

Yom Kippur Musings

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תודה רבה

Yom Kippur Musings

Yom Kippur, the most solemn and holy of all the festivals and holidays in the Israelite year, will soon be here. With the advent of this season, the themes of judgment, mercy, and kingship are prevalent. For the past fifteen years, my own inner landscape has forced me to grapple with the whole notion of HaShem's theodicy.¹ Last Yom Kippur it was my sincere desire that I would come to some satisfactory resolution of the issue and thus would no longer be confronted with such a daunting and seemingly irreconcilable dilemma. Alas! Here I stand with 5772 fast approaching and I find myself with the same exact conundrum, having made no progress toward a satisfactory resolution.

The Issue

How do I reconcile God's attribute of mercy with God's attribute of judgment? On a very superficial level this issue would seem simplistic. The wicked, the evil doers get what is coming to them - namely God's judgment and those who are faithful to God and His commandments get their just reward- his everlasting mercy. One need only read any edition of any newspaper to rapidly uncover the fallacy of this argument.

1. Did these two innocent children- Caylee Anthony or Leiby Kletzky deserve to die such horrifying deaths?

1. Theodicy - 'etymology- 'theos'-God' 'dike'- justice- the justification of God. The defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of physical and moral evil.

2. Did all those who lost their life savings due to insider trading and the collapse of Wall Street (as a consequence of corporate greed) deserve such a fate?
3. Do almost 50% of African American males deserve to be either under or unemployed? Is this in some ways God's judgment?
4. Do those who are wealthy deserve to pay far below their fair share of taxes?
5. Are those, who shall we say, through a flip of the cards, were born in Somalia deserve to starve to death? Are all those Somalians really wicked?
6. Should I, who by seemingly happenstance, was born in the USA, deserve to have better access to health care than 75% of everyone else on the planet earth? Am I that much more righteous and deserving of God's mercy?
7. Should one child who happened to be born into an affluent family have access to a better education than another child born into a less affluent family? Is this an example of God's justice and mercy?

I must confess and acknowledge that I do not find at all edifying any of the typical answers that individuals, philosophers, would-be philosophers and religious dogma offer as solutions or answers to any of these scenarios. Nor do I find them satisfactory. If I may be tongue-in-cheek and non-academic for just a moment---

1. Everybody who is 'good' will get what they deserve in the by and by, the world to come, heaven or paradise. Patience has never been my strong suit, so I do not see why we need wait. For that matter, what real assurances do we have that there is a "world to come." I know that this statement is an anathema to any self-respecting Israelite, but I would be

fully satisfied and thankful for the myriad of experiences that I have had in "this world." It would not in the least upset me if "this is it" or "what you see, is what you get" were the end product of life" Delayed gratification making up for present suffering? I think not!

2. Everybody who is evil will burn in hell or have to endure some other eternal torment. This statement, in its essence is not an Israelite understanding of hell, teleology or eschatology, but this view has creep so much into the religious or spiritual parlance of contemporary culture, that I feel compelled to address it. They did it here on earth and they should pay for it here and now! What merciful being/ entity would see any of His creation tormented forever and ever with no chance to ever repent? Now that is cruelty! God is the only omniscient entity in the entire universe and did He not know how His creation would turn out? Why did He create us with a propensity for sin in the first place? Perhaps He should not have given us 'freewill." If He wanted a perfect world, with perfect, sinless humans, then we should not have been created. If we were never a thought in His eternal mind, then He would not now be grieved to his very heart!² It's not my fault!

3. Some appeal to the oft quoted scripture-

כי לא מחשבותי מחשבותיכם ולא דרכיכם דרכי נאם יהוה:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD (Isaiah 55:8).

