

Thirteen Middos HaRachamim

By Rabbi Dovid Cohen

Grade Level: Middle School-High School

Description:

A detailed explanation of the Thirteen Middos Harachamim according to the Tomer Devorah which gives students a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the middos. This is especially helpful during the months of Elul and Tishrei when we recite the 13 Middos. Each middah is clarified, In English, with a paragraph or two and there are parable and stories included to help in comprehension of the ideas.

Goals/Objectives:

Students will examine each of the 13 Middos and will gain a greater appreciation and understanding of them by using this guide as a reference.

Instructions:

1. Each student should have a copy of the text of the 13 Middos in front of them.
2. As the teacher goes through each middah, he/she should explain each one carefully using this guide.

Variation:

- Have students summarize the main point of each of the Middos on a small card. They can take these cards with them to shul and insert them in the machzor where the 13 Middos are recited. This will help them focus on the main points at the time of saying them.



THE 13 MIDDOS



Rabbi Dovid Cohen



Tomer Devora Part 1: Intro - Doing The 13 Middos

The Gemara in Rosh Hashana tells us that Hashem wrapped himself in a Talis like a Shaliach Tzibbur and revealed to Moshe the 13 middos. He said when Bnei Yisroel sins they should "do" before me the 13 middos and I will forgive them. I guarantee, says Hashem, that their Tefilos will not be returned empty.

The 13 middos are an integral part of our Tefila throughout the Yamim Noraim since they guarantee the success and acceptance of our prayers. However, point out the Baalei Mussar, Hashem does not say that we should "say" the 13 middos rather we should "do" the 13 middos.

Rav Moshe Kordevero says that by doing the 13 middos we emulate Hashem. By acting with these middos we become a Tzelem Elokim and we are Mikayem the mitzva of "V'Halachta B'Drachav" to go in Hashem's ways. He therefore composed a sefer called the Tomer Devora which explains each one of these middos and is a wonderful guide for us all year round and especially in the days of Elul and Tishrei.



Tomer Devora Midda 1: Chesed - The King Who Tolerates Amazing Disgrace

"Mi Kel Kamocha" Who is a force like you?? We cannot even lift our hand or utter signs without Hashem's express authority for every movement. Yet when we open our mouth's to speak Lashon Hara, Hashem keeps the power charge flowing and allows us to continue to spew forth words that cause untold damage to the physical and spiritual worlds that He created us in order for us to perfect. Why not just pull the plug? Shouldn't Hashem say, "I give you power to do what I want. If you want to do something against my wishes find your own source of power" (which of course there is none.)

Hashem provides us with life and the power to do both His calling and to rebel against His will if we choose, without discriminating between the two. Because of this midda the Malachim call Hashem "Melech Ne'elav" The insulted King.

To emulate Hashem we need to tolerate other people, both people that we cannot control and even our kids and people who we can control. Not only tolerate, but also to shower them with kindness in return for their insulting words and demeaning behavior towards us.



Tomer Devora Midda 2: Nosei Avon - The Victim Supports The Criminal's Abuse

The reason the 13 middos are such a powerful tool for us to receive Hashem's mercy is because they are all about tolerance. These 13 middos and the idea of tolerance are fundamental to the whole creation. The whole idea of creation was to test mankind to see if he will follow Hashem's will. The setting for this test requires Hashem to hide His presence and create an illusion that there are other powers besides him. The first midda described Hashem's tolerance to create a world where people can go against His will using his power (see Midda 1).

The second midda says the Tomer Devora shows even greater tolerance. After a person chooses to use his God given power to rebel against Hashem, theoretically at that point he should be branded a "loser" and destroyed on the spot since each aveira creates a Malach of destruction. This Malach needs to constantly destroy in order to exist. Hashem should really hold the sinner responsible to sustain this malach which would mean all his destructive power would reign down on the sinner causing him to die. Nevertheless Hashem sustain all these Malachei Chavala and waits patiently for the sinner to do teshuva. With the pain and tears of teshuva we can give the Malach what is owed to him and then he disappears.

This midda is called "Nosei Avon"; Hashem carries the burden of our aveiros that were committed against Him. From here we learn, says the Tomer Devora, that when someone causes us harm, even if it is ongoing, we should still not be upset with him and continue to be kind to him, suffering silently and waiting patiently until he fixes the damage.



Tomer Devora Midda 3: Oveir Al Pesha - Cleaning Up Someone Else's Mess

In principle, once an aveira is committed there is no way to avoid the consequences. You have let loose a destructive Malach that needs to destroy you and he is not going away. In this third midda Hashem gives us the present of teshuva which can erase the Malach altogether. Once we do teshuva Hashem himself forgives us, cleans our soiled souls, and deals with the fallout of the Chet.

A person must act the same way. Patience and tolerance of the person and his transgression is the subject of the first two middos. In this midda we go a step further. If someone has destroyed something, not only must you forgive them but you yourself should clean up their mess and rectify the situation for them because that is the way of Hashem.



Tomer Devora Midda 4: Of Course We Are All Family...Except...

