

Tomer D'vorah (The Palm Tree of Deborah) - Rabbi Moshe Cordovero

Edited by Rabbi Emanuel Ben-David

Moshe ben Ya-akov Cordovero was one of the most profound and systematic exponents of the teachings of the Zohar and a leading figure in the circle of mystics for which sixteenth-century Safed in Palestine was renowned. He was born in 1522 and died at the age of 48, in 1570. The little book Tomer D'vorah is an ethical treatise devoted to the doctrine of the Imitation of God and was first published in Venice, 1588.

I. Introduction

It is proper for man to imitate his Creator, resembling Him in both likeness and image:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ

Let us create Human Being in our form-shape (close to be in our own shadow) and our likeness (acting like us, mirroring us, imaging us).¹

Then one will be within the “secret” (very close, to hear the secret that no one else hears) of the Supernal Form (God). Because the chief Supernal image and likeness is in deeds, a human resemblance merely in bodily appearance and not in deeds debases that Form. For what value can there be in man's resemblance to the Supernal Form in bodily limbs if his deeds do not resemble those of his Creator? Consequently, it is proper for man to imitate the acts of the Supernal Crown², which are the thirteen highest attributes of mercy hinted at in the verses (Mikha 7:18-20):

(1) מִי אֵל כְּמוֹדֶךָ (2) נִשְׂאָ עוֹן (3) וְעִבְרָ עַל פְּשָׁע (4) לְשִׂאֵרֵיִת נִחַלְתָּו (5) לֹא הִחֲזִיק לְעַד אַפּוֹ (6) כִּי חַפְצֵךָ חֶסֶד הוּא:

(7) יָשׁוּב יְרַחֲמֵנוּ (8) יִכַּבֵּשׂ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ (9) וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל חַטְאוֹתֵם:

(10) תִּתֵּן אֶמֶת לְעַלְקָב (11) חֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם (12) אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּיִנוּ (13) מִימֵי קֶדֶם:

1) Who is a God like You, 2) Bears iniquity 3) And remitting transgression; Who has not maintained 4) Against the remnant of His own People 5) His wrath forever, 6) Because He loves graciousness!

7) He will again have compassion on us; 8) He will cover up our iniquities, 9) You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea.

10) You will keep faith with Jacob, 11) Loyalty to Abraham, 12) As You promised on oath to our fathers 13) in days gone by.

¹ Editor's translation, adding the additional meanings of the roots used in the verse.

² The Crown is the Highest Sefirah, that “represents” God; All the ten Sefirot are the attributes, emanations, the ways in which the Divine Providence manifests itself in the worlds.

³These verses are the ending verses of the Haftara of Yom Kippur Minhā service – right after the end of the book of Jonah. Indeed, during the High Holidays (especially on Yom Kippur) we chant are from Exodus 34:-7:

יְהוָה יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְךְּ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת:

נֶצַח חַסֵּד לְאֲלֹפִים נִשְׂא עֵוֹן וּפְשַׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקְהָ [לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד עֵוֹן אָבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְעַל בְּנֵי בָנִים
עַל שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל רְבַעִים:]

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 parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.]

We are not chanting the last part of the verse that relates to the qualities of Judgement. The Kabbalists, however, speak, in addition, of thirteen higher attributes, belonging to Crown, which contains no judgment. These are hinted at in the verses from the book of Mikha.

In the following few sections we will review and reflect on a few of these precepts-attributes that are particularly relevant to repentance and forgiveness.

II. מי יֵלֵךְ כְּמוֹךָ? Who is a God like You?

This refers to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as a patient King, A King that is insulted (Heb. Ne-elav), yet bears the insult in a manner that is beyond human understanding. For behold, without doubt, there is nothing hidden from His providence. Furthermore, there is no moment when man is not nourished and does not exist by virtue of the divine power which flows down upon him. It follows that no man ever sins against God without the divine affluence pouring into him at that very moment, enabling him to exist and to move his limbs. Despite the fact that he, the human being, uses it for sin, that divine power is not withheld from him in any way. And yet, the Holy One, Blessed be He, bears this insult and continues to empower man to move his limbs even though man uses the power in that movement for sin and perversity, thus offending the Holy One, Blessed be He, who, nonetheless, suffer it.

And yet, though it lies in His power to arrest divine power, He does not withhold His goodness from man, bearing the insult, pouring out His power and bestowing of His goodness on man. This is to be insulted and bear the insult, beyond words.

The words “Who is a God like you?” mean ‘You, Good and Merciful God, with the power to avenge and claim Your debt, yet Thou are patient and bear insult until man repents.’

Behold this is a virtue man should make his own: be patient and allow oneself to be insulted to that extent and yet not refuse to bestow one’s goodness to the recipients.

This is an expression to the meaning of Free Will to make one’s choices.

³ The next paragraphs in Italics font are not a part of the Tomer D’vorah text but rather the editor’s addition meant to clarify potential confusion.