Those who utilize this angle of argumentation, state that what may seem like injustice to us, is in God's infinite and all-knowing God-self,

2. Genesis 6:6

indeed just. God can see and comprehend that which we cannot even fathom. I agree that a finite being such as myself, cannot even begin to imagine or contemplate anything, or anyone that dwells in eternity. I was not there when he brought order and symmetry to the תְּהִי הַיָּמִים. I was barely a thought in God's mental landscape when He laid the foundations of the universe. I was not present, nor do I have an understanding of how He commanded the great oceans to be formed and marked their borders. The morning stars were not formed by me, nor can I command the angels to rejoice.³ No, I do not have an inkling of any of this. In light of my self-admission of utter ignorance of the physics of creation, it may seem like incredible hubris that I should ask God to defend that which He gave birth to.

In my defense, just as a parent does not offer the same explanation to their young child as they would to their adolescent, I think that God could find an explanation that I am capable of understanding. Granted, there were some things I was told to do as a child without an explanation, but later in life when I became an adult, a parent and a wife, I understood the reasoning behind my parent's commands. No matter how long I live, I will never be the King of the universe, the All Holy, but explanations that are offered to a child who has limited understanding, are designed to motivate the child in the direction that is required for the moment. I am only requesting sufficient explanation of His divine sense of justice in order that I may be a more dutiful servant in this moment of eternity.

הַסֵּתֶר לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְהַגְלַת לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ עַד עוֹלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת
 The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.
 (Deut 29:29).

3. see Job 38:4-41

Time has no meaning for God, an infinite being. Time does have meaning to me. Since my time is limited, why can't God in his infinite wisdom make known to me how any of this is just or in His infinite plans for the world and my life in particular?

4. Some people argue that the reason things in this current world are so topsy-turvy and ill-balanced is because the world is being judged and is under God's wrath or judgement. I would argue that when has the world not been in judgment? Ok, let me see -- there was a brief moment in Gan Eden or the garden of Eden when everything was pristine. Unfortunately that period was brief and very shortly thereafter, it was all downhill from there. Do you remember these incidents --eating from the forbidden tree, Cain's murder of Abel, the sons of the gods and the daughters of men, the tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah and the generation of the flood? I did not even make it past Bereshit (Genesis) and we already have a decaying moral climate and a world in disarray. I know that for a brief moment Noah and Abraham come to the rescue but then things continue in their downward spiral. I could jump to any time or epoch in world history and find more of the same--natural disasters such as the earthquake recorded in Amos⁴, the Bubonic plague that nearly wiped out Europe, the crusades that were fought in the name of the supposedly competing Gods of Islam and Christianity, the European near-destruction of Native American life and culture, the horrors of the African slave trade, tsunamis, השואה (The Shoah), the horrors of years of apartheid reign and rule in South Africa, the European attempt to destroy the Aboriginal cultures in Australia, the colonization of Africa and the tremendous economic, social, political, and moral upheaval and rippling effects it caused throughout an entire continent, and the influenza pandemic of

4. Amos 1:1

the early 20th century. Need I go on? I easily could....! When has the world not been in so-called judgment?

I am not willing to let God off the hook, even for a single moment.⁵ Some may feel as though I am being rather audacious and forthright to believe that God should feel compelled to offer me any answers. After all, who am I? מה אנוש כי תזכרנו ובן אדם כי תפקדנו --what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? Psalm 8:4.

Does not God demonstrate that he cares for me by providing me with instructions and guidance? What I am seeking, by asking what might be perceived as difficult, but in my mind necessary questions, is to assure that I am indeed following the path that God has chosen for me. Does not God say:

כי אנכי ידעתי את המחשבת אשר אנכי חשב עליכם נאם יהוה מחשבות שלום ולא לרעה לתת לכם אחרית ותקוה --For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.- Jeremiah 29:11.

The Torah is a blueprint for life and it is a 'sure and sufficient guide.'⁶ However, at times the Torah needs elucidation and clarification. Are not the answers I seek indeed just and justified?

5. These insights and thoughts (1-4) are in large measure formulated and concretized through conversations with Prof. Gerald J. Wingster, Assistant Professor, SUNY-Nassau Community College, Dept. of Mortuary Science

6. Attributed to Elder William Saunders Crowdy - The first re-establisher of the Israelite way of life among people of African descent.

