantor and showed Moses the order of the prayer. God said to him: Whenever Israel sins, perform this service before me and I will forgive them."

– *Talmud Rosb Hashanah 17b*

#### PEOPLEHOOD & INDIVIDUALITY

Peoplehood consciousness will not happen if individuals are placed in a classroom or ceremony in which they sit passively. In order to internalize the value of Peoplehood, the individual needs an opportunity to express individuality. The sophisticated Peoplehood program empowers participants to take concrete actions which evoke a sense of commitment to his or her personal Jewish journey and to the global Jewish People. An individual enters into a relationship with the Jewish collective that is at once a personal, and hence meaningful, but at the same time plays out in a collective framework.

– *Best Practices of Organizations that Build Jewish Peoplehood*,  
Dr. Ezra Kopelovitz and  
Dr. Shlomi Ravid  
May 2010

#### ALONE AND TOGETHER

And the Lord said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have asked; for you have truly gained My favor and I have singled you out by name." He said, "Oh, let me see your presence!" And He answered, "I will make My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But," He said, "you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live." And the Lord said, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen."

– *Exodus 33:18-23*

The Lord came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: "The Lord! The Lord! A God Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, Abounding in Kindness and Faithfulness, extending Kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of fathers upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations." Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, and said, "If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!"

– *Exodus 34:5-9*

### I AND WE

...How does Moses' desire for personal mystical revelation mesh with the narrative of sin and forgiveness? It is remarkable that while he speaks in the first person singular when he asks for the vision of God's glory, he modulates to the first person plural in v.9: 'If I have gained your favor...let God go in our midst...pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!' At the culmination of Moses' work of prayer, he identifies with the sin of the people; quietly, undramatically, the pronouns change. The fire in his bones, by this point, so thoroughly integrated that it sparks out unself-consciously in his syntax. Apparently minor inflections of his voice manifest his solidarity with his people and his transcendence of paranoid and narcissistic postures. Moses has found his *own* 'voice in the thin silence': he speaks with a quiet normalcy that seems to emerge seamlessly from the vision he has just experienced... It is, therefore, significant that this qualified encounter with God leads Moses to a full solidarity with his people: "Pardon our iniquity." This is the moment when he makes his profound choice, to speak out from the side of the human. The fire in his bones, now affects his language so that *I* and *we* shade off into one another. At this moment, God renews His covenant."

– *Aviva Zornberg, The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, pp. 437, 442

#### AUTONOMY AND INCLUSION

These two orientations [are] expressive of ... the two greatest yearnings in human experience. We see the expression of these longings everywhere, in ourselves and in those we know, in cultures East and West, modern and traditional. Of the multitude of hopes and yearnings we experience, these two seem to subsume the others. One of these might be called the yearning to be included, to be a part of, close to, joined with, to be held, admitted, accompanied. The other might be called the yearning to be independent or autonomous, to experience one's distinctness, the self-choseness of one's directions, one's individual integrity. David Barkan called this 'the duality of human experience,' the yearnings for 'communion' and 'agency' (1966)... But what is most striking about these two great yearnings is that they seem to be in conflict, and it is, in fact, their *relation* – this tension that is of more interest to me than either yearning by itself. I believe it is a lifelong tension. Our experience of this fundamental ambivalence may be our experience of the unitary, restless, creative motion of life itself... Biologists talk about evolution and its period of adaptation – of life organization – as involving a balance between differentiation and integration. These are cold and abstract words. I suggest they are a biological way of speaking of the phenomena we experience as the yearnings for autonomy and inclusion.

– *Kegan, The Evolving Self*, p. 107–108

## *The Nesiya Commentary*

How does Judaism integrate the need to see ourselves as unique individuals and belonging members of a larger community? If these two yearnings – to be distinct and included – are fundamentally in tension with one another, how can this tension be a resource for personal growth?

In his book *The Evolving Self* (1982), Robert Kegan argues that personality development depends upon an ongoing search to reconcile these two competing yearnings. Kegan's theory suggests that the struggle to balance these two needs is essential to developing one's capacity for intimacy and interdependence. Kegan also suggests that relationships and "settings" are critical in providing individuals with opportunities to construct and reconstruct how to balance these two competing needs and achieve the highest levels of moral virtue, integrity, productivity, fulfillment, and leadership.

Influenced by Kegan's work, Nesiya programs have always tried to address both the growth of participants as unique individuals and their belonging to a larger community. Nesiya has also always assumed that Judaism embodies a dual emphasis on seeing oneself as unique and as a member of a communal and historic enterprise.

When we gather in synagogue during the High Holy Days, we pray as individuals and as members of the Jewish people. One prayer which is recited repeatedly in the *Selichot* and High Holy Day services is the proclamation by God of the thirteen divine attributes: "The Lord! the Lord! A God Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, Abounding in Kindness and Faithfulness, extending Kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving Iniquity, Transgression and Sin; and Cleanses"(from Exodus 34:6-7).

Why does this recitation of divine names play such a central role in the High Holy Day prayers? How is this act supposed to help us toward personal transformation and renewal? How is our repetition of God's description of His own names supposed to serve as a powerful and inspiring moment of prayer? The story of Moses' negotiation with God, from which these verses are taken, begins to address these questions, and teaches us much about the process of calling for transformation and renewal, on solitary, interpersonal, and communal levels.

