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THE ROOT RACHAM AND ITS DERIVATIVES IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

NEIL COMESS-DANIELS

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
New York, N. Y.

March 1979

Advisor: Professor Norman J. Cohen

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
New York School

Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by Neil Comess-Daniels
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements by Ordination

THE ROOT RACHAM AND ITS DERIVATIVES IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

This thesis is an investigation of the usages and meanings of the root raham and its derivatives in rabbinic tradition. In addition, common parallels of raham also are treated by the author. The include: hesed, hanan and zedakah.

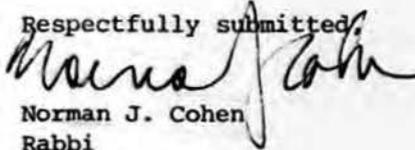
This study began with the isolation of key biblical verses utilizing the verb raham and its derivative forms. The author then attempted to locate all the extant passages in Rabbinic Literature dealing with these verses and/or using derivatives of the root raham. To this end, he consulted all the major rabbinic anthologies, verse indicies, thematic indicies and whatever secondary literature that exists.

The isolated material is organized thematically into five main chapters, with an Introduction, Conclusions and Notes. Chapter One is a survey of the occurrences of raham and its derivatives in the Bible, and it centers on a linguistic analysis as well as a definition of the term rahamim. Chapter Two delineates the various ways rahamim is used by the Rabbis. It mainly focuses upon rahamim as an attribute of God. Chapter Three involves a discussion of how God manifests His rahamim, both in mundane situations, and in moments of crisis. In Chapter Four, Mr. Comess-Daniels examines the means by which God's rahamim can be induced by both Israel and the nations of the world. Chapter Five raises the question of who are the recipients of God's rahamim.

Mr. Comess-Daniels has succeeded in this thesis to dispel the long-suggested notion that there is a conceptual linkage between rahamim and rehem (womb). He has found no biblical or rabbinic material to support such a claim. In addition, he has beautifully delineated the numerous sub-motiffs connected with the term rahamim, not the least of which are the various ways rahamim is made manifest and is induced.

Though this thesis does not take into consideration changes in the rabbinic usage of the term rahamim and its parallels over time, Mr. Comess-Daniels is to be commended for his research, text analysis and organization. He has gathered much material and presented it in a highly meaningful fashion.

Respectfully submitted,



Norman J. Cohen
Rabbi

April 1979

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"Our love will not be quenched."

INTRODUCTION

Jews have often been called the "people of the book." Throughout our history we have held in high regard both the books that we write and the books that we read. Words are the building blocks with which these books are written. I have long been fascinated by words, their origins, usages and the layers of meaning that they acquire. This interest has been expanded as a result of my studies at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. As I approached the time to select a topic for my rabbinic thesis, it became obvious to me that a philological study would be my choice. Initially, I decided upon the root ר-ח-מ as my subject matter because of a desire to investigate the much mentioned theory that rachamim, "mercy," is conceptually related to rechem, "womb." I had often seen this supposed relationship used as a basis for the re-interpretation and translation of many prayers. This has been especially true recently in services developed in response to the heightened feminist awareness among Jewish women. I wished to see if the exploitation of the theorized connection between these two words had any linguistic basis or whether it was modern homiletics. Whether or not the theory proved to be true, I sought to unravel the matrix of meanings and usages that ר-ח-מ and its derivatives have within Rabbinic Literature.

Secondary material which examines the root ר-ח-מ or any of its derivatives is quite scarce. It consists primarily of a short article by Israel Eitan entitled, "An Unknown Meaning of Rachamim," and a substantial section of Nelson Gleuck's Hesed in the Bible. Both of these works are discussed in Chapter One inasmuch as they both deal with ר-ח-מ in the Bible. No secondary material is extant concerning the occurrence of this root in Rabbinic Literature.

I began my study with the isolation of key biblical verses that utilize ר-ח-מ and its derivatives in relationship to G-d. To do

this I worked primarily with Mandelkern's Concordance of the Hebrew Bible, supplemented by relevant articles from the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. I then turned to Rabbinic Literature and began my search for the extant passages which used derivatives of רַחֲמִים by surveying several topical anthologies. Among these were Bialik-Ravinitsky's Sefer ha-Aggadah, Eisenstein's Ozar Ma'amarei Hazal, Montefiore and Lowe's A Rabbinic Anthology, Gross' Ozar ha-Aggadah and Urbach's The Sages. I also used biblical verse indices, such as Epstein's Torah Temimah, Hyman's Sefer Torah ha-Ketuvah u'Mesorah and Kasher's Torah Sheleimah. Also helpful were the indices to various individual compilations, such as B. Cohen's index to Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews, the index to the Soncino Talmud, Friedmann-Simon's Midrash Rabbah and William Braude's Pesikta d' Rav Kahana, Pesikta Rabbati and Midrash on Psalms. Finally, I turned to the wealth of material available from concordances like Kosovsky's Ozar Lashon ha-Tannaim, Ozar Lashon ha-Mishnah Tosephta, Ozar Lashon ha-Talmud and Moshe Gross' Ozar Ha-Aggadah. I quickly discovered that the primary word of my study would be 'rachamim.' As a result, I grouped the passages according to their usage of the term rachamim. This resulted in the five main chapters which the reader will find in the thesis.

The first chapter is a general survey of the occurrences of רַחֲמִים in the Bible. The reader will find that the sub-headings of Chapter One are similar to the chapter headings of the remaining four chapters. This facilitates comparison between the usage of rachamim in the Bible and Rabbinic Literature. The biblical chapter discusses the linguistics of רַחֲמִים (including analysis of the two secondary sources mentioned earlier), as well as how the Bible appears to define rachamim. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how rachamim is manifest. Chapter

Two delineates the various ways in which rachamim is defined. These definitions are basically divided into four sections: (1) rachamim as a key attribute of G-d's personality, (2) derivatives of רחמים as divine names, (3) rachamim as descriptive of how G-d relates to Israel and, (4) rachamim as an element of Creation. Chapter Three is concerned with how G-d manifests His rachamim, which is seen as occurring naturally in the everyday functioning of the world, as well as a means of alleviating crisis situations. G-d manifests His rachamim both through kindness as well as through His anger and strictness. Chapter Four examines those means by which G-d's rachamim can be induced. Some of these vehicles are exclusive to Israel, others Israel shares in common with all of humanity. This Chapter also discusses how special intermediaries can be used by Israel to induce G-d's rachamim. Chapter Five explores who are the recipients of G-d's rachamim, be they Jew, non-Jew, righteous or wicked, privileged or underprivileged. Finally, the concluding Chapter will be both a summary and an analysis of the findings of the five main Chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

THE USAGE OF RACHAM IN THE BIBLE

A. Linguistic Analysis of the Root ר-ח-ם

The dearth of scholarly material dealing with the root ר-ח-ם and/or its derivatives in the Bible is surprising. One would think that since ר-ח-ם occurs so frequently in the Bible and because it appears in many different contexts that there would be a good deal of analysis of its usages. Further exasperating the situation is the perpetuation of the assumption that rechem, "womb," and rachamim, "mercy," are both conceptually and linguistically related,¹ though there has been no study that documents such a relationship.

Primarily what is extant regarding ר-ח-ם is a short article by Israel Eitan² and a significant portion of Nelson Gleuck's study on chesed.³ In his article, Eitan makes a powerful argument that rachamim, rather than its standard translation of "mercy" or "compassion," in many cases in the Bible means "bowels." He notes that Brockelman in his Lexicon Syriacum,⁴ defines the Syriac parallel to rachamim, ܪܚܡܐ as "intestina, sedes affectum," ("intestines, seat of compassion"). Eitan supports this definition by pointing out stylistic parallels between rachamim qua "intestines" and the word leiv, "heart." He compares such phrases as בָּכְמָרוֹ רַחֲמָיו, "his bowels grew hot," (Gen. 43:30) and בָּכְמָרוֹ רַחֲמֶיהָ, "her bowels grew hot," (I Ki. 3:26) with יַמְעֵי רִתְחוֹ, "my inwards boil" (Job 30:27) and כִּי יֶחֱם לִבּוֹ, "while his heart is hot" (Dt. 19:6). In the same vein he solves the problem of Zephania 1:17b, וַיִּשְׂפֹךְ דַּמָּם "and (he) shed out his bowels" (II Sam. 20:10). Eitan agrees that לַחֲמָם means "bowels" but he does not rely on II Samuel 20:10 for his justification. Instead he solves the difficulty orthographically, noting that the "ל" "

in רחמים was probably originally a "ר" (and the word was רחמם) and that a slight elongation of the upper tittle made it a "ל". Eitan's final point is that the definition of rachamim qua "bowels" follows "a well known philological principle of deriving all abstracts from concrete nouns or roots."⁵ According to Eitan, "bowels" is the primary or root definition of rachamim with "mercy/compassion" being a secondary abstract which is derived from it. This would refute Joseph Reider's short comment concerning Eitan's article,⁶ in which he notes that the definition of "bowels" for rachamim is already extant in Gesenius' Thesaurus and in Gesenius-Buhl's Handwörterbuch (16 and 17 edition), where it is listed in secondary status. For Eitan, the concrete noun is of primary status.

