

# The 13 Attributes of Mercy: A Double-Edged Sword (or: The Best Way to Receive Atonement)

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## What Are the 13 Attributes of Mercy?

The 13 Attributes of Mercy (Shelosh-'Esreh Middot HaRakhamim) are the foundational divine qualities revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai after the sin of the Golden Calf. Recorded in Exodus 34:6–7, these attributes represent the ultimate framework for forgiveness, compassion, and divine grace within Judaism. They are prominently chanted during Selichot (penitential prayers) and High Holiday services like Yom Kippur.

## Exodus 34:5-7

וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעָנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ שֵׁם וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה:  
וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה | עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְשָׂגִוִן אֶרֶץ אֲפִים וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת:  
נֹאֵר חֶסֶד לְאֵלִים נִשְׂא עֲוֹן וּפִשַׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנָּקֶה פֶקֶד | עֲוֹן אֲבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בָּנֵי בָנִים עַל-  
שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים:  
וַיִּמְהַר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקַּד אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה:

<sup>5</sup> Now the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord. <sup>6</sup> And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “**The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in goodness and truth,** <sup>7</sup>keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

## Numbers 14:1-20

וַתִּשָּׂא כָל-הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת-קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכּוּ הָעָם בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא: וַיִּלְלֻ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ  
אֲלֵהֶם כָּל-הָעֵדָה לֹא-מָתְנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לֹא-מָתְנוּ: וְלָמָּה יְהוָה מְבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת  
לְנַפֵּל בַּחֲרֹב נַשְׁיָנוּ וְטַפָּנוּ יִהְיוּ לְבָז הָלֹא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרָיִם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו נָתַנָּה רָאשׁ וְנָשׁוּבָה  
מִצְרָיִם:

וַיַּפֵּל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם לִפְנֵי כָל-קָהָל עַדָּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן-נֹון וְכָלֵב בֶּן-יִפְתָּה מִן-הַתַּרְיָם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ קִרְעוּ בְּגָדֵיהֶם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עַדָּת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר  
הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֵתָה טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד: אִם-חֲפָצִים בָּנוּ יְהוָה וְהָבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת  
וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-הִיא זָבֶת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ: אֲךָ בִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֵל-תִּמְדֹּד וְאַתֶּם אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֵל-עֶם הָאָרֶץ כִּי לֹחֲמֵנוּ  
הֵם סָר צִלָּם מֵעַלֵּיהֶם וַיִּהְיֶה אֹתָנוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הָעָדָה לְרָגוֹם אֹתָם בְּאַבְנִים וּכְבוֹד יְהוָה נִרְאָה בְּאַהֲל מוֹעֵד אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עַד־אֵנָּה יִנְאָצֵנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד־אֵנָּה לֹא־יִנְאָמִינוּ בִּי בְּכָל־הָאֱתוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ:  
אֶכְנֶה בְּדֶבֶר וְאוֹרֶשְׁנוּ וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אֶתֶּךָ לְגוֹי־גָדוֹל וְעָצוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וּשְׁמָעוּ מִצְוֹתַי כִּי־הֵעָלִיתָ בְּכַחֲךָ אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה מִקֶּרְבִּי: וַאֲמָרוּ אֶל־יְיֹשֵׁב הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת שְׁמָעוּ כִּי־אֲתָה יְהוָה בְּקִרְבָּה הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָיוּ בְּעֵינֵי נִרְאָה | אֲתָה יְהוָה וְעַנְנְךָ עִמָּד עֲלֵהֶם וּבַעֲמֹד עֲנֹן אֲתָה הַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם וּבַעֲמֹד אֵשׁ לָיְלָה: וְהִמַּתָּה אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד וַאֲמָרוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמָּעוּ אֶת־שְׁמִיעָךָ לֵאמֹר: מִבְּלֹתֵי יָכֹלֶת יְהוָה לְהַבִּיא אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם וַיִּשְׁחָטֻם בַּמִּדְבָּר:

וַעֲתָה יִגְדֹּל־נָא כֹחַ אֱדוּנִי כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לֵאמֹר: **יְהוָה אֶרֶץ אֶפְרַיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד נִשְׂא עֲוֹן וּפָשַׁע וְנָקָה לֹא יִנָּקָה פֶלֶאד עֲוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בְּנֵים עַל־שְׁלִשִׁים וְעַל־רִבְעִים:**

סֶלַח־נָא לַעֲוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּגְדֹל חֶסֶדְךָ וּכְאֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָתָה לָעָם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד־הַנֶּה:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה סֶלַחְתִּי כְּדִבַּרְךָ:

<sup>1</sup> So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. <sup>2</sup> And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup> Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” <sup>4</sup> So they said to one another, “Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.”

<sup>5</sup> Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel.

<sup>6</sup> But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, *who were* among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; <sup>7</sup> and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: “The land we passed through to spy out *is* an exceedingly good land. <sup>8</sup> If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, ‘a land which flows with milk and honey.’ <sup>9</sup> Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they *are* our prey (they shall be as food for our consumption); their protection has departed from them, and the Lord *is* with us. Do not fear them.”