We all know that Kol Yisroel Areivim Zeh LaZeh and we are all responsible for one another and suffer for each other's aveiros. We have all heard the famous Mashal of two people in the rowboat and one makes a whole under his seat all the while telling his hysterical boat mate that it is his seat and can do whatever he wants. Nevertheless we often don't respond to others who falter and even help them along their doomed path if we think it is in our interest.

How can we explain this? Simple. The old divide and conquer strategy. We are so full of groups and divisions, we forget that we have more in common than apart. Only our enemies see us in our true light; Jews! To us there are sefardim, ashkenazim, chasidim misnagdim, chareidim, mizrachnikim, chilonim. So why do Chasidim fight, for example? Simple, because they further break down into Belz, Satmar, Vishnitz, etc. Each Chasidus further divides by various factors. Then there are family divisions based on a whole new set of nonsense.

Can't we see that we are fodder for the Yetzer Hara that brilliantly can cause us to see division until we are left with only ourselves against the world? Of course we know that Kol Yisroel Areivim. But if the sum total of Yisroel is only me, myself, and I the practical application of the principal doesn't take us very far.

The more you think the other group is "off the wall" the more you should love them. That's because the 4th midda is "She'eiris Nachalosoy"; as in She'er and Nachala says the Tomer Devora. We are Hashem's flesh and family and that is why he pities us and suffers with us even when we are off the wall. We, too, should feel the same way about all our Jewish brethren in order to merit Hashem's similar feelings on the Yom HaDin.



Tomer Devora Midda 5: Time For Plan "B" - The Flood-gates of Kindness

Hashem does not punish us as a means of meting out revenge. He punishes in order to push us back to the right path. It is all for our good. What happens if Hashem subjects us to horrible misery yet we still don't return? Hashem cries "Lashav Hikeisi Es Bineichem Mussar Lo Lukachu"; for naught I punished your children since you did not learn your lesson. In that case a different tactic is called for; incredible mercy and kindness even if we are totally undeserving. Sometimes that can make us realize that we have a Father in Heaven and cause us to come back to him with our whole heart. The Michtav MeiEliyahu uses this concept to explain our sudden return to Eretz Yisroel after the Holocaust. (V'Halachta B'Drachav)

This is the 5th middah, "Lo Hechezik Lo'ad Apo", Hashem does not stay angry forever. Even if you haven't corrected anything, Hashem's anger will dissipate. From here we learn, says the Tomer Devora, that not always must we discipline with an iron fist. We should try to bring our children and our colleagues closer by showering them with endless love. If it can achieve the same results, why not?



Tomer Devora Midda 6: Chafetz Chesed - One Good Deed Can Go A Long Way

What is the difference between Tzedaka and Chesed. The Vilna Gaon says that Tzedaka is justified. I am rich and he is poor so I give him. It can come from our natural human compassion. Chesed is totally unjustifiable. It means to do something nice to someone for no reason whatsoever. There is no justification other than pure goodness on the giver's part.

Hashem is a Chafetz Chesed. He created the world with Chesed. Hashem was complete and lacking nothing. We deserved nothing yet Hashem made the world. When Hashem judges us He carefully weighs all our mitzvos and aveiros. When he comes across a true act of Chesed the whole situation changes. Hashem puts away his scales, sends home the bean counters and says this person does kindness without justification and therefore we will deal with him in the same way. Deserving or undeserving your judgment has just taken a turn for the better.

In dealing with other people, says the Tomer Devora, even if they have done something to incur your wrath look for some redeeming feature within them and say to yourself "even though I am rightfully mad still look at what he has done good" and forgive him.



Tomer Devora Midda 7: Once Bitten Twice Shy?

When a good friend shocks us by doing something bad to us it changes our relationship and our impression of them forever. Even if you make up with them, it is not the same; the trust is never complete. Not so with Hashem. In fact the Gemara says quite the opposite. B'Makom SheBaalei Teshuva Omdim Ein Tzadikim Gemurin Yecholim La'amod", Baalei Teshuva are closer to Hashem more so than Tzadikim who can never reach the same heights.

The Tomer Devora explains that this is because a tzaddik is not so tempted by that aveira whereas a Baal Teshuva must fight himself and struggle to avoid that aveira. He stands much further away from the aveira than a tzaddik who is not scared to be in its proximity. Therefore the Baal Teshuva stands on Holier ground.

This is the Midda of "Yashuv Yerachameihu"; Hashem returns the sinner to his good graces even more than before he sinned. So too with our friends. We should learn to forgive and really forget. We should embrace them with extra closeness after the fallout. This way we will be zocheh for Hashem to accept our Teshuva as well.



Tomer Devora Midda 8: Adding It All Up... Not!

When considering doing a very difficult and time consuming favor to a friend we often weigh the good he has done for us versus the bad. The overall light in which we place him will determine our decision to put out for him or not. Not so with Hashem. When a person does a mitzva, the mitzva goes up to Shamayim and is placed before Hashem. When we do an aveira it is denied entry into Hashem's presence. Hashem is Kovesh Avon, he suppresses the aveira.