How does Eitan's theory relate to the usage of רחמים as linked to G-d? There are no phrases like נכמרו רחמיו (Gen. 43:30) which are used to describe the welling up of G-d's compassion. Nowhere in the Bible do anthropomorphic descriptions of G-d include G-d's having "bowels." The closest that we can come to a connection between G-d's compassion and a part of the "Divine anatomy" that might be indicative of the bowels can only be arrived at through an extension of the aforementioned theory which proposes a linkage between rechem, "womb," and rachamim. In making this extension, it must first be assumed that mercy arises from the "inwards" and that any term that refers to a specific part of that anatomical region (like rachamim qua "bowels" or rechem) is indicative of the region as a whole.

There are only two biblical verses that might be thought of as indicating that G-d does indeed have a "womb." The verse that is perhaps a bit more concrete is Job 38:8, ויסף ברלתים ים בגיחו מרחם יצא, "Or who shut up the sea doors when it broke forth and issued out of the womb?" The question here is whether or not it can be assumed that the womb

referred to is G-d's? In this regard, one need only compare the biblical concept of creation with the Babylonian myth Enūma elish to be tempted to say that indeed the biblical G-d possesses a womb.⁷ In the Enūma elish, one of the two primordial gods is the female Tiamat whose substance is water. However, the biblical author of Genesis Chapter I, is careful to describe the various parts of nature as under G-d's control, not divine in and of themselves. This would seem to negate the linkage between G-d and the rechem in Job 38:8. Another obvious question is why, if indeed the verse refers to a divine womb, does it not say מרחמי, "from my womb", instead of מרחם, "from the womb"? Finally, the context of the cited verse does not speak out of G-d's having restrained the waters during creation as being an act of rachamim, mercy. Upon analysis then, Job 38:9 does not indicate the biblical concept of a divine womb. The only other verse that may be indicative of a divine womb is Isaiah 49:15, התשכח אשה עולה מרחם בן-בשונה גם אלה תשכחנה ואני לא אשכח, "Can a woman forget her baby or disown the child of her womb? Though she might, I never could forget you." It would appear that here G-d's relationship with Israel is metaphorically paralleled to that of a mother and the issue of her womb. It is tempting to follow the metaphor through, arguing that G-d, too, has a rechem and Israel is the issue of the divine womb. However, to do so would be mere fanciful conjecture. Further, as with Job 38:8, there is nothing in the context surrounding this verse that mentions G-d's mercy, especially as related to the use of rechem.

One must conclude that the assumed connection between rechem and rachamim, at least as both terms are applied to G-d, does not exist in the Bible. Because of that, whereas Eitan's definition of rachamim as "bowels" can be substantiated for the description of the welling up of

human compassion, there is no way in which to apply his theory to biblical descriptions of divine compassion.

B. Common Parallels of ח-סד-א .

As mentioned above, the only other major treatment of ח-סד-א in the Bible is in Gleuck's Hesed in the Bible. Gleuck argues that chesed (which along with ר-ח-מ are the most common terms used in parallel with rachamim) is distinct from rachamim in that chesed is indicative of the covenantal relationship between G-d and a) the Patriarchs, b) the Davidic dynasty, and c) the people of Israel as a whole. Rachamim, he maintains, does not function in this manner.

In his discussion of chesed reflecting the reciprocal relationship of G-d and the Patriarchs, Gleuck uses Genesis 24:13-14 as his major example. In verse 14, G-d will show chesed to Abraham because of the covenantal relationship between them. Gleuck maintains that the word chesed would not have been used had not such a covenantal relationship (which he likens to a master/slave relationship) existed. For chesed as a sign of the reciprocal relationship of G-d to David and his house, Gleuck cites I. Ch. 17:13-14. This relationship is likened to that between a father and a son. Chesed is an integral part of the relationship, both parties having to act out of it in order for the relationship to be maintained. For the father not to act with chesed means not being a father. For the son not to act with chesed means to risk punishment. Gleuck cites several verses to describe the use of chesed as bespeaks the reciprocal relationship of G-d and His people. He uses Ps. 85:8-9 to demonstrate that it is only when the community is faithful to G-d that it deserves to receive G-d's chesed and that the faithful also act with chesed toward G-d. He cites Ps. 77:8 to demonstrate that Israel, because they are G-d's people, have the right to expect G-d's chesed. Finally, he

notes that in Hosea 2, Israel and G-d are described as being in a marital relationship. Here he distinguishes between chesed and rachamim: "Yahweh wants to bring Rahamim, which exceeds the bounds of Hesed into this marriage...It is but a short step from Hesed to Rahamim. Hesed is covenantal loyalty; Rahamim is forgiving love...Yahweh's people, however, could not show Rahamim toward Yahweh."⁸

While it appears that Gleuck's evidence is quite convincing, his quick relegation of rachamim to only "forgiving love" is both shortsighted and indicative that he did not look as closely at the various uses of rachamim as he did for chesed. As for his point that only chesed denotes the covenantal relationship between G-d and the Patriarchs, II Kings 13:23 would seem to indicate that G-d's rachamim and chen are made manifest because of that relationship. Chesed is not mentioned! (וַיִּחַן ה' אִתְּכֶם וַיִּרְחַם וַיִּפְּן אֲלֵיהֶם לִמְעַן בְּרִיתוֹ). Gleuck's use of Ps. 77:8 is unfair. By maintaining that this verse demonstrates that it is only chesed that Israel can rightfully expect because of their special relationship to G-d, Gleuck is guilty of grossly ignoring the context surrounding the verse. Only two verses later (vs. 10), in much the same manner in which chesed is spoken of in vs. 8, the author of the psalm speaks of chen and rachamim. Gleuck is not justified in separating these terms conceptually merely because they do not appear back to back in the text. Gleuck's most tenuous point is his use of Hosea 2 to demonstrate that chesed refers to "covenantal loyalty," while rachamim refers to "forgiving love." In several places in Hosea 2, it would appear that Gleuck's distinction does not hold and that rachamim does indeed denote "covenantal loyalty." For example, in verse 2:3 G-d instructs Hosea to refer to his brothers and sisters (i.e., the faithful Kingdom of Judah, versus the unfaithful Israel) as עַמִּי, "my people" and as רַחֲמָה, "Lovingly Accepted," respectively (these

are the opposite of the names he is to give to the two children he has by a harlot, who represents the unfaithful). Here then, those who are faithful to G-d are called His people (עַמִּי). They have entered a covenantal relationship with G-d and are thereby deserving of G-d's rachamim, as indicated by רַחֲמֵהוּ. In verse 2:6 G-d says that He will not have rachamim upon the children of harlotry. That is to say, rachamim, not chesed, is withheld from those who are unfaithful to the covenantal relationship. Finally, in 2:25 G-d re-establishes the covenant with the Northern Kingdom with rachamim, not with chesed. As to Gleuck's point that "the people...could not show Rachamim toward Yahweh," this appears to be true, except for one glaring example in which David promises to show his rachamim to G-d. This can be found in Psalm 18:2 in which David says: "אֲרַחֲמֶךָ ה'." This phrase is in parallel with "אֲקַרְאֶה ה'" in verse 4 which would give "אֲרַחֲמֶךָ ה'" the meaning "I will pray to you, O Lord." This is the only biblical example of רַחֲמֵהוּ meaning "to pray." Nonetheless, David does indeed relate to G-d with rachamim. Since this usage is a hapaxlegomenon, it is difficult to say whether it would be possible for any Israelite to so relate to G-d, or whether it is reserved only for the chosen elite, like David.

While it will be shown later that Gleuck certainly is correct in defining rachamim as G-d's "forgiving love," to say that rachamim can only be defined as such is quite limited. Further, rachamim can be shown to refer to G-d's "covenantal loyalty," which Gleuck would see as only falling within the purview of chesed.

The other major parallel to רַחֲמֵהוּ, חַנּוּן, has the general meaning of "bestowing favor." Interestingly, its usages, too, can be found to fit into the categories which Gleuck reserves for chesed. As to its referring to the G-d/Patriarch relationship, II Kings 13:23, which has already been mentioned regarding rachamim, also uses chen in the same

way. Chen is also indicative of the relationship between G-d and the Davidic house, and as with ר-ח-ם, David can apparently show G-d chen, as is demonstrated by the phrase אֲדוֹנָי אֶתְחַנֵּן (Ps. 30:19), in which ח-נ-ן must mean "to pray." Finally, the same verse, Ps. 77:10, that was used to demonstrate ר-ח-ם referring to the G-d/Israel covenant, has the identical usage for chen. From this it is obvious that ר-ח-ם, ח-ס-ד, and ח-נ-ן are three roots which, although their basic meanings are somewhat distinct, often overlap in their biblical usage.