Karl Barth⁷ once said that we should travel through life with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." The idea being that one would inform the other. Armed with the newspaper in my left hand, I try to take culture and contemporary society seriously. I ask myself the hard questions concerning the intersection of modern life and Israelite values. How does my religious tradition effectively engage, complement and even challenge contemporary normative values?

With the Tanak in my right hand, I seek to live in continuity with those laws, statutes and judgements that HaShem revealed to us on Mt Sinai. While attempting to hold contemporary culture and God's laws in dynamic tension and contemplation, I continually seek to discover how I, as a member of a specific faith community, can faithfully, responsibly and effectively embody the Israelite way of life in a manner that responds seriously to our culture, our world and the particular story I find myself engulfed in.

Armed with a newspaper and the Tanak how do I respond to these questions?

1. Do evil doers really get what is coming to them?
2. Do the good righteous people really receive their just rewards in **this** world?
- 3.. If those who are faithful are rewarded (in **this** world) then why do the wicked also prosper?

Of course, the questions that I pose are not new but have been issues that throughout the ages have been grappled with from people of all religious traditions and persuasions. How does the Tanak, tradition and contemporary theological insight attempt to answer these questions?

7. Karl Barth- probably the foremost neo-orthodox theologian of the 20th century. His magnum opus is Kirchliche Dogmatik (Church Dogmatics).

The Tanak

The Psalmists and the Israelite prophets wrestled with the same issues of God's theodicy. Some saw the simple equation of righteousness = reward and wickedness=punishment, while others saw only the seeming injustice that was pervasive throughout their world.

Psalms 37:9

כי מרעים יכרתון וקוי יהוה המה יירשו ארץ:

For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

Psalms 37:28

כי יהוה אהב משפט ולא יעזב את חסידיו לעולם נשמרו זרע רשעים נכרת:

For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off;

Psalms 89:14

צדק ומשפט מכון כסאך חסד ואמת יקדמו פניך

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

Jeremiah 12:1

צדיק אתה יהוה כי אריב אליך אך משפטים אדבר אותך מדוע דרך רשעים צלחה שלו כל בגדי בגד:

You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?

Malachi 3:15

ועתה אנחנו מאשרים זדים גם נבנו עשי רשעה גם בחנו אלהים וימלטו:

So now we account the arrogant happy; they have indeed done evil and endured; they have indeed dared God and escaped.

God, in the Tanak, is multifaceted and complex. The biblical view does not bifurcate or separate mercy and justice. Justice is just as much a part of God's essence as is mercy and love.

Rabbinic Literature

The Rabbis of blessed memory also tried to hold God's mercy and judgement in dynamic tension and contemplation. There are hundreds of passages that discuss God's mercy and/or God's judgment.

We believe by the exact measure of God's judgement the world (because of the extent of the wickedness found in her) should be destroyed but the Rabbis said-

Yoma 38b

Even for the sake of one righteous man the world would have been created and for the sake of one righteous man it will continue

There are multiple Rabbinic aggadot that relate that the world continues to exist because God in his great mercy always allows 36 completely righteous people to exist in every generation

Sanhedrin 97b and Sukkah 45b

Abaye said: The world must contain not less than thirty-six righteous men in each generation who are vouchsafed [the sight of] the Shechinah's countenance, for it is written, Blessed are all they that wait lo² [for him]; the numerical value of 'lo' is thirty-six.

Pesikita Rabbatai 38b

Even though there be nine hundred and ninety-nine accusers against a man and only one who ascribes to him merit, God as it were inclines (the

scale) to merit....' The angel who informs God of the man's merit says to God 'punish him with sufferings and so in doing you bring him to repentance.'

Pesikita Rabbatai 166b

R. Abba b.Kahana said: On New Years God judges His creatures and finds merit in them, for he desires to acquit and not to condemn them, as it is said "As I live I desire not the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). God desires to justify His creatures , as it is said. "It pleased the Lord to justify him" (Isaiah 42:21⁸). Resh Lakish said: God says "In the hour when I conquer, I suffer loss, but in the hour when I am conquered, I gain. I conquered at the generation of the flood but I lost for I destroyed all those masses. So it was with the generation of the Tower of Babel, and with the men of Sodom. But when the Golden Calf was made, Moses conquered me, and I gained all those masses. So I acquit all my creatures so that I may not suffer loss.

