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BRIDGES FOR PEACE

Israel Teaching Letter

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Knowing & Loving
GOD



Knowing & Loving GOD

Mount Sinai

"You shall
love the Lord your
God with all your
heart, with all your
soul, and with all
your mind..."

Deut. 6:4, 5

"...The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment" (Mark 12:29–30, quoted from Deut. 6:4, 5). As Christians, this ultimate command of Yeshua (Jesus) should be our goal. We should love God with our whole being. As I think about loving someone, it is clear to me that you do not love someone you don't know. You may admire them for their fame or appearance. You may read about them and find much to be lauded. But, until you know them, you will not really love them. The more we know the Lord, the more we should love Him.

God Reveals Himself to Man

Moses was a man who found favor in the sight of the Lord. Moses encountered God in the burning bush, at which time he was given a calling and a ministry to lead the Children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. I admire this man Moses, who not only accepted—albeit reluctantly at first—the leadership role God gave him, but also was determined to see and know God and follow His ways.

After the Children of Israel fled from Egypt, an event that is commemorated during the feast of Passover, they walked to Mount Sinai, where one of the most incredible revelations of God to man occurred. God revealed Himself to the entire nation of Israel with smoke and fire and a loud voice. What an impressive and truly frightening event! *"Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the trumpet was very loud so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace and the whole mountain quaked greatly...And the LORD spoke to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people; lest they break through to gaze on the LORD, and many of them perish'"* (Exod. 19:16–18, 21).

Yet, Moses did not stay at a distance but went on the mountain to receive direction from the Lord. According to Jewish sources, this event occurred 50 days after Passover and is now celebrated during the feast of *Shavuot* (Pentecost). The biblical drama continues with the giving of the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel giving up on Moses after he is gone a long time, the worship of the golden calf, and the breaking of the stone tablets.

I love the way Moses pursued God during his time of intercession for the people with a deep desire to know Him. *"Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight, and consider that this nation is Your people. And He said, 'My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.' Then he said to Him, 'If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here'"* (Exod. 33:13–15). Moses not only desired to know God but he refused to go on without an assurance of God's presence. In no way did he want to lead this people astray. He would follow the presence of God. We see this repeatedly throughout the story of Moses' life.

God loved Moses. *"So the LORD said to Moses, 'I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name'"* (v. 17). When I first started studying Hebrew, we learned this phrase in our modern Hebrew class, and the teacher told us that the meaning was "to be liked." I loved that. God liked Moses! Not only did He like him, He knew his name.

The story continues as Moses presses for more and God responds favorably to his bold request. Just weeks before, God had revealed Himself through fire, smoke, and thunder, an awe-inspiring display, and yet Moses pursued God and came closer rather than hanging back where it was safe. *"And he said, 'Please, show me Your glory.' Then He said, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.' But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.' And the LORD said, 'Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen'"* (vv. 18–23).

It is during this amazing encounter that God tells Moses about Himself. Jewish author Pinchas Peli writes about that day: "It was, they [Talmudic rabbis] say, on the day after Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement], following the great reconciliation that took place on that day, as the Almighty pardoned the people for their sin of idolatry and handed over the second set of the tablets of the covenant to Moses." Remember, they had just sinned against God by worshipping a golden calf. In this encounter,



"...show me now
Your way, that I
may know You
and that I may find
grace in Your sight,
and consider that
this nation is Your
people..."

Exod. 33:13

13 Attributes of God and His Mercy

1. & 2. God (YHVH)
3. Omnipotent (El)
4. Merciful (*rachum*)
5. Gracious (*chanun*)
6. Slow to anger (*erekh apayim*)
7. Abounding in lovingkindness (*rav chesed*)
8. Truth (*ve-emet*)
9. He remembers love for thousands (*notzer chesed la-alafim*)
10. Forgiving sin (*noseh avon*)
11. and rebellion (*va-phesha*)
12. and error (*ve-chata'ah*)
13. and cleanses, or doesn't cleanse the unrepentant (*ve-nakeh*)

God describes Himself in what has come to be referred to in Jewish thought as the 13 Attributes of Mercy. I want us to look at these attributes as a step toward knowing God more deeply and loving Him more.