The occurrence of ח-נ-ן in relation to ר-ח-ם can be divided into two basic categories: 1) normal parallel phraseology and 2) the formulaic phrases חֲנוּן וְרַחוּם and רַחוּם וְחֲנוּן. We have already mentioned an example of the first category, Ps. 77:10, in which Israel can expect G-d's rachamim and chen. On the other hand, there is the notion that the giving of rachamim and chen is totally up to G-d's prerogative (Ex. 33:19) and that Israel can effect that prerogative based on its behavior (Isaiah 27:11). There is also a more universalistic expression of the giving of rachamim and chen, in which they are imparted not only to Israel, but also to "all who wait for Him (Is. 30:18)."

The formula חֲנוּן וְרַחוּם appears to be earlier than its counterpart, רַחוּם וְחֲנוּן⁹, although both seem to be used in the same manner, describing G-d's abundant forgiveness. The earliest occurrence is in Ex. 34:6-7 and the basic phraseology is often repeated.¹⁰

Other terms occurring in parallel with ר-ח-ם are rare. צָדִיק occurs in parallel in Ps. 116:5 and it would seem to indicate that G-d's rachamim is given to those in distress, not because they deserve it, nor because G-d is necessarily desirous of it, but out of a sense of justice. חַסוּל and חֹס also occur in parallel with ר-ח-ם in one verse, Jer. 13:14. In this verse, all three are listed as possible forces which can counter-act G-d's anger. Finally, סְלִיחָה is paral-

leled to ר-ח-ם in Dan. 9:9-10. This verse affords a good example of Gleuck's definition of rachamim, "loving forgiveness," (although one which Gleuck does not use). Here rachamim becomes "loving forgiveness" under the force of its parallel with סליחה .

Another formula in which ר-ח-ם is frequently found (besides חנן ורחום and רחום וחנון) is לתת רחמים . In all cases except one, it is used to refer to G-d's causing either an enemy of Israel or an enemy of an individual to be merciful. In I K. 8:50, G-d is petitioned to cause Israel's "captors" to have mercy upon them as a sign of G-d's forgiveness of Israel's sin.¹¹ A good example of G-d's causing the enemy of an individual to be merciful is in Daniel 1:9 in which the lord high chamberlain is disposed to be kind to Daniel.¹² The only example of the occurrence of this formula which is different is found in Dt. 13:18. Here G-d promises to give His rachamim directly to Israel if they refrain from contact with things that have been forbidden to them (presumably a reference to idol worship).

C. Rachamim as an Attribute of G-d's Personality

There are two major verses in which ר-ח-ם occurs as a key element of G-d's personality. The first, Ex. 34:6-7, is the famous listing of G-d's "thirteen attributes." The entire thrust of the passage is toward a detailed description of G-d's process of forgiveness, i.e., that whereas it is His nature to forgive, punishment is meted out to the third and fourth generations after the sin was committed. Inasmuch as the description occurs within the context of the remaking of the tablets of the ten commandments the linkage to "covenantal loyalty," as Gleuck would have it, is obvious. However, as mentioned earlier, all three terms, rachum, chanun and chesed are indicative of this

relationship. The other major example is Ps. 145:8-9 (חנון ורחום (ה' ארך אפים וגדול חסד. טוב ה' לכול ורחמיו על כל מעשיו). Based upon the context surrounding it, as well as verse 9 itself (טוב ה' לכול...), this description has a much more universal orientation, i.e., this is G-d's personality as regards everyone, not just Israel. This would seem to argue against Gleuck's restricting the use of chesed to merely a covenantal sense. Finally, since there is nothing in the context that mentions anything about forgiveness, rachamim must mean something else here. Inasmuch as the psalm constantly reverts back to the theme of creation, rachamim (along with chen and chesed) can be seen as descriptive of G-d's wisdom in creation as well as the wisdom with which He relates to the world.

In the Bible there is one metaphoric description of G-d's personality which involves His rachamim. In Ps. 77:10-11, G-d's "right hand" is mentioned. From the context it would appear that this "right hand" is both the embodiment of G-d's mercy as well as His anger. It is one entity, which depending upon His desire, can express either. This is similar to a later rabbinic concept in which both din, "judgement," and rachamim are seen as embodied in G-d and, depending upon Israel's actions, one or the other is expressed.

D. How Rachamim is Made Manifest to Humanity

We have already mentioned that G-d's rachamim as it is used in Ps. 145:9, is a quality of G-d that is made manifest in creation itself. There are other passages that indicate much the same thing. In Ps. 25:6 both rachamim and chesed are described as being "as old as time" and in Lam. 3:22-23 they are "renewed daily." Even though these statements concerning rachamim and creation are couched in seemingly universalistic

terms (i.e., indicating that G-d's rachamim is woven into creation for the benefit of the entire world), only Ps. 145 does not indicate a particularistic bias. Ps. 25 ends with פדה אלהים את ישראל... and the verse from Lamentations must have a particularistic bias by virtue of its being in Lamentations altogether. This would then mean that the biblical notion regarding rachamim as inherent in creation is that it is there for Israel's benefit; universalistic leanings in this regard are rare.

We should note that there are many instances in which rachamim is mentioned in clear connection with G-d's covenant with Israel. In Isaiah 54:10, G-d's rachamim and chesed are signs that He is upholding His end of the relationship:¹³

כי ההרים ימושו והגבעות תמושינה וחסדי מאתך
לא ימוש וברית שלומי לא תמול אמר מרחמך ה'.

Rachamim is also indicative of G-d's readiness to forgive Israel, which is inherent in the covenantal relationship. There are times when that forgiveness is only forthcoming if Israel repents,¹⁴ and times when it is granted in spite of their sin.¹⁵

Finally, G-d's redemption of Israel is also motivated by His rachamim. This redemption is based upon the original patriarchal covenant and is often connected with a return to the land.¹⁶

G-d's rachamim can also be manifest as a part of G-d's special relationship with David. David asks for G-d's forgiveness by citing the covenant that exists between them as merit.¹⁷ In addition, he will often, as an individual, not representing Israel, ask for G-d to give him protection by virtue of His rachamim.¹⁸

E. Conclusions

The root ם-ח-ך, as it occurs biblically in relation to G-d, is

found primarily in the word rachamim. Although a strong case can be made for rachamim meaning "bowels" in many instances, none of these instances apply to divine rachamim. As to the often assumed conceptual connection between rechem and rachamim, scripture provides no proof text. Basically, rachamim, when found in relationship to the divine, has the meaning of "mercy". G-d's rachamim in the Bible is primarily particularistic, used almost exclusively in connection with G-d's covenant with Israel. This is even true as regards rachamim as being an integral part of creation. It appears to be there solely for Israel's benefit. In being used to describe the covenant, rachamim certainly goes beyond Gleuck's limitation of "forgiving love" and crosses over into what he claims is the exclusive domain of chesed, "covenantal loyalty." Beyond these two manifestations, G-d's rachamim is also made manifest through G-d's redemption of His people.

Notes to Chapter One

1. See, for example, E. R. Achtemeier, "Mercy", Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, Abingdon Press, New York, 1962, Vol. 2, 352-354.
2. Israel Eitan, "An Unknown Meaning of Rachamim", Journal of Biblical Literature 53 (1934), 269-271.
3. Nelson Gleuck, Hesed in the Bible, 70-102.
4. Carl Brockelman, Lexicon Syriacum, 351.
5. Eitan, op. cit., 271.
6. Joseph Reider, "On Rahamim," JBL, op. cit., 385.
7. James B. Pritchard, The Ancient Near East, Princeton University, New Jersey, 1958, 31-39.
8. Gleuck, op. cit., 84.
9. See the deliniation in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, (eds.), Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, 337.
10. See, for example, Ps. 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 112:4, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; II Ch. 30:9.
11. See also Jer. 42:12.
12. Gleuck, op. cit., 102, sees this as an example of the covenantal link between G-d and the prophet. See also Neh. 1:11.
13. See also Is. 49:15 and 54:7-8- in which G-d insures that should He be lax in upholding His end of the covenant that it will be re-established through rachamim.
14. See Dt. 13:18, Is. 55:7, Joel 2:12-14.
15. See Is. 30:18; Micha 7:19; Ps. 78:33-38, 79:8.
16. For the patriarchal covenant see II K. 13:23, Jer. 33:26; for the connection to a return to the land see Dt. 30:3, Is. 14:1, Jer. 12:15 and 30:18. Cf. Dt. 4:30-31, I K. 8:50, Jer. 21:7, Ps. 102:14, Lam. 3:32, Neh. 9:27-28, II Ch. 30:9.
17. See Ps. 51:3.
18. See II Sam. 24:14; Ps. 40:12, 86:14-17, 119:76-77 and 156.

