

The Thirteen Divine Attributes – David Levy (reprint)

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The Shlosh Esrei Middos or the Thirteen Attributes of G-d are the centrepiece of the Selichos prayers that we Ashkenazim say from the night or day after the Shabbos before Rosh Hashana (or two Shabbosos before if Rosh Hashana falls on a Monday or Tuesday) and Sefardim say from the beginning of Ellul in each case until the end of Yom Kippur. These Thirteen Attributes are also really the centrepiece of the Kol Nidre Service after the Amidah (but interspersed among and overshadowed by the tuneful Piyuttim) and of the N'eilah Service in the Chazan's repetition of the Amidah. (Some Machzorim like the once popular Routledge include these Selichos prayers in all five prayer services on Yom Kippur).

What is so special about them? Hash-m Himself taught them to Moshe (Sh'mos 34:6,7) when Moshe pleaded for the Bnei Yisroel to be forgiven after the episode of the Golden Calf. In Talmud Rosh Hashana 17b Rabbi Yochanan explained that we deduce from the wording preceding the Thirteen Attributes: "Hash-m passed before Moshe and proclaimed" that He said that whenever Yisroel sin they should perform this order of service before Him and He will forgive them. (They can only be recited effectively in a Minyan).

What exactly are the 13 Attributes? Most follow the view of Rabbenu Tam (Tosfos) that they are as follows (1) Hash-m (i.e G-d's mercy before the sin) (2) Hash-m (i.e His mercy after the sin) (3) Keil (G-d) (i.e showing even greater mercy) (4) Rachum (Merciful) (5) V'Chanun (and Compassionate) (6) Erech Apayim (Slow to Anger) (7) V'Rav Chesed (and Abundant in Kindness) (8) V'Emes (and Truth) (9) Notser Chesed Lo'alofim (Preserver of Kindness for Thousands of Generations) (10) Nosei Ovon (Forgiver of Iniquity i.e sin committed through lust or desire) (11) Vofesha (Forgiver of Transgression i.e sin committed as act of defiance) (12) V'Chato'oh (and Forgiver of Sin) (13) Nakei V'Lo y'nakei (He Who erases and does not erase i.e erases the sins of those who repent but not of those who do not repent (Talmud Yomah 86a) or He erases bit by bit so the punishment is bearable (Rashi))

Ramban agrees with Tosfos calculation but others (Rabbis Saadiah and Nissim Gaon and the Rif) say the first Hash-m is not one of the Thirteen Attributes and is connected with the preceding words; The Zohar, Arizal and the Kabbalists begin the Thirteen at Keil; Sefer Chassidim and Meiri only start the Thirteen at Rachum

Is it enough just to recite the Thirteen Attributes or do we have to emulate G-d in doing them ourselves? The statement of Rabbi Yochanon that Yisroel should perform this service implies according to Alshich and Rabbi Z H Ferber that the doing is important. Rabbi Ferber uses the same idea to explain the duplication of the words "Racheim" and "Arachamenu" (I will surely have compassion on him) in Jeremiah 31:19 which is the last verse of the Zichronos section in the Rosh Hashana Musaf Amidah and the last verse of the second day's Haftorah. Racheim refers to Hash-m's darling son Ephraim (Israel) and only if he is merciful will Hash-m have mercy on him too.

B'nei Yisoschor, a Chassidic commentator, argues that as most accept that Keil is one of the Attributes and as it is impossible to emulate the power of G-d implied in this word then merely saying them must be sufficient. He finds support for this in the paragraph of Selichos which almost always precedes the Thirteen Attributes Keil Melech Yosheiv in which it says: Keil Horeiso Lonu Lomar Shlosh Esrei (G-d You have instructed us to say the Thirteen) i.e from the inclusion of Keil in the Thirteen we understand the importance of "saying" them.

Mindful of these ideas hopefully we can "say" the Thirteen Attributes with more meaning and hopefully even "perform" them.