13 Attributes of God and His Mercy

"And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generations'" (Exod. 34:6-7).

Every Jewish source I read agrees that there are 13 attributes of God or His mercy listed in these two verses, as shown in the side bar. Before embarking on this study, I was unaware that the number 13 is significant in Jewish thought. In the West, 13 is often thought of as unlucky. In fact, many tall buildings simply don't have a 13th floor because of superstitions. Before explaining the significance of the number 13, it is necessary to explain the numbering system of the Hebrew alphabet, which is composed of 22 consonants, all of which have a numerical equivalent. (Refer to the chart on page 5.)

One of the most common examples is the Hebrew word for "life," *chai* (חַי): ח = 8, י = 10, which totals 18. Because this is considered such a wonderful word, often Jewish donations come in multiples of 18. Gematria is the Jewish discipline devoted to finding deep or hidden meaning in Scripture based on the numerical equivalent of words. This often produces thought-provoking results.

According to jewfaq.org, "It is worth noting that the number 13 is not a bad number in Jewish tradition or numerology. Normally written as Yod-Gimel [יג], 13 is the numerical value of the word *ahava* (love, Alef-Hei-Beit-Hei) [אהבה] and of *echad* (one, as in the daily prayer declaration, G-d is One, Alef-Chet-Dalet) [אחד]. Thirteen is the age of responsibility, when a boy becomes bar mitzvah. We call upon G-d's mercy by reciting his Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, found in Exodus 34:6-7. Rambam [12th century Jewish philosopher also known as Moses Maimonides] summed up Jewish beliefs in Thirteen Principles."

At the beginning of this teaching letter, I referred to the assertion of Yeshua concerning the Shema ("Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one."). This is the central tenet of Judaism—there is only one God. The numerical equivalent of both *echad* (one) and *ahava* (love) is 13. If you add these two numbers together, you have the number 26. Now, consider this, YHVH, the name of God, has a numerical value of 26. Very interesting! God is love, and God is the only God, and His name is YHVH.



Jewish people call upon God's mercy by reciting the Thirteen Attributes as part of their prayers.



Thirteen is the age of responsibility, when a boy becomes bar mitzvah.

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1 - 2. God (YHVH)

The first and second attributes of God are translated in my New King James Bible as "The LORD, the LORD." In Hebrew, it says, the YHVH, the YHVH. In many Christian Bibles, this all-caps LORD is referred to as Jehovah. Other writers say it should be pronounced Yahweh. Why do we have these various highly divergent sounding pronunciations? In my father's library, I found a book written in 1953 by Rabbi Raphael Levine. He answers this question:

"This name for God arose out of a mispronunciation of the four letter Hebrew word for God, 'YHVH' by early Christian translators. The four letter Hebrew word YHVH was considered ineffable out of reverence for the Holy Name. It was therefore never pronounced, but a substitute, the word ADONAY (Lord, Master), was used. Later, when Hebrew was written with vowel signs, the vowel signs for the word ADONAY were placed under the four letters YHVH, which made the word appear as Ye-ho-vah...which in Latin is Jehovah. Actually, the four letter word 'YHVH' is from the Hebrew verb 'to be' and signifies 'being, existence, eternal.' When Moses asked God His name, he was told that the only name he need know is 'being.' (Exodus 3:14)"

Bible College Professor David Dunn, one of our Canadian representatives, says that YHVH is the personal name of God, and wherever we see "LORD" written in all caps in our English Bibles, it is actually the YHVH name of God. According to Rabbi Magriso, "Whenever the Tetragrammaton, YHVH, is used, it denotes the attribute of Mercy." Jewish sources say that each of these "the LORD" phrases in this passage should be counted as a separate attribute of God's mercy. The first is that God has mercy like a parent toward a child who acts properly and does not rebel. The second is that God has mercy on a person who sins and then repents.

