מדרש

Midrash

ON GENESIS 8:22

Showing mercy to others brings down God's mercy

Bereshit Rabbah 33:3

God's mercy extends over all His creatures, as the verse "His mercy is upon all His works" (Psalms 145:9) teaches, and human compassion toward others—whether through charity, sparing a small creeping creature, or feeding animals—draws down that same Divine mercy, as illustrated through the stories of Rabbi Tanḥuma's drought, Rabbi's toothache, and Noah's care for the animals in the ark. The midrash (homiletical commentary) further distinguishes the Name "the Lord," signifying the attribute of mercy, from "Elohim," signifying the attribute of strict justice, noting that the righteous can transform justice into mercy while the wicked transform mercy into justice. Finally, on Genesis 8:22's promise that the seasonal order "shall not cease," the sages debate whether the natural cycles and constellations actually ceased functioning during the Flood or merely had their effects suspended. AI SUMMARY

“The Lord is good to all, and His mercy is upon all His works [maasav]” (Psalms 145:9) – Rabbi Levi said: “The Lord is good to all, [and His mercy is] upon” everything, because they are “His works.” Rabbi Shmuel said: “The Lord is good to all, and His mercy is upon” everyone, because that is His attribute, that He is merciful. Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: “The Lord is good to all” and imparts some of His mercy to His creations [maasav].

Rabbi Tanḥuma and Rabbi Abba bar Avin in the name of Rabbi Aḥa: Tomorrow a year of drought may come and [you will see that] people have compassion for one another, and the Holy One blessed be He [in turn] becomes filled with mercy upon them [and grants rain]. In the days of Rabbi Tanḥuma, the people of Israel needed to declare a fast [due to a drought]. They came to him and said to him: ‘Rabbi, decree a fast.’ He decreed a fast one day, a second day and a third day, but rain did not fall. He came in [to the synagogue] and preached to them, saying to them: My children, fill yourselves with mercy for one another, and the Holy One blessed be He will then become filled with mercy for you.

While they were distributing charity to their poor, they saw someone who was giving money to his divorcée. They came to him [Rabbi Tanḥuma] and said to him: Rabbi, why are we sitting by while there is a transgression taking place here among us? He said to them: What is it that you saw? They said to him: We saw so-and-so giving money to his divorcée. He sent for them and brought them into the congregation. He said to him: What is this woman to you? He said to him: She is my divorcée. He said to him: Why were you giving her money? He said to him: Rabbi, I saw that she was in distress, and I became filled with compassion for her.

At that moment, Rabbi Tanḥuma lifted his face heavenward and said: Master of the universe, if this man, who has no obligation to support her [his divorcée], saw her in distress and became filled with compassion for her, then regarding You, of whom it is written: “Gracious and merciful” (Psalms 145:8), and us, who are the descendants of Your beloved

ones, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – all the more so that You should become filled with compassion for us. Thereupon rain fell, and the thirst of the world was quenched.

Our Rabbi was once occupied in Torah study in front of the synagogue of the Babylonians in Tzippori. A certain calf passed by him. It was going off to be slaughtered, and began lowing, as if to say: Save me. He said to it: 'What can I do for you? It was for this purpose that you were created.' Rabbi suffered from toothaches for thirteen years. Rabbi Yosei bar Avin said: All those thirteen years that Rabbi suffered from toothaches, no woman in the land of Israel miscarried, and women in childbirth suffered no pain. Sometime later, a small creeping animal passed in front of his daughter, and she was going to kill it. He said to her: 'My daughter, leave it, as it is written: "His mercy is upon all His works"' (Psalms 145:9).

Our Rabbi was exceedingly humble, and he would say: Anything a person might ask me to do [to show him deference] I would do, except for what the sons of Beteira did to my ancestor, when they stepped down from their prominent positions and promoted him [in their stead]. But if Rav Huna the Exilarch were to come up to here, I would stand up before him. Why? Because he is from [the tribe of] Judah, and I am from Benjamin; he is from the males of Judah, and I am from the females.

Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great said to him: 'Why, he is standing right outside.' Rabbi's face became ashen. When he [Ḥiyya] saw that his face had become ashen, he said to him: 'It is his coffin.' He [Rabbi] said to him [Rabbi Ḥiyya]: 'Someone wants you outside, go out and see who it is.' He went outside and did not find anyone there. He realized that he had been placed under admonishment [by Rabbi], and admonishment lasts for no fewer than thirty days. Rabbi Yosei bar Rabbi Avin said: All those thirty days during which Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great was under admonishment from our Rabbi, he taught his nephew Rav all the principles of the Torah, and those are the Torah principles that comprise Babylonian halakha.

At the conclusion of thirty days, Elijah of blessed memory came to our Rabbi in the guise of Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great, placed his hand on his tooth and it was cured. When Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great came before Our Rabbi, he [Rabbi Ḥiyya] said to him: 'What did you do to your tooth?' He said to him: 'From the time that you placed your hand on it, it was cured.' He said to him: 'I do not know anything about that.' When he [Rabbi] heard this, he began treating him with respect, and when he would gather students, he would position him in the inner circle.

Rabbi Yishmael ben Rabbi Yosei said: '[Will he be placed] even closer [to you] than I?' He said to him: 'God forbid, such a thing shall not be done in Israel.' Our Rabbi used to relate the praises of Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great before Rabbi Yishmael ben Rabbi Yosei. He said to him: 'He is a great man, a holy man.'

One time, he saw him in the bathhouse, and he [Rabbi Ḥiyya] did not show him deference. He [Rabbi Yishmael] said to him [Rabbi]: 'That student of yours whom you praise, I saw him in the bathhouse and he did not show deference to me.' He said to him [to Rabbi Ḥiyya]: 'Why did you not show deference to him?' Rabbi Ḥiyya said to him: 'I was deep in thought about the aggada of Psalms [and did not notice him].' When he [Rabbi] heard this, he appointed for him two students who would enter with him to the caldarium, so that he would not tarry there and have his life compromised.

Another interpretation: "The Lord is good to all..." (Psalms 145:9); "God remembered Noah...." – Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani said: Woe unto the wicked, as they transform [God's] attribute of mercy into the attribute of strict justice. Everywhere that "the Lord" is stated, it refers to the attribute of mercy – "the Lord, the Lord, merciful and gracious God" (Exodus 34:6); yet it is written: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth" (Genesis 6:5); "the Lord regretted that He had made man" (Genesis 6:6); "the Lord said: I will obliterate..." (Genesis 6:7).

Fortunate are the righteous, as they transform the attribute of strict justice into the attribute of mercy. Everywhere that God [Elohim] is stated, it refers to the attribute of justice. "You shall not curse judges [elohim]" (Exodus 22:27); "the please of both of them

shall come to the judges [elohim]" (Exodus 22:8); yet it is written: "God [Elohim] heard their groan, and God [Elohim] remembered His covenant..." (Exodus 2:24); "God [Elohim] remembered Rachel..." (Genesis 30:22); "God [Elohim] remembered Noah."

What [favorable] memory did [God] remember to his credit? It was that he fed and sustained them [the animals] all twelve months in the ark. "God remembered Noah" – and it is only reasonable that it was [also] due to the merit of the kosher animals that he took with him.

Rabbi Eliezer says: He [Noah] got his name from the offering [he made to God], as it is stated: "The Lord smelled the pleasing [niḥoaḥ] aroma" (Genesis 8:21). Rabbi Yosei bar Ḥanina said: He got his name from the resting of the ark, as it is stated: "The ark rested [vatanaḥ] in the seventh month..." (Genesis 8:4).

Rabbi Yehoshua says: "[Planting and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night] shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22) – the implication is that they had ceased [during the Flood]. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: The constellations did not function all twelve months [of the Flood]. Rabbi Yonatan said to him: They functioned, but their effect was not noticeable.