CHAPTER TWO

DEFINING WHAT RACHAMIM MEANS IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

A. Rachamim as a Key Attribute of G-d's Personality

The rabbis generally saw rachamim as an essential part of the Divine personality matrix. Much of their thinking is based upon the major biblical verses that are descriptive of G-d's personality (Ex.34:6-7, Ps. 145:8-9) which were analyzed in Chapter One. The rabbis emphasized its importance so that it stood out among G-d's attributes, as did din, "justice," the counterpart of rachamim.

A clear example of the rabbinic emphasis on rachamim can be found in Midrash Tehillim 93:8. Commenting upon the phrase, "עדותך נאמנו מאד,"

R. Simon reads the "עדות" as indicative of G-d's attributes:

א"ר סימון: שלש עשרה מידות בתורה שהקב"ה
מרחם בהן את ישראל, שנאמר "ה' ה' אל רחום
וחנון וגו'" (שם' לד:ו) רב אמר: אחת עשרה,
ורבנן אמרי: עשר, ואל איזה מהן השתחוה משה?
רב אמר על החסד, שנאמר "ויסתר משה ויקוד ארצה
וישתחוה" (שם שם ה) ר' אליעזר בן עקיבה אמר:
על ארך אפים, ורבנן אמרי: על מדת רחמים.

This passage is an attempt to distill from the biblical verse (Ex. 34:6) just what is G-d's most important personality trait. For the purposes of this study, several points should be noted. The rabbinic bias toward G-d being merciful is revealed first in this passage by R. Simon's use of the phrase "מרחם בהן...," i.e., every aspect of G-d's personality is merely a part of G-d's rachamim. It is, therefore, not surprising that at the end of the passage the final distillation leads to rachamim as the characteristic which Moses acknowledged. Not only does rachamim receive the authoritative stamp of Moses and, as a result, the support of the majority (רבנן), but also the bias toward rachamim is clear in that it is the only personality trait which is called a "מדה", attribute.

Even as the basic description of G-d's personality in the biblical text of Exodus 34:6-7 comes from G-d's own lips, so the rabbis, too, make some of their most powerful assertions regarding the Divine

personality by having G-d do the talking. In B. T. Berachot 7a, after coming to the conclusion that G-d, like humans, prays (to Himself), the prayer that he utters begins: **יְהוָה מִלְּפָנַי שִׁכְבְּשׁוּ רַחֲמֵי אֵת** . כַּעֲסֵי וַיִּגְדְּלוּ רַחֲמֵי עַל מִיּוֹתַי... Here, once again, it is G-d's rachamim that plays the dominant role in His personality.

As was noted earlier, the other aspect of G-d's personality that is highlighted in rabbinic literature is din, "justice." Thus, when given the opportunity to describe Himself, it is these two attributes upon which G-d will focus. Note for example, Exodus Rabbah 10:15:

אֲנִי דִין אֲנִי מֵלֵא רַחֲמִים.
אֲנִי דִין לְהַפְרִיעָה וְנֹאמֵן לְשֵׁלֶם שְׂכָר.

B. Rachamim as Defined by other Terms

Within rabbinic literature, one must usually judge by the context as to precisely how rachamim is being used. However, in a few places rachamim is equated with another term whose meaning is clear. Take, for example, this statement from Tosephta Peah 4:21:

ר' אליעזר בר' יוסי אמר: מניין שהצדקה
וגמילות חסדים פרקליט גדול ושלוש גדול בין
ישראל לאביהם שבשמיים שנ' "כה אמר ה' אל
תבוא בית מרזח ואל תלך לספור ואל תנד להם
כאדפתי את שלומי מאת העם הזה נאם ה' את החסד
ואת הרחמים (ירמיה טז:ה) חסד זו גמילות
חסדים ורחמים זו צדקה..."

Thus, according to R. Elazar, G-d expresses His rachamim through His being righteous.¹ Another passage which draws a linkage between rachamim and tsedakah is Seder Eliahu Rabbah Chapter 29 (27):

אין העולם מתגדל אלא בצדקה. שנאמר "בצדקה
תכונני" (ישעיה סד:יד) ועליה אמר דוד: "אנא
ה' מלטה נפשי. חנון ה' וצדיק ואלהינו מרחם."
(תהילים קטז:ד-ה) ואמר: "כי אל רחום ה'
אלהיך" (דברים ד:לא).

The connection between rachamim and tsedakah is not as direct in this passage as in the previous passage. However, the connection is strong nonetheless. Though rachamim is not directly defined as tsedakah here,

it is undeniably linked with tsedakah through the proof texts. Further, the rabbis gave added force to the connection by attributing the association of these two terms to David.

Another term with which rachamim is associated is אהבה, though in relation to Divine behavior the connection is made only rarely. We find that, in general, Rashi was wont to translate rachamim with ahavah.² His only example of this regarding Divine rachamim is in a comment on B. T. Sanhedrin 7a in which he translates "כשאהבתינו" as "כי רחמתיך הוה עזיזא" as "היתה עזה ביני לאשתי". Since, in the Talmud passage, a sage is metaphorically equating the love between a husband and a wife to that between G-d and Israel, then Rashi's translation indirectly implies that the love between G-d and Israel is expressed by rachamim.

C. Rachamim and Other Forms of ר-ח-ם as Indicative of G-d Himself

It is an accepted midrashic principle that wherever יהוה appears in the Bible, it is indicative of G-d's Attribute of Mercy and that אלהים refers to the Attribute of Justice. This principle finds expression in many places in the literature. Almost always the scriptural proof for the dictum is Exodus 34:6. The following passage from Sifre Deuteronomy Piska 3 is a good example of how it is typically worded:³

כל מקום שנאמר ה' זו מדת רחמים שנאמר "ה' ה'
אל רחום וחנון..." (שם' לד:ו).

Rashi's comment on Exodus 34:6 reveals that the dictum that equals rachamim did not always hold fast:

אל: אף זו מדת רחמים, וכן אומר "אלי למה
עזבתני?" (תהילים כב:ב) ואין לומר למדת הדין
"למה עזבתני", כך מצאתי במכילתא.

Rashi's reference is to the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata 3, which itself comments on the word "אלי" in Exodus 15:2. But the Mekhilta is not the only place in which exception is taken with the equation of יהוה

and rachamim. In both Bereshit Rabbah 33:3 and 73:3, the rabbis find several biblical passages in which they see יהוה⁴ as indicative of judgement and אל or אלהים as indicative of mercy.

Generally the rabbis utilize the principle to read Divine mercy into the biblical text. They will not restate the principle each time it is used. It is simply understood. Note the following examples:

1) Leviticus Rabbah 29:3:

...בשעה שישראל נוטלין את שופריהן ותוקעין
לפני הקב"ה עומד מכסא הדין ויין שב בכסא רחמים
דכתיב "ה' בקול שופר" (תהילים מז:ו) ומתמלא
עליהם רחמים ומרחם עליהם והפוך עליהם הדין
לרחמים.

2) Exodus Rabbah 6:1

...ולפי שנסתכל הקב"ה שבשביל צער ישראל דבר
כן חזר ונהג עמו במדת רחמים. הה"ד, "ויאמר
אליו אני ה'" (שם ו:ב).

Certain forms of ם-ח-ר are used in some places as indicating G-d Himself. For example, in Mishnah Shavuot 4:13, rachum is listed among those names of G-d with which one can be bound in oath, along with יהוה שדי, and other common names. In the talmudic discussion of this Mishnah (B. T. Shavuot 35 a-b) the question arises as to whether rachum and chanun are to be included among Divine names or whether they are merely epithets. Proof that they are the latter is brought by listing those names which may not be erased (because they are used solely of the Diety) and those which may be erased (rachum is in the latter category). To add to this Abaye maintains that rachum and chanun mean "By Him who is merciful" and "By Him who is gracious," i.e., that they are indeed epithets. Rava adds that since "there is nothing else which is called merciful and gracious," it is clear that the words are adjectival in nature and not names in and of themselves. The result is that the Talmud is not willing to agree with the Mishnaic acceptance of rachum and chanun as Divine names.

In the following aggadic source, G-d is to be identified with **ר-ח-ם**;
Seder Eliahu Zuta Chapter 6:

ואומר: "ויעבור ה' על פניו ויקרא וגו'
(שם' לד:ה-ו) כיון שראה משה שמירה של חסד היא
נתעטף ועמד בתפילה לפני הקב"ה.