III. *That Bears Iniquity* נִשָּׂא עוֹן

This is greater than the preceding quality. The former attribute refers to acts that are not intentional, not done in malice. The Holy One Blessed Be He, acts in the same way even towards those who transgress intentionally. He bears the sin and endures it. Until one of the following happen:

The sinner repents and accepts the severity of the penances one inflicts upon oneself. Or the righteous Judge brings suffering or death upon the sinner. Or the sinner, upon death, descends to Hell to pay his debt.

From which a man should learn the degree of patience in bearing his fellow human being yoke and the evils done by him even when those evils still exist. He bears with his fellow until the wrong is righted or it vanishes of its own accord and so forth.

IV. *And remitting transgression* וְעִבְרָה עַל פְּשָׁע

This is a great quality. For pardon of sin is granted at the hand of the Holy One, Blessed be He, himself and not by a deputy. The pardon is as if He washes away the sin, as it is written (Isiah 4:4): 'When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion.' This is the meaning of 'And remitting transgression': He pours out clean water, goes over and washes away the sin.

Man, too, must so behave. He should not say: 'Shall I put to rights that which another has perverted or which is the result of his sin?' He should not speak in this way. Man, imitating the Holy One Blessed Be He, should be proactive in expunging and washing clean the insult, injury, that caused by another human being. From this one can learn the depth shame in sinning: for if the King is obliged to cleanse the filthy garments of the sinner, the sinner would be ashamed and encouraged not to sin again.

What does it mean? How do we translate it into our own actions? Rather than wait for our fellow to come and ask forgiveness from us, we should seek them and forgive them even before they come and ask for it. After all, we assume that the person that wronged us did it by mistake, inadvertently. Their actions were with all the good intentions. They probably might not know that their actions offended us. Obviously, they are not aware that they need to ask for our forgiveness. The cows will come home way before that person will realize the need for asking forgiveness.

The first step is easy. We remember very well all the smallest details of those incidents that we were hurt, offended, being done wrong. The next step is the hardest of them all – much harder than for us to go and ask for forgiveness. It requires the full and complete honesty with oneself as with the other. After all, if we won't be that honest, we will be left with the hurt feelings and the grudge, and our fellow human will be left in the darkness of lack of knowledge and ability to better oneself. I encourage us all to summon the courage necessary to go to those who wronged us and tell them: "I was hurt and offended when you did/said that to me. Later I realized that you really didn't mean to offend me, you had good intentions. I forgive you for that, and hope that there was nothing in what I did that offended you. If there was, please forgive me".

V. *Against the remnant of His own People* לְשִׂאֲרֵי־תַלְתּוֹ

This is how The Holy One, Blessed be He, behaves with regard to Israel: 'What can I do to Israel since they are My relatives the flesh and blood?' For the People Israel are the spouse of the Holy One, Blessed be He, calling the People 'My daughter,' 'My sister,' 'My mother'. God says: 'What shall I do if I punish them, for the pain will be Mine?' As it is written (Judges 10:16): 'And His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.' For He cannot bear their pain and disgrace for they are the she'erith-remnant of His inheritance.

So it is with regard to one's neighbors. All members of the People of Israel are related one to the other, for their souls are united and in each individual soul there is a portion of all the others. Kol Israel Arevim Ze LaZe – all Israel are collateral, responsible, to each other, as if they were all one body and one soul⁴. When one sins, he wrongs not only his own soul but the portion which all the others possess in him. And when one hurts, all others fill that pain.

Consequently, a man should desire his neighbor's well-being, that he eyes benevolently the good fortune of his neighbor and that his neighbor's honor be as dear to him as his own; for he and his neighbor are one. This is why we are commanded (Leviticus 19:18): וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמֹדָךְ אֲנִי יְהוָה – Love to your fellow as yourself, I am The Lord. It is proper that a man desire the well-being of his neighbor and that he speak no evil of him nor desire that evil befall him. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, desires neither our disgrace nor our suffering because we are His relatives, so too, a man should not desire to witness evil befalling his neighbor nor see his neighbor suffer or disgraced. And these things should cause him the same pain as if he were the victim. The same applies to his neighbor's good fortune.

VI. *Because He Loves Graciousness* כִּי תִפְנֵן חֲסֵד הוּא

There are angels in a certain celestial palace whose function it is to receive the kindness done by man and when the Divine Quality of Justice pleases against Israel these angels immediately bring that kindness to the notice of the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who has mercy upon Israel, for He desires mercy. Even when they are guilty He has mercy upon them if they are kind to one another.

It is fitting, therefore, that man make this quality his own. Even when he is offended or provoked, if the offender has his good points in that he is kind to others or he possesses some other good quality this should be sufficient to soothe one's anger so that his heart is pleased with him and he delights in the kindness that person does (or has done). And he should say: 'It is enough for me that he possesses this good quality.' And 'It is enough for me that he has shown me or another man kindness or that he possesses this particular good quality.' And he should find delight in mercy.

⁴ See teaching on Parashat B'hukotahy, based on Rabbi Jonathan Sacks book "To Heal a Fractured World".