Sanhedrin 90A

Even in the famous quotation that "all Israel has a part in the world to come...except these....he who maintains that the resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, he who states that the Torah was not divinely revealed, an Epikoros,⁹ and he who reads non-canonical books. Even for these excluded groups, efforts are made by the Rabbis to rehabilitate each group.

The Rabbis of the rabbinic era were not critical biblical scholars in the modern sense but they did recognize the significance of the differing

8. a playful mistranslation

9. A heretic

names of God found in the Tanak. They homilized that whenever אלהים (Elohim) was found in the text, this name referred to God's attribute of absolute justice and wherever יהוה (Yahweh) was found, this name referred to God's attribute of mercy. Thus, they too, similar to the Tanak, hold justice and mercy in dynamic tension. How we are judged depends upon the balance of His mercy and judgement. The rabbinic sources do not provide a monolithic view but the majority of evidence moves their scale decidedly toward mercy tempering God's judgment.

The Modern Era

In the contemporary era, theologians of all religious denominations have also had to grapple with this most perplexing problem of mercy and judgement. Reinhold Niebhur¹⁰ says:

"On the other hand the mercy of God, which strangely fulfills and yet contradicts the divine judgment, points to the incompleteness of all historic good, the corruption of evil in all historic achievements and the incompleteness of every historic system of meaning without the eternal mercy which knows how to destroy and transmute evil by taking it into itself."

Abraham Joshua Heschel's¹¹ writings give expression to the dichotomy of God's mercy and judgment. God continually finds himself torn between the compassion that He has for humankind even though He must simultaneously denounce humankind's propensity toward evil. This chronic thwarting of the Divine purpose leads to the ultimate judgment of God. God's judgment is manifested as Divine anger whose purpose is

10. Reinhold Niebhur- A 20th century Christian theologian who is best known for his synthesis of the Christian faith and modern realities of politics and diplomacy The Making of Modern Theology 19th and 20th Century Texts 'Reinhold Niebhur: Theologian of Public Life' pages 172-173

11. Abraham Joshua Heschel- a leading Jewish Rabbi, theologian and philosopher of the 20th century. See his work, The Prophets

not malevolent but corrective. This judgment or as Heschel calls 'suspended love' sole intent is to bring humanity back in proper alignment with the Divine purpose. For Heschel, the God of the Tanak has a stake in our destiny and humanity is God's ultimate concern. 'Pathos' then, is a simultaneous disclosure of God's ultimate concern for humanity and a concealment of His majestic power.

It is a continual struggle for God to try to balance His mercy and judgment. Heschel's understanding of divine 'pathos' is indeed striking and even quite compelling but in my estimation we are left with a very anthropomorphic deity.

Even in the theology that we preach/teach through our worship in song, Israelites express this dichotomy of Divine mercy and judgment. In one sentence, we sing equally of God's judgment and mercy without necessarily noting any discrepancy. We sing "The Lord is known by His judgments, which he executes. The Lord is known by his good works, The God of Abraham."¹²

Rabbi Harold Kushner struggles with the Divine theodicy in his well-known book, "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People." His conclusions, though thoughtful, strike me a bit simplistic in his attempts to absolve God of ultimate responsibility for evil and suffering. Kushner seems to dispel the notion that God is all powerful in favor of the notion that God is good. This view left me wondering why an omnipotent God cannot also be good? If I dispel with the biblical notion that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, I am left with a God that I find

12. This excerpt is from the song "O Lord, My God, How Great is Thy Name In All The Earth." It was composed by Elizabeth Wagner a member of Temple Bethel- headquartered in Suffolk (Belleville), VA

no need for. I do agree with him, as I have previously noted, that it rains on the just and unjust alike." For Kushner, the reason for this is because suffering is a random event and should be attributed to the "incomplete" ordering of a basically orderly universe. He notes that some suffering is caused by the evilness of others. This type of suffering cannot be avoided but rather is a consequence of humanity's free will. He believes that the very ability for humans to choose good or evil is the basic attribute that demarcates us as human. Were God to interfere with our ability to choose good or evil, then we would somehow be less human.¹³ Kushner's views leave me wondering if it is also true that so many good things happen to bad people because of universal randomness and human free-will? Kushner does admit that there are no ultimate answers to divine theodicy but there can be acceptable responses. We can acquiesce and decide that the world is not perfect and forgive God for not making a perfect world.