In this passage three things are made synonymous: (1) G-d's goodness (which is referred to earlier in the passage via Exodus 33:19); (2) G-d's lovingkindness and mercy; and (3) G-d Himself (**יהוה**). According to Kadushin's Theology of Seder Eliahu the passage understands the connection in the following manner: "In (Exodus) 33:19 G-d says that He will come to pass His goodness before Moses, and will proclaim, then, the name of Lord (**יהוה**), again in (Exodus) 34:6, He speaks as Lord (**יהוה**), hence what He proclaims Himself must be the description of His goodness, and this, in (Exodus) 33:19, He made synonymous with Lord."⁶ Therefore, if G-d's goodness is synonymous with Lord and that goodness is described by rachamim and chesed, then rachamim and chesed also signify G-d (**יהוה**). Although it is not stated that its intent is such, this passage can be a proof for the inverse of the rabbinic principle stated earlier, i.e., just as **יהוה** indicates rachamim, so rachamim indicates **יהוה** .

Ironically, while the Talmudic sages were unwilling to allow rachum specifically to be used as a Divine name, they would often use a term of their own whose root is **ר-ח-ם**, **רחמנא** . The first sage reported to have used the divine designation Rachmana is R. Akiba in B. T. Berachot 60b⁷:

תנא משמיה דר' עקיבה "לעולם יהי אדם רגיל
לומר 'כל דעביר רחמנא לטב עביר.'"

Rachmana is solely a term of the Babylonian Talmud.

There does not appear to be any consistent motivation behind the use of the epithet Rachmana. It occurs in relationship to both G-d's leniency as well as G-d's stringency. Nonetheless there are passages in

which the choice of Rachmana, over any other Divine appellation, seems most apt. B. T. Kiddushin 20a is a good example:

א"ל ההוא מרבנן לאביי מכדי הני קראי איכא
למידרשינהו לקולא ואיכא למידרשינהו לחומרא
מאי חזית דרשינהו לקולא נדרשינהו לחומרא לא
ס"ד מדאקיל רחמנא לגביה דתניא "כי טוב לו
עמך" (דברים טו:טז)...

In a passage such as this in which G-d's leniency is being referred to, it seems quite appropriate that G-d would be called Rachmana. There are many other examples of this type.⁸ On the other hand, there are passages in which G-d's stringency is indicated by Rachmana. In discussing whether or not the liability for half-damages (in the case of a cow that gores) is civil or penal, R. Papa maintains that it is civil, pointing to G-d as Rachmana for having ordained half-payment (because the cow, an animal, could not be held responsible for its actions). R. Huna b. R. Joshua maintains that it is penal. He says in B. T. Baba Kama 15a;

...ברין הוא לא לשלם כלל ורחמנא הוא דקנסיה
כי היכי דלנשנרי לתוריה...

Here it is Rachmana (meaning not just "G-d" but "Divine Law", as it does in many other places) that judges the case more severely even than din, "justice," does.

Rachamim also is employed as a description of the manner in which G-d relates to Israel. This is especially true in relation to G-d's judgement of Israel, which is a reflection not only of justice, but of mercy as well. A good example of how midat rachamim is pictured as interacting with midat hadin in relation to Israel can be found in the Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 25:101:⁹

בש"ר מאיר, "כי הנה ה' יוצא ממקומו" (ישעיה
כו:כא) יוצא מסוה למוה, מסדת הדין למדת הרחמים
על ישראל.

There are even passages in which both rachamim and din appear not as separate entities within G-d's personality, but rather as one entity which G-d changes from one to the other depending upon His desire. Note Leviticus Rabbah 29:9:

...כך כשיהיו בניו של יצחק באים לידי עבירות
ומעשים רעים...ומתמלא עליהם רחמים ורחם
עליהם ותהפוך להם מדת הדין למדת הרחמים...

It should be mentioned that only rarely is the expression midat rachamim used in relationship to G-d judging all peoples. The following passage from Tanhuma Buber Shalach #24 exemplifies this well:

(רבון כל העולמים עשה בשבילך) "ועתה יגדל נא
כח ה'" (במדבר יד:יז) וינצח מדת הרחמים למדת
הדין כאשר דברת לאמר (שם) "אני אמרתי לפניך
באיזו מדה אתה דן עולמך..."

There is a frequent metaphor which is used to describe the division of G-d's personality between justice and mercy. The metaphor is one in which each of the attributes is embodied in one of two thrones upon which G-d sits. Generally G-d is found on the כסא הדין and it requires some human action, be it on the part of Israel or humanity in general, to cause G-d to rise from the Throne of Justice and move to the Throne of Mercy. As regards Israel specifically, this motif finds continuous expression in texts which speak about the laws of Yom Kippur. For example, the text quoted above (Leviticus Rabbah 29:9) G-d is beseeched by Abraham to move to the Throne of Mercy on Yom Kippur in spite of Israel's wickedness:

עמוד מכסא הדין לכסא הרחמים ומתמלא עליהם
רחמים...אימתי? בחודש השביעי.

A good example of an individual requesting that G-d sit on the Throne of Mercy is the case of Moses as he approaches death (Tanhuma Buber, Va-etkhanan #6):

...אמר לפניו: "רבש"ע עמוד מכסא הדין וש
על כסא הרחמים עלי ולא אמות."

There is also at least one text in which it appears that what determines upon which Throne G-d sits is not human action but rather the time of day (B. T. Avodah Zarah 3b):

רב יהודה אמר רב: שתיים עשרה שעות הוי היות
שלש הראשונות הקב"ה יושב נעסק בתורה שניות
יושב ודן את כל העולם כולן כיון שרואה
שנתחייב עולם כלייה עומד מכסא הדין ויושב
על כסא רחמים...

It would appear from this passage that G-d's time of mercy is predictable. In reality, it is not G-d's mercy that is predictable but rather it is humanity's weakness. Humanity's inability to attain a basic level of righteous living forces G-d into the routine of moving from the Throne of Judgement to the Throne of Mercy. Were He not to move, humanity would be destroyed.

One text asserts that it is because G-d has chosen to relate to Israel with rachamim that Israel is not annihilated as a result of G-d's anger. It is solely rachamim that makes the G-d/Israel relationship possible. Aggadat Bereshit 8:¹²

ולמה אנו יכולים לעמוד בזעפו, מפני שבא
עלינו ברחמים, שנאמר "זעף ה' אשא" (מיכה ז:ט)
וכתיב "ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון" (שמות לד:ו).

D. Rachamim as an Element of Creation

The simplest statement regarding the involvement of G-d's rachamim in creation is so worded as to be said by G-d Himself (Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Mishpatim 19):

ושמעתי כי חנון אני, שברחמים בראתי את עולמי.

Beyond being a force behind creation, rachamim is also a means by which the world is sustained, a vehicle through which the eternity of creation is assured. (Ottiot de Rabbi Eliezar, Part I):¹³

אמר הקב"ה במדת הרחמים בראתי את העולם ובמדת
הרחמים אני מנהיגו ועתיד אני לחדשו במדת
הרחמים.

There are even speculations as to why G-d chose to create the world with rachamim. The following passage is taken from Midrash Konein (which is found in Beit Ma-Midrash II, P. 38-39). Here rachamim is part of creation in order that the various parts of creation might have a chance of surviving the attacks of their natural enemies:

ברא בני אדם ברא כנגדם שדים ואלמלא רחמיו
של הקב"ה ותיקונם שתיקן להן אין כל בריה
יכולה לעמוד בפני המזיקין ומיד חוזרין חלילה.

In another text rachamim is said to have been used in creation in order to have allowed G-d to be able to create the world in the face of evil. Bereshit Rabbah 8:4:

א"ר ברכיה בשעה שבא הקב"ה לברות את אדם
הראשון ראה צדיקים ורשעים יוצאים ממנו. אמר
אם אני בורא אותו רשעים יוצאים ממנו. ואם לא
אברא אותו היאך צדיקים יוצאים ממנו? מה עשה
הקב"ה? הפליג דרכן של רשעים מכנגד פניו
ושיתף בו מדת רחמים ובראו...

On the other hand, there are passages that maintain that the world was created on the basis of a balance between mercy and justice. Note Bereshit Rabbah 12:15 in this regard:¹⁴

אם בורא אני את עולם במדת הרחמים הוי חסיה
סגיאין. במדת הדין האיך העולם יכול לעמוד?
אלא הרי אני בורא אותו במדת הדין ובמדת
הרחמים והלואי יעמוד.

The gamut of midrashic opinion also includes those passages that maintain that rachamim was not used in creation at all, only din. Exodus Rabbah 30:13:

ד"א ואלא המשפטים הה"ד (משלי כט) "מלך במשפט
יעמיד ארץ" זה הקב"ה שברא את עולמו בדין
שנאמר (בר' א:א) "בראשית ברא אלהים" ברא ה'
לא נאמר אלא אלהים.