<sup>10</sup> And all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Now the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of meeting before all the children of Israel.

<sup>11</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses: “How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? <sup>12</sup> I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

<sup>13</sup> And Moses said to the Lord: “Then the Egyptians will hear *it*, for by Your might You brought these people up from among them, <sup>14</sup> and they will tell *it* to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, Lord, *are* among these people; that You, Lord, are seen face to face and Your cloud stands above them, and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. <sup>15</sup> Now *if* You kill these people as one man, then the nations which have heard of Your fame will speak, saying, <sup>16</sup> ‘Because the Lord was not able to bring this people

to the land which He swore to give them, therefore He killed them in the wilderness.’<sup>17</sup> And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great, just as You have spoken, saying,<sup>18</sup> **‘The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression;** yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents on the children to the third and fourth generation.’<sup>19</sup> Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.”

<sup>20</sup>Then the Lord said: “I have pardoned, according to your word;

**OBSERVATION**

**When reciting the 13 attributes of mercy, we cut the verse in half, leaving out the attributes of strict justice.**

### Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b

“וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא.” אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: אֵלֶּמְלָא מִקְרָא כְּתוּב, אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְאֹמְרוֹ. מְלַמֵּד שְׁנֵתֵעֲטָף הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא פְּשָׁלִית צָבוּר, וְהִרְאָה לּוֹ לְמַנְשֵׁה סֶדֶר תְּפִלָּה. אָמַר לוֹ: כָּל זְמַן שִׁישְׂרָאֵל חוֹטְאִין — יַעֲשֹׂוּ לְפָנַי כְּסֶדֶר הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי מוֹחֵל לָהֶם. “ה' ה'” — אֲנִי הוּא קוֹדֵם שִׁיחַטָּא הָאָדָם, וְאֲנִי הוּא לְאַחַר שִׁיחַטָּא הָאָדָם וַיַּעֲשֵׂה תְּשׁוּבָה — “אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן”. אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה: בְּרִית כְּרוּתָה לְשֵׁלֶשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מִדּוֹת שְׂאִינָן חוֹזְרוֹת רִיקָם, שְׁנֵאֲמַר: “הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי כּוֹרֵת בְּרִית”.

The verse states: **“And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed...”** (Exodus 34:6). **Rabbi Yohanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this,** as it would be insulting to God’s honor. **The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the structure of the order of the prayer. He [the Holy One, Blessed be He] said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them.**

The verse continues: **“The Lord, the Lord,”** and it should be understood as follows: **I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins and performs repentance,** as God does not recall for him his first sins, since He is always **“God, merciful and gracious”** (Exodus 34:6).

**Rav Yehuda said: A covenant was made with the thirteen attributes that they will not return empty-handed,** meaning that if one mentions them, he will certainly be answered, as it is stated in this regard: **“Behold, I make a covenant”** (Exodus 34:10).

### Rashi on Rosh Hashanah 17b

**ברית כרותה לשלש עשרה מדות - הללו שאם יזכירום ישראל בתפלת תעניתם אינן חוזרות ריקם:**

A covenant was made with the thirteen attributes - These, that if Israel remembers them in the prayer of their fasts, they will not return empty handed.

### Tzror HaMor on Torah, Exodus 34:5

*Sefer Tzror HaMor* (Bundle of Myrrh) is a classical, multi-layered commentary on the Torah written by the Spanish Kabbalist and scholar Rabbi Avraham Sabba (1440–1510). It bridges the gap between literal text and hidden Jewish mysticism, making complex spiritual ideas approachable.

...והנה בכאן למדו סדר שלשה עשר מדות שבם מרחם ומכפר לחוטאים. וזאת היא תשובת שאלת הראני נא את כבודך. ולכן אמר ויעבור ה' על פניו. ללמדו היאך יסדר אלו הי"ג מדות. הוא והנמשכים אחריו לביטול הגזרות ולכפרת העונות. כאומרים ז"ל אלמלא מקרא כתיב אי אפשר לאומרו. כביכול נתעטף בטליתו ואמר לו כ"ז שישראל עושים כסדר הזה אינן חוזרות ריקם. שנא' הנה אנכי כורת ברית.

ופירושו ידוע שהרי אנו רואים הרבה פעמים בעונותינו שאנו מעוטפים בטלית ואין אנו נעניין. אבל הרצון כל זמן שישראל עושים כסדר הזה שאני עושה. לרחם לחנן דלים ולהאריך אפים ולעשות חסד אלו עם אלו. ולעבור על מדותיהן כאומרים כל המעביר על מדותיו וכו'. אז הם מובטחים שאינן חוזרות ריקם.

אבל אם הם אכזרים ועושי רשעה. כל שכן שבהזכרת י"ג מדות הם נתפסין. וזהו וחנותי את אשר אחון. מי שראוי לחון ולרחם עליו...

