TOMER DEVORAH

THE PALM TREE OF DEBORAH

Written by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero

About the Ramak

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570), known as the Ramak, was a leading teacher of Kabbalah in sixteenth-century Safed. His writings brought depth and structure to the study of Jewish mysticism.

In Tomer Devorah, he invites us to bring the divine qualities of mercy into our everyday relationships. His teaching asks us not only to learn about compassion, but to practice it.

Further reading:
The Ramak on Chabad.org



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Resembling the Divine.

The Ramak tells us that we are made in the image of the divine which is called Keter or crown.

Man or Adam comes from the word earth and to resemble. It is not enough to merely resemble the divine in form we also must resemble the divine most importantly in deed and action.

But what are G-dly, or divine deeds and action you may ask?

Here we are told that the 13 attributes of mercy are divine paths of just action.

What are the 13 principles? It should be noted that there are two sets of 13 principles found in the Tanach, bible. The first is Moses' 13 attributes, with which he pleads for the Jewish people not to be obliterated by the harsh decree exacted upon them due to the sin of the golden calf. The second 13 attributes are found in the book of Micah. Chassidut explains that the first attributes are more sublime and spiritual, thereby causing a spiritual form of

Reflect as you learn

Which quality of compassion feels most needed in your life today?

forgiveness and compassion. Micah's attributes are the attributes the way they relate more to the corporeal, practical and tangible reality.

Here are the 13 attributes of Micah:

(1) Who is a G-d like You (2) who pardons iniquity and (3) forgives the transgression (4) of the remnant of his heritage? (5) He does not maintain his anger for ever, (6) because He delights in mercy. (7) He will again have compassion upon us; (8) He will suppress our iniquities. (9) And you will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. (10) You will show truth to Jacob, (11) love to Abraham, (12) as you have sworn to our fathers (13) from days of old.

"Who is a G-d like you?"

This attribute refers to G-d as "the offended or insulted King". As a creator, G-d is the source of all life. He manifests life at every moment. This constant flow of vitality also gives the capacity for man the ability to sin against him. In other words, G-d who is the very source of life is insulted by disproportional misuse of his selfless benevolence. Nevertheless, G-d is patient and does not hold back life force to the sinner.

Practical take away: Learn patience. Although our kindness may be unappreciated and even misused by the people we give it to, we must not give up and continue being kind. Ultimately the kindness we exact says more about us than about the ungrateful receivers. So go out there and give or smile to someone who may not reciprocate. You are acting in your highest G-dly self.

2: "Who pardons iniquity"

This attribute is a step up from the previous one. Kabbalah explains that when one transgresses, a negative entity or angel is created. Now this angel needs to be sustained. Who sustains the life force of this angel? Well, the one who created him should be responsible for this. Nevertheless it is G-d who supports not only the transgressors but the transgression.

Practical take away: Extreme patience. Even in the face of enduring and sustaining someone else's mistakes. Make space for them, be kind and take them in despite their flaws and blatant mistakes. Also, we must not forget to have patience with ourselves. If G-d has so much endurance for our mistakes, we must also trust that as long as we are striving towards a just goal, we will reach it and endure the ensuing difficulties.

3: "Forgives the transgression"

This is a higher level of acceptance, where G-d himself washes the sully off the transgressor's soul. As the verse says "I will shower you with pure waters and you shall be purified" (Ezekiel 36:25).

Practical lesson: Go out and help someone fix their mistakes. Don't say "it's not my problem". Just as G-d is kind, patient and proactive in the concern of our soul journeys, so too we must show courage and compassion to others, even though they "deserve it", or "did it to themselves".

4:"For the remainder of his inheritance"

The relationship that G-d has with us is like a family member has with a relative, a close relative such as wife, daughter etc. G-d is pained by our pain because he is "related", connected and invested in us. So too, all souls are interconnected and affected by one another. Therefore we should want and seek the good of our friend because they are really us.

Practical lesson: Practice seeing the good of the other and respect the other as you would like to be respected. This is included in the verse "love your friend as you love yourself". On a deeper level, the Ba'al Shem Tov tells us that any negativity we see in others is really a reflection of ourselves. The other is really us, we just need to clean the windshield mirrors of ourselves to see the inherent unity.