This passage goes on to demonstrate the preponderance of the name Elohim (i.e., midat hadin) in the creation story.

E. Rachamim as a Being in G-d's Heavenly Court

Generally the literature acknowledges that rachamim is represented in the heavenly entourage, but texts vary as to whether rachamim is embodied in only one angel or many. A good example of a text in which there are many angels of mercy is Buber's Tanhuma, Tazriah #20:¹⁵

אמר ר' תנחומא בר' חנילאי בשם ר' ברכיה בשם
ר' יוחנן: אין עומדים לפני הקב"ה אלא מלאכי
שלום ומלאכי רחמים, אבל מלאכי הזעם רחוקים
ממנו...

One version of the story of Sodom and Gemora has Lot praying for mercy directly to the angels who had come to bring the message of destruction upon the Sodomites. Whether or not these are specific "angels of mercy" is not made clear but it is obvious that they can dispense and withhold rachamim. G-d is not involved at all. Bereshit Rabbah 26:5:

כל אותו הלילה היה לוט מבקש רחמים על
הסדומיים והיו מקבלין מידו כיון שאמרו לו
"הוצאים אלינו ונדעה אותם לשתמש" אמרו לו
עליו (בר' יט) "עוד מי לך פה?" ללמד עליהם סגוריא.
עליהם מכאן ואילן אין ללמד עליהם סגוריא.

Rachamim, in the form of one angel, argues before G-d that despite its wickedness, humanity should be allowed to survive.¹⁶ Often, the one angel that is identified with rachamim vis-a-vis Israel is Michael. The clearest statement regarding Michael's association with rachamim comes from Buber's Eicha Rabbati Chapter 2:

א"ר יוכתן למלאך רחמים שבהם אמר זה מיכאל.

Buber in his commentary notes that this angel in other versions of this passage is either Ezekiel, the prophet (whom the passage is about), or Gabriel. This latter possibility is extremely unlikely inasmuch as Gabriel is commonly associated with the midat hadin.¹⁷ Michael's identification with rachamim is further supported by Exodus Rabbah 18:5, in which Michael is identified as the angel, in Zech. 1:12, who pleads with G-d that He have rachamim upon Israel.¹⁸

Notes on Chapter Two

1. See also Seder Eliahu Zuta Chapter 6.
2. See I. Avinery (ed.). Heichal Rashi, Vol. II, 319.
3. See also Pesikta de Rav Kahana, supplement 6:4 and Buber's Tanhuma Vaera #11 and Tazria #20 in which the formula of the dictum is, "אין ה' אלא..."
4. See also Bamidbar Rabbah 9:18, in which יהוה in Nu. 5:21 is seen as indicating סדת אכזריות.
5. See also Exodus Rabbah 3:6, 6:3; Numbers Rabbah 12:1; Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:26-27; Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata 4.
6. Max Kadushin, The Theology of Seder Eliahu, Vol. I, 114.
7. Ephraim Urbach, The Sages, 454.
8. See B. T. Sanhedrin 55a, 82b, B. T. Avodah Zarah 54a, B. T. Hulin 109b.
9. See also Numbers Rabbah 19, 4; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 8, 1; Song of Songs Rabbah II 17, 1.
10. See also Leviticus Rabbah 29, 3 and 6; Midrash on the Psalms 47:2; Buber's Tanhuma, B'hukotai, 55.
11. The passage cited can also be found in Tanhuma Nidpas Shalakh #13 and Numbers Rabbah 16:22. See also B. T. Berachot 17a and Pesikta Rabbati 40:2.
12. See also Midrash Psalms 22:7.
13. See also B. T. Hagigah 12a, Leviticus Rabbah 35:8.
14. See also Midrash Song of Songs p. 39b, #11.
15. See also Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version A, Section 33.
16. Recanati, Lev. 23:24, quoting from an unknown Midrash in Ginsberg, L., Legends of the Jews, Vol. V. P. 73. See also Bereshit Rabbah 8:5 in which a similar debate occurs concerning the creation of humanity, although angels of Mercy and Justice are not involved.
17. See B. T. Sanhedrin 44b in which Gabriel is referred to by his other name of 'an arguing spirit' and is defended against by imploring mercy, i.e., Michael. See note 6 of the Soncino translation of this passage, P. 290.
18. See also Pesikta de Rav Kahana 1.3 and Numbers Rabbah 8:5 in which Michael is associated with G-d's הסמל, "dominion."

CHAPTER THREE
THE MANIFESTATION OF RACHAMIM IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

A. Rachamim as Manifest Through G-d's Actions

Once it is accepted that G-d is merciful by nature, a question the rabbis must answer is, "Through what vehicles does G-d express His mercy"? Generally, the rabbis see G-d's rachamim expressed not through specific actions whose intent is to express G-d's mercy, but rather through the very nature of His interaction with the world. This concept is expressed in very simple, direct statements. For example, note the following statement from Midrash Ha-Gadol, Exodus 34:6:

"אל רחום וחנון: " שהוא מרחם על עולמו וחנון
את ברואיו.

or this from Seder Eliahu Zuta, Chapter 6:¹

מסות דרכיו הוא למד שרחמיו מרובין בעולם.

Specific Divine actions are treated as well, as they relate to the expression of G-d's rachamim. Even G-d's anger is mixed with rachamim. Usually the biblical basis for this view is Habakuk 3:2, "ברוגז רחם תזכור", A good example of this can be found in the Midrash on Psalms 22:7, in which one of the proof texts for Micha 7:8, "כי אשב בחשך ה' אור לי" is Habakuk 3:2.

שנו רבותינו מתוך כעס רצון, מתוך אפילה אורה,
מתוך רוגז רחמים, מתוך צרה רייחה, מתוך
ריחוק קירוב, מתוך נפילה קימה. מתוך כעס
רצון, "הרף ממני ואשמידם" (דברים ט:ח) מיד
"וינחם ה' על הרעה" (שמות לב:יד) מתוך אפילה
אורה, "כי אשב בחשך ה' אור לי" (מיכה ז:ח)
מתוך רוגז רחמים, "ברוגז רחם תזכור" (חבקוק
ג:ב).

A more detailed statement can be found in Aggadat Bereshit 78:

ואע"פ שהוא מביא את הידורין, מוזג את עולמו
משפט עם רחמים, שנאמר "נודע ה'" (תהילים
עו:א-ב) "ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון (שמות לד:ו).

The proof texts, of course, rely on the equation of יהוה with rachamim. This should be true, however, only for the second proof text, Exodus 34:6, and not for Psalms 76:1-2 for the name Elohim is used only in the psalm. It is obviously misquoted in the Midrash.

The mixture of G-d's mercy and anger was even read into texts in which G-d's rachamim is blatantly denied. Note the following illustration from B. T. Pesachim 87b:

אמר ר' אליעזר: אפילה בשעת כאסו של הקב"ה
זוכר את הרחמים שנא "כי לא אוסיף עוד ארחם
את ישראל" (הושע א:ו) ר' יוסי בר חנינא אמר
מהכי: "כי נשא אשא להם" (שם).

Rashi's comment on this passage explains well how the rabbis were able to read G-d's rachamim into the verse, i.e., merely because of the word "ארחם", even though the verse says that G-d will not be merciful.

G-d's rachamim is also seen as being made manifest in His ability to heal the sick. Even though this healing is considered to be a "natural" action of G-d, it was necessary to induce G-d to heal through the vehicle of prayer. These passages often employ the phrase "לבקש רחמים"; for example, B. T. Shabbat 32a:²

אמר רב יצחק בריה דרב יהודה: לעולם יבקש
אדם רחמים שלא יחלה, שאם יחלה אומרים לו:
הבא זכות והפטר.

A typical wording of a general prayer for G-d's healing power as associated with His rachamim can be found in B. T. Shabbat 12b:

רבי יהודה אומר: המקום ירחם עליך ועל חולי
ישראל...

The inclusion of the specific person among the "sick of Israel", as above, is a common feature of such prayers. Not only is rachamim to be requested in order that G-d heal the sick, but upon recovery, the role of His mercy in the process is to be acknowledged. In B. T. Berachot 54b, G-d's mercy is indicated by the use of "רחמנא":

רבי יהודה חלש ואתפח על לגביה רב חנא בגדתאה
ורבנן אמרי ליה: "ברוך רחמנא דיהבך ניהלך
ולא יהבך לעפרא"... עני בתרייהו אמן.

If someone recovers earlier than is humanly expected, it is considered an act of divine mercy. Note the passage in Baba Kama 91a:

האי מאן דאמרוהו לכולי יומא ואיתפח לפלגא
דיומא...טן שמיא הוא דרחמי עליה.