The divine attributes are proclaimed by God in response to Moses' repeated pleas that God forgive the Jewish people after the building of the golden calf. One of the remarkable aspects of Moses' protracted negotiations with God is his dual insistence on God giving him special "favor" in his own personal relationship with God and, at the same time, insisting that God forgive and return His presence to the "midst" of the Jewish people.

This was not always the case. Soon after the building of the golden calf, God offers to create a new nation with Moses as the leader and to wipe out the people entirely. Moses convinces God to renounce this plan, but when he sees the golden calf, Moses himself becomes furious and smashes the tablets. When Moses asks God again to forgive the people, he threatens to resign if God does not grant forgiveness. God insists that the journey of the people to the land of Israel must continue under Moses' leadership. However, God twice tells Moses that He will no longer be in the midst of the people, because close proximity of the divine presence to a "stiff-necked people" will lead to their destruction. (Exodus 32:10-33:5)

When Moses again challenges God's decision to withhold His Presence, he does so on two levels. He speaks both as a leader responsible for the people and also out of a passionate desire for an intimate encounter with God. What's remarkable about Moses' plea is the way in which his personal necessity and communal responsibility become interwoven, and, increasingly, predicated upon one another (see Exodus 33:12-13).

Although God assures Moses that His presence "will go" and God will "lighten your burden," Moses continues to insist that the journey toward the Land of Israel cannot continue unless God is with the people; he twice refers to "I and Your people" (Exodus 33:15-16). Here again, Moses's plea is distinguished by a dual concern for both his own special relationship with God and his concern for the people.

But if God has already agreed to go, why does Moses repeat the request? Many classical commentaries point to the inclusion of the phrase "I and Your people" as the central point of Moses's challenge. Moses is declaring that for God "to go" and be with him is not enough. God must also agree to renew his relationship with the people, and to dwell among them in spite of their failures. Another midrash suggests that Moses is challenging God to "change his face," to go from anger to loving kindness. From both of these perspectives, Moses is asking God to transform himself, to change who He is in order to enable His relationship with the people to continue.

God's next response is positive, but vague: "I will do this thing that you have asked..." It is at this point that Moses begs for an exclusive revelation. "Oh, let me see your Presence!" In response to this plea, God promises to Moses that he will "make all My goodness pass before you" and "proclaim before you the name Lord..." The choreography and location of the revelation make clear that what Moses will see will be limited; "you will see my back; but My face must not be seen." After the writing of the second tablets, God comes down in a cloud, passes before Moses, and proclaims the thirteen divine attributes. (Ex. 33:17-34:9).

With God's self-proclamation, Moses achieves new knowledge of God's nature. Incredibly, though, Moses is still not satisfied. He makes one last plea for God to unequivocally commit to staying in the people's midst, which he again links to his own relationship with God: "...If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!" Aviva Zornberg describes this remarkable moment as one in which Moses finds "his *own* voice" and "full solidarity with his people." Zornberg suggests that Moses' counterpointing of identities, in which "I and *we* shade off into one another," results in God being willing to renew His covenant with the people. In the midst of his most ecstatic and private encounter with God, Moses speaks on behalf of the community.

Moses' character, in these moments, reflects a dual commitment to his own personal necessity and to the community – which inform and benefit one another. This capacity to see oneself as both alone and together – as both a solitary and distinct person and as a member of a larger community – reflect the qualities of an interdependent personality, who is deeply able to attend to himself and others, without ever losing an ability to distinguish between them. Moses' engagement of God as both an individual and leader secures a new language for the people's relationship with God.

The Talmud brings a striking statement from the amora Rabbi Yochanan about this story: "And God passed before him and said [the thirteen attributes]..." – If the text had not written this, it would have been impossible to state. This text teaches that God wrapped himself [in a *tallit*] like a cantor and showed Moses the order of the prayer. God said to him: "Whenever Israel sins, perform this service before me and I will forgive them."

R. Yochanan is saying the story reveals a radical truth: God calls out the ways in which he wants to be called. When God calls out new names for His own qualities, He gives Moses and the Jewish people throughout history the power to change Him. God gives us the power to change God. If we call out to God as a God of forgiveness and love, that is what He will be. If we affirm His kindness, His presence will be one of kindness.

How might we apply this model of transformation and change to our relationships with other people? Many of us think of change as an internal process. We decide on a new set of behaviors, attitudes, and responses and then attempt to implement those changes. **God's actions in the story of the thirteen attributes suggest that if we want to change or grow we need others to call to us in a new way. Our relationship with others is an essential component in our attempt to transform ourselves.** In order to unlock our own potential kindness, love, and patience, we need others to demand it from us. We need those around us to identify the better person we can be and to call that person into being.

Perhaps this is why we enter the New Year as a community. We recognize that our power to transform ourselves as individuals is inevitably connected to the investment and commitment of those around us. We must all engage in a process of identifying the potential in others and calling their potential into being. By opening ourselves to hearing this call, we create the possibility of becoming the person we continually strive to be. Perhaps we should not only be asking for forgiveness at this time of year; we should also invite others to affirm and demand the goodness in us as we do the same for them.

Let us all be blessed by a New Year in which we strengthen our abilities to call out for goodness – alone and together. And let us strengthen ourselves as unique individuals and members of caring and dynamic communities.

### *Questions to Consider*

1. Name some of the qualities, or attributes, that you would like other people to "call out to you" in order to help you become the person you strive to be. Are there any qualities you feel would be helpful to "call out" to someone close to you?
2. How do you see yourself struggling with the balance between individuality and belonging in your own life?
3. When has being part of community helped you develop your uniqueness? Were there times when your community kept you from thriving?