Now here we are taught the order of the Thirteen Attributes by which He [God] shows mercy and grants atonement to sinners. And this is the answer to the request [by Moses] "show me now Your glory." Therefore it says "and the Lord passed before his face" — to teach him [Moses] and those who follow after him how to arrange these Thirteen Attributes, in order to annul harsh decrees and atone for sins — as our Sages of blessed memory said: "Were it not written in the verse, it would be impossible to say it — as it were, He [God] wrapped Himself [in a prayer shawl] like a prayer leader and said to him: 'As long as Israel performs [this invocation] in this order, they will not return empty-handed,'" as it is said, "Behold, I am making a covenant."

The meaning of this [teaching] is well known, as we [all] see many times, because of our sins, that we wrap ourselves in the prayer shawl [and recite the Thirteen Attributes] and yet we are not answered.

But the true meaning [of this teaching] is that whenever Israel acts in this pattern that I [God] Myself act — i.e. to show mercy, to be gracious to the poor, to be slow to anger, to do kindness with one another, and to overlook one another's faults, as they [the Sages] taught: "whoever forgoes strict justice toward others..." — then they are assured that they [their prayers] will not return empty-handed.

However, if they are cruel and act wickedly, all the more so that when the Thirteen Attributes are invoked, they are held accountable [strictly]. This is the meaning of "and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" — to one who deserves to be shown grace and mercy.



**A Challenging question to the Tzror HaMor ?** How can we explain that we see good people who show mercy, are gracious to the poor, are slow to anger, do kindness with one another, and overlook one another's faults, and yet their prayers are not answered?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_  
Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_  
Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix: Be gracious and give the benefit of the doubt (the lesson Rav Ashi learned in a dream)

### Mishna Sanhedrin 10:2:

שְׁלֹשָׁה מְלָכִים וְאַרְבָּעָה הֶדְיוּטוֹת אֵין לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. שְׁלֹשָׁה מְלָכִים, יִרְבֵּעָם, אַחָאב, וּמְנַשֶּׁה.

**Three kings** mentioned in the Bible **and four commoners have no share in the World-to-Come**. The **three kings** are: **Jeroboam**, son of Nebat, and **Ahab**, both of whom were kings of Israel, **and Manasseh**, king of Judea.

### Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 102b:2-4

רב אַשִּׁי אֹקֵי אֶשְׁלֹשָׁה מְלָכִים. אָמַר: לְמַחֵר נִפְתַּח בְּחִבְרִין. אֵתָא מְנַשֶּׁה, אֵיתָחוּזִי לִיה בְּחֵלְמִיה. אָמַר: חֲבֵרָא וְחֲבִירֵי דְאַבוּד קָרִית לֹן? מַהִיכָא בְּעִית לְמִישְׁרָא הַמוֹצִיא? אָמַר לִיה: לֹא יִדְעָנָא. אָמַר לִיה: מַהִיכָא דְבְּעִית לְמִישְׁרָא הַמוֹצִיא לֹא גְמִירָתָא, וְחֲבֵרָא קָרִית לֹן? אָמַר לִיה: אֲגַמְרִיה לִי, וְלְמַחֵר דְּרִישְׁנָא לִיה מִשְׁמָךְ בְּפִירְקָא. אָמַר לִיה: מַהִיכָא דְקָרִים בִּישׁוּלָא. אָמַר לִיה: מֵאַחַר דְּחִפְיִמָת כּוּלִי הָאִי, מָאִי טַעְמָא קָא פְּלַחִיתוּ לְעִבוּדָה זָרָה? אָמַר לִיה: אִי הָנֹת הָתָם, הָנֹת נִקִּיטָת בְּשִׁיפּוּלִי גְלִימָא וְרַהֲטָת אֲבִתְרָאִי. לְמַחֵר אָמַר לָהּ לְרַבָּנֹן: נִפְתַּח בְּרַבּוּתָא.

One day **Rav Ashi ended** his lecture just before reaching the matter **of the three kings**. He **said** to his students: **Tomorrow we will begin** the lecture **with our colleagues** the three kings, who, although they were sinners, were Torah scholars like us.

**Manasseh**, king of Judea, **came and appeared to him in his dream**. Manasseh **said** to him angrily: **You called us your colleague and the colleagues of your father?** How dare you characterize yourself as our equal? Manasseh said to him: I will ask you, **from where are you required to begin** cutting a loaf of bread when reciting the blessing: **Who brings forth** bread from the earth? Rav Ashi **said to him: I do not know**.

Manasseh **said to him**: Even this, **from where you are required to begin** cutting a loaf of bread when reciting the blessing: **Who brings forth** bread from the earth, **you did not learn, and yet you call us your colleague?**

Rav Ashi **said to** Manasseh: **Teach me** this halakha **and tomorrow I will lecture** and cite it **in your name during** my public **lecture** delivered on the Festival.

Manasseh **said to him**: One cuts the loaf **from where it crusts** as a result of its **baking**.

Rav Ashi **said to him**: **Since you were so wise, what is the reason you engaged in idol worship?**

Manasseh **said to him**: **Had you been there** at that time, **you would have taken** and lifted **the hem of your cloak and run after me**.

**The next day** Rav Ashi **said to the Sages** as a prelude to his lecture: **We will begin with the treatment of our teachers**.