I am not the least satisfied by his responses. This Yom Kippur, now in addition to forgiving my fellow humans for their transgression against me, forgiving myself for my transgression against others and myself, must I also forgive God? On Yom Kippur, hopefully, God forgives us, for what I shall call our "humanness." This is a humanness that God, God-self created. While I whole-heartedly agree that forgiving is a powerful and freeing act but does God really need, want or require my forgiveness or any forgiveness in general?

13. I would argue that this insight of Kushner is not entirely true. Example- When God "hardened" Pharaoh's heart did He not take away Pharaoh's free will?

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Questions and even more questions abound. At this point I might appeal to what has been referred to as the 'Wesleyan¹⁴ Quadrilateral' of Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason

1. Every interpretation begins with **1. Scripture**. Scripture should be the source of our interpretation. Any interpretive norm should be judged against the Bible as a whole.

2. **Tradition** calls into question our interpretation of Scripture and should ultimately force us to re-examine Scripture. Tradition and traditional interpretive norms ultimately raise questions about our own personal experiences and interpretations. The literature of our tradition helps us to consider perspectives that we may have overlooked. Tradition then serves as a lens through which we interpret. Scripture must be balanced and tested with experience and reason.

3. Experience- How do our experiences reinforce traditional norms or do we find that our life experiences are at odds with traditional interpretations? How is scripture seen and experienced in practical application in one's life?

Helping us through our interpretation of Scripture with the aid of tradition and experience is reason.

4. **Reason** is a precursor and unlike Scripture it is not a source of theological inquiry but forms a dynamic matrix with tradition and experience in our evaluation and interpretation of Scripture. Obviously, without the aid of reason we would have no method to evaluate, synthesize and analyze our sources or our interpretations of Scripture.

14. John Wesley- a leader of the Methodist movement in the late 18th century

All four- Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason have a role to play but the final and ultimate source of our understanding should be from Scripture 'sola scriptura.' "This quadrilateral, while it helps us to examine scripture or more importantly, I think that it helps scripture to examine us. If I were to apply the principles of this quadrilateral to mercy and judgment as described and presented in Scripture, I would have to argue for a more diverse and complex view of both concepts. With my personal experience, my faith community's experience and rabbinic tradition informing my understanding of Scripture, my reasonable conclusion would argue for God's ultimate judgment being the deciding attribute as to how God rules the world. His judgment is sometimes tempered by mercy but none- the- less, judgment is always lurking.

I am not sure that the Tanak, rabbinic tradition, my experience or theological reasoning has answered my dilemma but as a consequence of this exploration I am left with even more basic questions concerning epistemology¹⁵- meaning how does one know anything about God? The only means by which I can know anything about God is by means of his self-disclosure. God reveals himself primarily by means of His Word (Torah) and secondarily through nature.

If God does self-disclosure in Torah, how am I to understand his self-willed disclosure? Even with Scripture, as is evidenced by Rabbinic discourse, there can never be a reading that does not involve interpretation. Reading as an enterprise, in and of itself is an act of interpretation.

If the Psalmist, the Prophets, the Theologians, our Rabbis of old and our notable contemporary Rabbis do not have a suitable answer to this vexing question of Divine mercy and judgment, how can I, or any other ordinary human being expect to extract a solution?

15. Epistemology- The study of knowledge and justified belief. The study of the origins, nature and limits of human knowledge.

Yes, according to the absolute justice and judgment of God I, nor you, nor any human who has reached majority should deserve this Yom Kippur (or any other Yom Kippur for that matter) to be found written in the Book of life because...