What is the implication of this? If someone does 40 mitzvos and 10 aveiros he does not have a grand total of 30 mitzvos. They do not counteract each other. The mitzva is precious and stands for eternity and cannot be washed away by an aveira. Hashem punishes the person for the aveira and then he is free and clear to collect his heavenly reward for every single one of his mitzvos in full.

We must emulate Hashem says the Tomer Devora. When judging friends we must cherish the good they have done for us and remember it at all times. The bad must be suppressed. No matter how we choose to deal with the bad the good must be repaid in full without being tarnished in any way.



Tomer Devora Midda 9: Shooting The Messenger

Our Aveiros create bad forces in the world that torment us. Hashem sends a Pharaoh or a Haman to punish us to bring us back to teshuva. Once we have suffered enough and do teshuva these forces need to be erased. This is called the Midda of "V'Sashlich B'Mitzulos Yam Kol Chatosom", Hashem throws out aveiros to the depths of the sea. This explains why if we deserved to suffer in Mitzrayim why Pharaoh is punished. Pharaoh is a creation of our aveira. Once it is erased so is he. The same concept applies with the rock or the sword that a person is killed with in Bais Din. After it is used to administer the punishment the rock or the sword must be buried.

Similarly, says the Tomer Devora, if someone has acted terribly and then goes through a very difficult period we must pity him and help him. Chazal tell us that someone who gets 40 lashes in Bais Din should not be isolated afterward. Even though we should hate a sinner, "Once he suffers he is again considered our brother." Do not harden your heart and say that he brought his troubles on himself. On the contrary his punishment is past and so is his aveira. Now it is time to bring him back into the fold.



Tomer Devora Midda 10: Emes L'Yaakov - The Average Jew

Yaakov represents the average Jew. Emes is the Midda of Yaakov. He does everything fairly like the law dictates but not L'fnim Mishuras HaDin. Yaakov was 100% faithful to Lavan yet devised a scheme to honestly and fairly profit. Yaakov also took the brachos from Eisav fairly. Yet in these two instances he did not go beyond the call of duty in letting them take what they did not deserve.

Fairly can have two meanings according to the Peirush V'Halachta B'Drachav on Tomer Devora. There is the letter of the law and the intent of the lawmaker. The fairness of Yaakov takes into account the intent of the law and not just the cold hard letter of the law. He then applies it with mercy. When a person behaves with this level of Emes, Hashem will judge him fairly and in the best possible light taking into account all mitigating factors.

Tomer Devora Midda 11: Chesed L'Avrohom - The Above Average Jew

Midda 10 discussed how we must act with regular people in a fair way trying to hit the upper boundaries of fairness. Midda 11 is Chesed L'Avrohom or "Lifnim Mishuras HaDin" above and beyond what the law calls for. Even if one acts fair to a person who acts fair one should go beyond the call of duty for someone who acts lifnim mishuras hadin.

Chesed L'Avrohom means acting with Chesed to an "Avrohom", those who act like Avrohom and go lifnim mishuras hadin. You may think this is easy. Why not act kind to a person who is so kind? Keep in mind that Chesed means doing an act that is totally unwarranted and unjustified. So it is not paying back kindness with kindness, it is acting with kindness when to this nice fellow even when this particular favor is totally undeserved and goes beyond the scope of anything reasonable.



Tomer Devora Midda 12: Be Nice To The Brats!

Many times we have a good friend that we go way back with, whose kids we are less than crazy about. Our personal feelings towards the kid aside, when the opportunity arises we will do anything to help him out. Not because we care about him per se but because we see it as a favor to his parents.

Hashem has a special treasure house of abundant good that he bestows on us when we are totally undeserving. Why? Because our fathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok, and Yaakov were cherished and beloved friends of His. This is the 12th midda, "Asher Nishbata La'Avoiseinu"; that you promised to our fathers. The Tomer Devora says that when we have the opportunity to help a fellow Jew we should have the same attitude. Regardless what we think about them, remember who their father was and graciously help them out.



Tomer Devora Midda 13: For Ole Time Sake

In the Gemara there is a Machlokes if and when the Zechus of the Avos has already been used up. The past surely has all been paid up by Hashem so now what do have left if we have no zechusim of our own? The answer is that sometimes when someone who was so good becomes so bad, as much as we are very angry, we sometimes look at them and pity them thinking "my, how far have you fallen. We were once so close." This thought makes you want to do good for them even under the current miserable circumstances.

Mimei Kedem is the last midda. True, Hashem owes us nothing, yet the remembrance of the good ole days of following Him to the Midbar and standing by Har Sinai brings Him Nachas Ruach. Even though we are undeserving Hashem will pity us for ole time sake.

No matter what the present situation we should always try to remember something good that our friends and family have done for us in the past and be nice to them even if the favor has long ago been repaid.

I hope you enjoyed the bit of insight to the 13 middos according to the Tomer Devora. Most importantly I hope that all of us have been inspired at least in some small way to emulate our Creator and bring Him Nachas Ruach.

Kesivah VaChasima Tova!