3. Omnipotent (El)

Samuel Birnbaum says, "The third attribute is inferred from the word 'El' which means powerful to act as his wisdom dictates." Others refer to this as the omnipotent

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God's
tender mercy
and compassion
surrounds and
protects us as a
mother's womb
protects her
unborn child.

nature of God (all powerful). The name *El* (God) also indicates that God is the ruler, and the Almighty one. Adam Clarke says in his commentary that *El* is the strong or mighty God. When Moses heard this, he had to remember the mighty acts of God on behalf of the Children of Israel. God, *El* or *Elohim*, worked miracles: the plagues on the nation of Egypt, including the slaying of the firstborn sons, opening the Red Sea, providing food in the desert, bringing water from a rock, etc. *El*, the omnipotent, almighty God acts in power and, in His mercy, can and sometimes does work miracles on behalf of His people or His divine plan.

4. Merciful (*rachum*)

The Hebrew word *racham* or *rachamim* means mercy, compassion, or pity. Hebrew is a language of consonants, and every word has a root of two or three consonants. Words that have a similar meaning share a root or shorash. The root of *rachamim* is resh (ר), chet (ח), mem (מ). (*Rachum* is the adjective form.)

Ella is an Israeli woman who works with us. She and her husband are expecting their first child. When I was sharing some of these thoughts with the BFP team, she immediately said that the same root is used in the word for womb or uterus (*rechem*). What a beautiful picture of the tender mercy and compassion of God, which surrounds and protects as a mother's womb protects her unborn child!

In talking about God's relationship with the Jewish people, the Apostle Paul quotes from Exodus 33:19, when he writes, "For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy [*chanan*] on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion [*rachamim*] on whomever I will have compassion'" (Rom. 9:15). In Psalm 103:13, the psalmist speaks of this *rachamim* saying, "As a father pities [*rachamim*] his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him."

5. Gracious (*chanun*)

The Hebrew word *chanun* is used 13 times in the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen.–Mal.) to describe God and is invariably translated "gracious." Some Jewish commentators translate it as "kind." It comes from the root word *chen* (חן), which means grace. To me, *chanun* is typified by the idea that God's door is always open to me. No matter how busy He is, when I pray, He is listening. As a busy person, I understand that interruptions are not always welcome, but, most of the time, my door is open, and I hope that I exhibit a gracious attitude to all who speak to me, even when I am busy.

Webster's Dictionary says that to be gracious is to have or show kindness, charm, or courtesy. In Christian circles, we often talk about the grace of God or the unmerited favor of God. Our gracious God is always willing to extend a welcoming hand of grace to His children. In *The Torah Anthology*, Rabbi Kaplan says, "The word kind (*chanun*) denotes a free gift." In Romans, Paul states, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life..." (Rom. 6:23). Thank God for His free gift of grace to His children.

6. Slow to anger (*erekh apayim*)

This Hebrew phrase is translated in our English Bibles as "longsuffering" (KJV) or "slow to anger" (NKJV, NASB, NIV). Literally, the words could be "long or lengthy

nostrils.” What? What does that mean? According to William Wilson, the word *apayim* is from the root אָפַּח, which means to be angry, to be displeased and to breathe heavily. When someone is really angry, you can see it in their faces, in flaring nostrils and heavy breathing. Did you ever observe an angry or agitated horse and see how their nostrils flare?

In a very graphic word picture, God is telling Moses that His nostrils aren’t flaring in anger. He is incredibly patient, longsuffering, and slow to anger in His dealings with mankind. He longs for men to repent and gives them ample opportunity to do so. As Rabbi Kaplan says, “It [*erekh apayim*] implies that God delays His anger against the wicked and does not punish them immediately. He gives them time to repent.”