כי יצר לב האדם רע מנעוריו, every inclination of humanity's heart is evil from childhood.(Gen 8:21).

However, God's mercy abounds and...

ויזכר כי בשר המה רוח הולך ולא ישוב:

He remembered that they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return (Psalms 78:39).

Perhaps my answers can be found in that famous and beautiful Rosh Hashanah piyyut- ונתנה תוקף (Un'taneh Tokef)¹⁶ that demonstrates God' mercy-

Repentance, Prayer and Charity can mitigate the severity of the decree.

- 1.. Repentance** - turning away from the source of all suffering and turning toward the source of all ultimate good.
- 2. Prayer-** Being a staunch advocate before heaven and earth for **mercy for all** of God's creation. Yes, that includes those whom we do not like, who get on our last nerve and those who have done us much evil.
- 3. Charity-** sharing of the abundance of our personal and corporate resources for תיקון עולם (tikkun olam). Tikkun Olam should help establish a righteous world by the perpetuation of ongoing righteous behavior.

16. The first line of the piyyut is-- [Let us now relate the power of this day's holiness](#)

With tikkun olam, will the societal ills that I described in prior pages be alleviated?

But what of those who don't pray, practice charity or repent? Well, this Yom Kippur pray for them that they may come to know the true and mighty God of Israel. I once heard the saying 'Pray like everything is dependent on God but live your life as if everything is dependent on you.'

After an examination of the sources I find myself at a critical impasse on the subject of the 'justice' of Divine justice and mercy. I shall have to satisfy myself with the Talmudic dictum- תיקו (teiku). If there are questions that can not be answered by a particular Mishnah and the pursuing Gemara discussion, the Rabbis would end that section with the one word- תיקו. Although there are other etymologies for תיקו, I prefer the acronym- תשבי יתרץ קושיות ואבעיות - 'Elijah the prophet will resolve these questions.' I could resolve myself to remain trapped at this juncture of my philosophical and theological inquiry but I will take to heart the lesson of the master-The Rogatchover Gaon.¹⁷ In a famous story about one of his pupils, he taught that one cannot get stuck at any juncture in Talmud. Just as the Talmud continues for pages and pages after a תיקו, so then, we continue. I won't stop my inquiries but alas, life does continue! When Eliyahu (Elijah) ushers in the messianic age, then I know that he will answer my questions, but until then, תיקו.

I suspect that neither you or I are among the 36 righteous individuals that are found in every generation. Even so, I shall continue to strive to follow God's law, commandments and statutes, not because I fear God's judgment if I don't. I shall continue to follow His revealed path for our lives not because I am seeking or expect any reward. I follow His

17. The Rogatchover Gaon (Rabbi Yosef Rosin, 1858-1936) was one of the most prominent and gifted Talmudic scholars of the 20th century.

commands because I am a being, crowned by the Most High with honor and glory, created a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5), that was formed from His divine mercy. Even if I do not understand, I do, simply because I am commanded. The fact that I continue to do because I am commanded does not absolve me from continuing my inquiries, asking difficult questions or 'wrestling' with God. In fact, the lack of satisfactory answers requires that I continue to reason, pray, seek and question. I continue my studies and inquiries because 'when I pray, I speak to God but when I study, God speaks to me.' God and I shall continue our lengthy and provocative discussion and as with any good discussion, sometimes I talk and sometimes I listen and then there are times that God 'talks' and times that He 'listens.'

Some have asked --why not create a world devoid of God and opt for 'ethical culture?' Should I just do right only because it makes me feel better or simply because it is just right? My response to them has always been- -any thought of a so-called 'ethical culture' forgets one primary and causal fact. We only have any notion of 'the right', ethics, principles, morals and the like because of God's revelations to humanity. Philosophy, agnosticism, platonism, anthropology, stoicism, neo-platonism, psychoanalysis, mysticism, theology or any of the like did not bestow this upon humanity. Only the God of Israel has done this. The ideas of proper behavior, right thoughts, ethical actions have been filtered down to us from God, through Torah, the prophets, generations of righteous leaders, men of courage such as Elder Crowdy and Rabbi Matthews, mothers who nurtured us, 'auntie's and 'uncles' of the Beth Knesset that helped in our rearing and even parents that instilled in us the idea of right and kept us connected to the God of Israel. I might even argue that it is precisely the ability to know 'the right' that makes us human. If for no other reason than this, I shall continue to follow the God of Israel.