5: "He does not maintain his anger for ever"

Even though someone wronged him by sinning, G-d does not maintain his anger against that person. We find that even though the generation of Yerovam were idolaters, they were successful militarily and economically. This is because G-d exhibited patience with the hope of their eventual return to him.

Practical lesson: Practice withholding your anger in situations where the person even deserves it. The Ari tells us that even justified anger derails a person's spiritual and psychological equilibrium. Tell that person what you think, and point out what they did wrong, but without anger.

6: "For he delights in mercy"

In his book called "The Pardes", the Ramak writes that there is a select chamber of kindness in paradise called "The chamber of kindness". Angels raise all kind acts performed in this world in that chamber. Whenever the attribute of judgment is awakened against the Jewish people and the world, the Angels of this chamber show the kind acts performed between man and his friend.

Practical advice: Look for the good points of others. Every person has kind deeds which they have done. By focusing on his kindness the anger which we have toward them is lessened and we see good.

7: "He will again have compassion upon us"

G-d is not like man where if he is appeased by the wrongdoing of his friend he will always bear a slight memory of the wrong doing. G-d actually considers it a merit to return to him and is now uplifted to a higher level than before the sin. The Talmud teaches that this world was created with the letter "Hey" ה, to teach us that this world presents many obstacles and a person can "leave his world" by transgression. Nevertheless there is Teshuva, return. A person can enter the small part of the Hey and start over.

Practical lesson: Forgive. When someone apologizes to you for their wrongdoings, respect their courage and rekindle a new relationship with them.

8: "He will suppress our iniquities"

G-d always favors the mitzvot (positive deeds) over the negative deeds. It does not mean that the negative does not exist, it does. It's just that the mitzvot are lighter and rise up high. The avairot, negative deeds are suppressed and kept down in an inconspicuous place. In G-d's eyes, our positive shines and our negative is suppressed.

Practical lesson: Remember the good. By focusing on the negativity we become negative ourselves. By accentuating the positive and making it the dominant part of the other, we bring out our highest most positive G-dly traits.

9: "And you will cast into the sea all of their sins"

In this trait, G-d not only forgives, but also casts away the root of the negativity. This is a consistent theme in the Bible, where we see that subjugators of Israel are destroyed. Superpowers who mercilessly rule Israel do not exist and powerful villains have their evil deeds transformed upon them. This is by the way the custom to do "Tashlich" or casting on Rosh Hashana.

Practical lesson: Have compassion. Once a person accepted the reasons for their fate, they are ready for their inner redemption. Believe that they (and even you) are deserving and that there is hope.

10: "You will show truth to Jacob"

Jacob connotes the simple person who does not know how to live a higher and more transcendent life. Whereas Israel comes from the word straight, relating to the person who is focused and lives the highest existence. G-d helps the Jacobs, or our Jacob by giving them truth. Meaning; as long as we try, G-d reciprocates and assists us by giving us his truth and with that hope of living a higher existence.

Practical lesson: Give your time to others by helping them achieve their goals. Mentor someone who can use your life wisdom and experience.

11: "Kindness to Abraham"

This refers to people who act in abundant kindness to others. To this G-d reciprocates exceedingly by giving them abundant kindness as well.

Practical lesson: Be more patient and attentive to those kind people you know. See if you can be of service to them in any way.

12: "Which you swore to our forefathers"

There are individuals who have no merits. The only merits they do have are those of their forefathers. In the merit of this G-d has compassion and looks at their good.

Practical lesson: Look for the good in the other based on their connection to the forefathers. Extend this to even look at their good based on them being a human and in the image of G-d.

13: "From the days of old"

The merits of the forefathers could potentially run out, as well as the merit of being a human (and not acting like one) can run out. Regarding this the verse says "I remembered the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal" (Jeremiah 2:2). Meaning, G-d looks at the good deeds done in the past. As if going back in time and remembering the innocence of childhood. In the merit of the past good deeds and innocence, G-d has compassion in the present.

Practical lesson: Imagine the person you dislike as an innocent child. What did they look like?, what did they do then?. Have compassion on them now even when they are not so innocent adults.

Reflections

1. Which attributes most resonated with you?

2. How can you best implement these attributes in your day to day life?

3. What are some other practical lessons you can think of from Tomer Devorah?