7. Abounding in lovingkindness (*rav chesed*)

Chesed is one of the most wonderful and descriptive words in the Hebrew Bible. It is abundant love which manifests in outrageous, tremendous acts of kindness, beyond what anyone deserves. It involves zeal in a positive sense. It implies faithfulness. In English Bibles, it is translated in various places as mercy, kindness, lovingkindness, and goodness. Psalm 36:7 says, “How precious is Your lovingkindness [*chesed*], O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings.” *Rav* means numerous, many, great, vast.

Rabbi Kaplan commented on the great love and kindness of God towards those who are not deserving: “The great mercy that God shows them is that He tilts the balance on the side of love and mercy. If God sees that a person’s good deeds and his bad deeds are exactly balanced, He performs this tremendous act of love. He tilts the scale toward the side of merit so that it will be heavier than one’s sins.” What a wonderful picture of the extravagant love of God toward sinners! John said, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Yes, God has always been and will always be a God of great lovingkindness.

8. Truthful (*ve-emet*)

God is truthful. He can be trusted to keep His promises. We see this in His actions toward Israel. We live in a day when the prophecies of Israel’s prophets are being literally fulfilled as the Jewish people have been reestablished on their ancient homeland in fulfillment of biblical prophecy. God is a truthful, promise-keeping God. The word *emet* is a rich word. Usually translated “truth” or “true” in our English Bible, it also means firmness, stability, or perpetuity, as in Isaiah 39:8b: “At least there will be peace and truth [*emet*] in my days.” It means faithfulness and fidelity in keeping promises in a consistent fashion.

9. He remembers love for thousands (*notzer chesed la-alafim*)

This phrase means that God extends His love forever. His mercies never end. Referring to thousands of generations is a euphemism for never ending. God will show compassion and mercy while the world endures. In Jewish thought, this also is a promise that the descendants of the righteous will enjoy the reward of God.

“How precious
is Your
lovingkindness
[*chesed*], O God!
Therefore the
children of men
put their trust
under the shadow
of Your wings.”

Ps. 36:7



10 - 12. Forgiving sin (*noseh avon*) and rebellion (*va-phesha*) and error (*ve-chata'ah*)

The next three attributes all involve forgiveness of God on various levels. The first, *noseh avon*, means deliberate sin. This is the person who because of his own desires makes a conscious decision to sin, knowing that it is sin. God says that he can still repent and be forgiven. *Phesha* refers to rebellion. God forgives the repentant sinner even when his sin comes from a heart that was rebellious. This sin has the connotation of sinning to spite God—even this God will forgive. Thirdly, God forgives *chata'ah* or error. This is the inadvertent sin.

13. Cleanses, or doesn't cleanse the unrepentant (*ve-nakeh*)

The final attribute involves a phrase, which when literally translated means "God cleanses, does not cleanse." While God is a God of love, compassion, kindness, mercy, and grace, He is also a God of justice. He is ready and willing to cleanse everyone who comes with a repentant heart, but He does not cleanse those who do not repent.

Imitating God's Attributes

This study has given me a deeper appreciation and love for God. Like Moses, I want to have a greater revelation of Him. I hope that many of you are stirred with hunger for God. One final thought, these attributes are meant to be imitated. In the book of Galatians, we read of the fruit of the Spirit, the attributes that a person who is growing in Christian maturity will exhibit, and some of these same attributes are listed there: love, longsuffering, faith, kindness, etc. (5:22-23).

The 13 attributes of God's mercy are prayed in synagogues every biblical holiday. We should all praise God for these wonderful attributes and ask Him to help us treat one another in the same way that God so graciously and mercifully treats us. "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love*" (I John 4:7-8).

By Rev. Rebecca J. Brimmer
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God forgives the
repentant sinner
even when his
sin comes from
a heart that was
rebellious.

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