As my son, Kebba, the philosopher, pointed put to me and I sheepishly pretended as if I did not know, my whole enterprise in this treatise

"Yom Kippur Musings" has been begging the ultimate and essential question. The questions that I have posed are not in their essence essentially about mercy and judgment, but rather what is the nature of God? What then is the nature of the Divine entity יהוה? What makes God, God? Who is God in His essence? If by some determination of God's infinite mercy (or should I say judgment?), I find myself among the living in 5772, I intend this to be my next inquiry. God have mercy on me!

I suspect that with the next Yom Kippur of 5773, God's judgment will still be on me. Next year, I may once again ask these same questions about His Divine judgment and next Yom Kippur, He will even yet again demonstrate His Divine attribute of Mercy towards me. Why mercy? I consider God as being merciful because I may be no closer to an answer to any of the questions that I have posed but I will still inquire. Mercy? Yes, that is mercy! Do I really want to know what is in store for me? Do you really want to know what is in store for you?

You may also ask why then I do I continue to inquire, analyze and study, if I believe that I may not find satisfactory answers? Is this not an exercise in total futility?

I shall conclude and answer this concern with this story. It has been told that a gentlemen once approached and asked the Rebbe¹⁸, 'Rebbe why do you and your students continue to study so many philosophical ideas and theosophical texts of judaism, exploring the cosmos, discovering/discussing the God idea, talking about Godly emanations, Godly manifestation and angels? These are such abstract and esoteric concepts and what human mind can picture and grasp these concepts? So why study them? In any case when the Messiah will come and it says

18. Menachem Mendel - the Tzemach Tzedek (the third Chabad Rebbe)

ולא-יכנף עוד מוריד (God will no longer hide from you)¹⁹ and everyone, all humans will witness the revelation of Godliness. We will all experience it then, so there is no need to study it now. When the time comes we will see everything in front of our eyes."

The Rebbet thought for a moment and responded- "imagine that you are behind a wall, and listening to a conversation on the other side of the wall. You can't hear the entire conversation but you can only hear tidbits. You catch a word here and a sentence there. You hear a question that was raised and said with a bit of rage. You hear part of a sentence that was said quietly. You catch all different pieces of that conversation. Do you know what was spoken about?- Not really! Years later you talk to some of the people who were part of the conversation and you ask them to recount the conversation to you. They then go through verbatim the, conversation. Along the way, as the conversation is repeated to you, you hear familiar themes and say-- 'Ah, ah, now I understand why that was stated. Ah, now I know why he was a angry. Ah! Now I understand that question. Ah! That's why he said that!

The Rebbe continues " now imagine the person who did not overhear those tidbits of conversation behind the wall. When he hears the conversation repeated verbatim, it is all new and he does not have the benefit or pleasure of those 'ahs,' the 'now I understand', the 'now I know' moments." That says the Rebbe "is the benefit and virtue of studying these things today. Of course there are limits to human knowledge and what we can grasp. Of course, in the future, in the messianic era, everyone will be exposed to and experience these things, but will they have the pleasure of experiencing the Ah, now I understand moments, the Ah, that's what we were studying when were discussing Divine emanations, angels and God. The students who did not study these concepts won't

19. Isaiah 39:20

have that pleasure. They won't have that experience. It will all be bland and new for them."

Obviously, each time I study and come back to an idea, I have limits to what I understand. I continue to study because every time I come back to an idea or text, I understand a little more and on a more profound level. I have those 'Ah,' now I understand moments and those now I realize why the Torah said this moments. I can only have these 'Ah' experiences if I study and continue to study.

The conversation continues...

גמר חתימה טוב

This Yom Kippur May You be Inscribed in the Book of Life

Rabbi Malchah Netanyahu

8th of Av 5771