The case of an early recovery is a good example of another rabbinic philosophy. From time to time, G-d would act mercifully of His own accord to rescue someone from danger, even though, according to the rabbinic perception of the normal functioning of the world, this should not happen. It is as though rachamim were a supernatural intrusion into the natural order. Note P. T. Shabbat 14b in this regard:

תני ר' יעקב: הרואה נחש ועקרב בתוך ארבע
אומות ראוי שימות בהם אלא שרחמים של המקום
מרובין.

Another example of this philosophy can be found in B. T. Sanhedrin 12a:

זוג בא מרקת ותפשו נשר... בזכות הרחמים
ובזכותם יצאו בשלום...

A more normative manifestation of G-d's rachamim relates to the prevention of pregnancy, i.e., as a Divine contraceptive. In several different Talmudic passages,³ the rabbis attempt to determine what should be the strictures regarding sexual intercourse for several categories of women: (1) a married minor (eleven years and one day to twelve years and one day); (2) women above and below that age; (3) the expectant mother and (4) the nursing mother. Three basic opinions are cited: R. Bibi argues that minors, pregnant and nursing women may use an "absorbent" (contraceptive); R. Meir states that all women should conduct their sexual relations normally; and that of the sages (the majority opinion):

...חכמים אומרים: אחת זו ואחת זו משמשת
כדרכה והולכת מן השמים ירחמו...

According to the sages, no physical contraceptive is allowed to protect the woman from pregnancy or harm, even in special cases. Trust was placed in G-d's rachamim to protect her.

B. G-d's Rachamim as Manifested in Redemption/Salvation

The rabbis saw rachamim as a motivating force behind G-d's redemption of Israel. Were it not for the intercession of G-d's mercy

into the history of Israel, the people would not have survived. This thought receives excellent expression in Bereshit Rabbah 78:13, in which the rabbis maintain that even though G-d has appointed excellent "shepherds" to guide and tend "His flock" throughout Israel's history, still it has been G-d's mercy that enabled the people to survive their oppressors:

"ויאמר אליו אדוני יודע כי הילדים רכים וגו' (בר' לג:יג) זה משה ואהרן. "והצאן והבקר עלות עלי" אלו ישראל שנ' (יחזקאל לד:לא) "ואתן צאני צאן מרעיתי אדם אתם." ר' חונא בשם ר' אחא אמר "אלילולי רחמיו של הקב"ה ודפקום יום אחד כבר מתו כל הצאן בימי אדריינוס." ר' ברכיה בשם ר' לוי אמר: "אדוני יודע כי הילדים רכים" זה דוד ושלמה. "והצאן והבקר עלות עלי" אלו ישראל, שנאמר "ואבנה צאני וגו' (שם לד:יז) ר' חונא בשם ר' אחא אמר: אלילולי רחמיו של הקב"ה כבר מתו כל הצאן בימי הסן.

Another passage, Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:23, attributes the Exodus from Egypt, as well as all future redemptions, in part to G-d's rachamim:⁴

ד"א אמר ר"א כשנגאלו ישראל ממצרים לא נגאלו אלא מתוך חמשה דברים אלו. מתוך צרה, מתוך תשובה, מתוך זכות אבות, ומתוך רחמים, ומתוך הקץ. מתוך צרה דכתיב "ויאנחו בני ישראל" (שמות ב:כג) מתוך תשובה דכתיב "ותעל שועתם" (שם) מתוך זכות אבות דכתיב "ויזכור אלהים את בריתו" (שם כד) ומתוך רחמים דכתיב "וירא אלהים את בני ישראל" (שם כה) מתוך הקץ "וידע אלהים" (שם) ואף וע"ל אין נגאלים אלא מתוך חמשה דברים הללו מתוך צרה דכתיב "בצר לך" (שם ד:ל) הרי מתוך צרה. "ושבת עד ה' אלהיך" (שם) הרי מתוך תשובה. "כי אל רחום ה' אלהיך" (שם לא) הרי מתוך רחמים. "ולא ישכח את ברית אבותיך" (שם) הרי מתוך זכות אבות. "ומצאוך כל הדברים האלה באחרית הימים" (שם ל) הרי מתוך הקץ...

A specific symbol of G-d's rachamim as expressed in Divine redemption is "rain," מטר or גשמים. G-d's granting rain, especially after a drought, is viewed as an act of mercy on His part. Much of the expression of this idea comes from B. T. Ta'anit in which the circumstances surrounding many droughts are recorded. Oftentimes an intermediary (a person of high status in the community) was called upon to represent the people before G-d and to pray for rain. The following prayer of R. Akiba

from B. T. Ta'anit 25b exemplifies well both the wording of the prayers of the intermediaries, as well as the conceptual link between geshamim and rachamim:⁵

... ירד ר' עקיבה... ואמר "אבינו מלכינו אין לנו
מלך אלא אתה אבינו מלכינו למענך רחם עלינו"
... וירד גשמים...

C. Rachamim as Expressed by the Divine Law

It had already been indicated several times how, by choosing to use the term 'Rachmana' when referring to G-d and His Law, the rabbis demonstrate that divine legislation is motivated by and based upon divine mercy. There are many passages which illuminate this thinking, not the least of which comes to us not from a rabbi but from the wife of a rabbi, Yaltha, the wife of R. Nahman: B. T. Hulin 109b:

מכדי כל דאסר רחמנא שרא לן כותי' אסר לן דמא
שרא לן כבודה...

Yaltha goes on to list many other instances in Divine Law in which its stringency is counterbalanced by its mercy. The rabbis even felt that G-d's law was more merciful than their interpretation of it. Note in this regard, B. T. Sanhedrin 82b:⁶

מי איכה מידי דרחמנא פטירה ואנן ניקום
וביטול ליה ולא והנתן מי שלקה ושנה ב"ד
מכניסין אותו לכיפה רחמנא פטירה ואנן קטלין.

Thus far we have seen the notion that divine law is a manifestation of divine mercy as it is expressed in the Babylonian Talmud. It exists in the Midrash as well. Some of its midrashic expression concerns specific commandments. For instance, in Deuteronomy Rabbah 6,1 the fact that G-d ordained that circumcision be conducted on the eighth day after birth (so that the child might gain strength) is seen as an act of mercy:

למה התינוק ניטול לשמונה ימים? שנתן הקב"ה
רחמים עליו להמתין לו עד שיהא בו כח.

The establishment of the Cities of Refuge (Dt. 4:41) was seen as the expression of divine mercy through the interpretation of a preceding verse (Dt. 4,37) in Deuteronomy Rabbah 2,26-27:

כי ידעת היום והשיבת אל לבבך כי ה' הוא
אלהים...

which the rabbis translated as "Lay it to thy heart that the G-d of mercy (יהוה) is He who when necessary is a G-d of Justice (אלהים)."⁷

D. Rachamim as Manifest in G-d's Forgiveness of Sin

G-d Himself in Exodus 34:6-7 defined how the process of forgiveness of sin functions. Even though this passage included the stricture that G-d's vengeance would be executed unto the third and fourth generation after those who sin, still the rabbis saw even this as being indicative of G-d's mercy. Note Seder Eliahu Rabbah Chap. 18:

כתבת לנו שלשים ורבעים בו בעולם עד סוף
הדורות בודאי "ה' ארך אפים ורב חסד וגו' "
(במ' יד:יח) מפני מה? מפני שאתה רחום וחנון.

The passages which relate G-d's unconditional forgiveness do not mention any specific event or events in Israel's history that would warrant Israel's being forgiven. Nor do they mention confession, repentance or the request for forgiveness or mercy. Rather, for the most part, they are simple, straight forward statements noting the sin of Israel (none of the texts are universal) and G-d's desire to forgive. G-d's merciful forgiveness is given freely. Perhaps the simplest form of this philosophy comes to us from the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Mishpatim 13:⁸

ולבם לא נכון עמו ואף על פי כן "והוא רחום
יכפר עון (תהילים עח:לו).

One passage clearly demonstrates just how unconditional G-d's forgiveness is when it is motivated by mercy. In Exodus Rabbah 25:6, human beings are described as being wont to exact payment from those who are in debt to them, yet trying at the same time, to avoid paying their own debts.

The owing of debts becomes a metaphor for Israel's sinning against G-d. G-d is shown to act differently from human beings:

אבל הקב"ה אינו כן מצא שאנו חייבין לו הוא
כובשו שנה (מיכה ז:יט) "ישוב ירחמנו יכבוש
עונותינו." ואם מוצא לנו זכות הוא מוציא...

E. When Rachamim is Made Manifest

There are texts which depict G-d's rachamim as being manifest in "this world," baolam hazeh. G-d's rachamim, as we mentioned earlier, was an integral part of creation. Therefore, its manifestation goes back to the beginning of history. In the Garden of Eden we find it manifest as a specific kind of fruit or oil. This can be found in The Apocalypse of Moses, The Book of the Life of Adam and Eve, an apocryphal work written in Greek in Palestine between 100 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. (therefore, a contemporary of early Rabbinic Literature).⁹ The book deals with Adam's life and death, beginning with the expulsion from the Garden. When Adam is upon his death bed he asks for his son, Seth, to go to the Garden to ask G-d if "He will perhaps have pity on me and...give unto me the fruit from which proceeds the anointing of pity."

More generally, G-d's mercy towards Israel is seen as everlasting in this world, i.e., that even if Israel is suffering, G-d's rachamim is always there and will eventually be made manifest. In the Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Chapter 17, it is speculated based upon Psalm 77:9-10,

האפס לנצח חסרו גמר אומר לדור ודור. השכח חנות אל אם כפץ
סלה, as to whether or not G-d's mercy is or is not everlasting
(selah in rabbinic exegesis is taken to mean "forever")."

"השכח חנות אל" (תהילים עז:י) השכח שאת חנונו
ה'. "אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים" (שמות לד:ו).
ד"א "השכח חנות אל." השכח חנייתך, "על פי ה'
יחנו ועל פי ה' יסעו" (במדבר ט:כ). ד"א "השכח
חנות אל" השכח מחנותיך אל, אהל מועד וגלגל
ונוב וגבעון ושילה ובית עולמים שנים, "אם
קפץ באף רחמיו סלה" (שם), אע"ג שהוא כעים
רחמיו קרובין, וציון אומרת "עזבני ושכחני."

Based on reading selah as "forever," rachamim is indeed everlasting.¹⁰

Some texts are of the opinion that G-d has specific hours during the day when He is merciful (B. T. Avodah Zarah, 3b and 4b). In Chapter Two it was explained that this probably refers more to Israel's inability to be free of sin than to G-d's predictability.

At least one passage depicts G-d's mercy as preserved in the world to come, stored up for those who did not deserve reward in this world. Exodus Rabbah 45,6 tells of Moses being shown the stockpiles of reward in one world to come. When confronted with the pile, he asked for whom it is intended. G-d told him:

מי שיש לו אני נותן לו משכרו ומי שאין לו
אני עושה לו חנם ונותן לו מזה שנאמר "וחנותי
את אשר אחון" (שם' לג: יט). "וחנותי את אשר
אחון" למי שאני מבקש לחון. וכן "רחמתי את
אשר ארחם" (שם).

It is not "mercy" itself that is distributed from this pile, but reward is given to humanity based upon divine mercy ("ורחמתי את אשר ארחם").

Notes for Chapter Three

1. See also a later source Chovot Halevavot, Sha'ar Hayichud, Chapter 6. Here the natural acts of G-d's creatures are also a vehicle for the expression of divine mercy.
2. See also B. T. Berachot 34b.
3. See B. T. Yebamot 42b, 100b, B. T. Ketubot 38b-39a, B. T. Nidah 45a.
4. See also Exodus Rabbah 34b.
5. See also B. T. Ta'anit 6b, 16a, 19a, 25a; Leviticus Rabbah 34:14; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezar 17, pp. 40b-41a.
6. See also B. T. Menachot 89a.
7. See note #1 in Soncino translation of The Midrash, Vol. VII, p. 56. There is also a powerful statement which asserts that G-d's decrees are not acts of mercy. In commenting upon the Mishnayot (Berachot 5:3, Megilah 4:9) which prohibit the saying of על קן צפור יגיע רחמין, "Your mercies extend to the bird's nest," R. Jose b. Zebida says the reason for the prohibition is מפני שעושה מרותיו של הקב"ה רחמים ואינן אלא גזרות (B. T. Berachot 33b, B. T. Megilah 25a).
8. See also Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael Shirata 9, Bachodesh 1; Lamentations Rabbah 3:8; and Seder Eliahu Rabbah Chapter 4.
9. Conybearc, Fred C., "On the Apocalypse of Moses," Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. VII, 216. ff.
10. See also The Midrash on Psalms 67:1.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE INDUCEMENT OF RACHAMIM

A. Inducements Unique to Israel

The rabbis apparently saw G-d's merciful love of Zion as having been removed, based upon their interpretation of verses like Psalms 77:9-10 האפס לנצח חסדו גמר אט לזר חדה. השכח חנות אל אם קפץ באף רחמיז סלה. and Isaiah 49:14 ותאמר ציון עזבני ה' וה' שכחני. A good example of this thinking can be found in Pesikta Rabbati Chapter 31:7:

"ותאמר ציון עזבני ה' וה' שכחני" מהו ה'
וה' ? אמרה לו: אפילו שתי מדות רחמים
שכתובים בך "ה' יה' אל רחום וחנון" (שמות לד:ו)
עזבו אותי ושכחו אותי...

The peoples' yearning for their homeland can cause G-d to once again be merciful toward Zion. However, the notion that G-d's mercy for Zion could be renewed in this manner does not find expression until later texts. Note, for example, the following text from The Kuzari, the end of article 5, which comments upon Ps. 102:14, "אתה תקום תרחם ציון...":

רוצה לומר ירושלים אמנם תבנה כשיכספו בני
ישראל לה תכלית הכוסף עד שיחוננו אבניה
ועפרה.

Israel could induce G-d's rachamim not only upon Zion, but also upon themselves, through the performance of specific acts. Among those acts of course, are the commandments. For instance, in Song of Songs Rabbah 4:14, we find G-d saying concerning those Israelites who were circumcized by Joshua and the aroma created by their foreskins:

לבשיבאו בניהם של אלו לידי עבירות ומעשים
רעים אני נזכר להם ריח זה ומתמלא עליהם
רחמים והפוך להם מדת הדין לרחמים.

Here, not only is circumcision meritorious in and of itself, but its merit lasts eternally.¹

On Yom Kippur, fulfilling the commandment to blow the shofar induces G-d to move from the Throne of Judgement to the Throne of Mercy. Note in this regard Pesikta Rabbati 40:5:

אמר דוד אין גדול מן השופר. שהוא מסלק מדת
הדין ומקרב מדת רחמים (בשעה) שהקב"ה עולה
ויושב על כסאו שלו בדין. יהודה בר נחמן בשם
ריש לקיש אמר "עלה אלהים בתרועה" (תהילים
מז:ו) מיד תקעו בשופר ומדת הדין (מסלקת
ומדת רחמים) מתקרבת "ה' בעול שופר" (שם) 2

Even the study of the commandments (i.e., versus their execution) induces G-d to be merciful. For example, Massechet Kallah Rabbati 2:1:

כיון שהקב"ה מסתקל בתינוקות של בית רבן
ובת"ח שיושבין בבתי מדרש מיד נהפך כעסו
לרחמים.³

Repeatedly, in B. T. Ta'anit we find that a fast is decreed in order to end a drought (25a, 19a, 23a). Since, as was noted earlier, rachamim is often made manifest through geshamim, it is rachamim, too, that the people wish to induce through their fasting. However, the fast itself is never enough. It is always accompanied by either a prayer and/or additional action. There are cases in which the action taken by the people in relation to their fast is an abstinence from kindness; e.g., B. T. Ta'anit 16a:

אסרו הבהמות לחוד ואת הוולדות לחוד אמרו
לפני רבונו של עולם אם אין אתה טרחם עלינו
אין אנו טרחמים על אלו.⁴

G-d's rachamim can also be induced by Israel's performance of the sacrificial rite, e.g., Pesikta de Rav Kahana 6:4:

...בית שמאי אומרים, "כבשים" (במדבר כח:ג)
שהם כובשין עונותיהם של ישראל, במה"א "ישוב
ירחמנו יכבוש עונותינו (מיכה ז:יט).

The disciples of Shammai read כבשים (Nu. 28:3) as though written כובשים, "they put out of sight." That is, the daily offering of the lambs brings it about that G-d puts Israel's iniquities out of sight, as the verse tells us, "He will turn again and have compassion upon us, He will put our iniquities out of sight (יכבוש) (Micha 7:15).

Another biblical text which is used to demonstrate that sacrifice induces G-d's mercy is Isaiah 55:7, "וישב אל ה' ורחמהו" which is translated as: "Let him repent through sacrifice and He will have compassion upon him," Note the following passage in which this verse is used; Leviticus Rabbah 3:3:

"וישב אל ה' ורחמהו" (ישעיה נה:ז)...רבנן
אמרי כל הכפרות הראה לו הקב"ה. לאברהם אבינו
ע"ה חוץ מעשירית האיפה...ורשב"י אמר אף
עשירית האישה.

Further proof of the power of sacrifice to induce mercy can be found in Lamentations Rabbah, Petichta 24, in which Israel, personified as one person, laments that now that the Temple (the place of sacrifice) is destroyed, Israel has lost a vehicle with which to induce G-d's rachamim:

מי ישימני כשנים הראשונים שהיה מקדש בנוי...
כשהייתי מבקשת רחמים על עוני עונה אותי...
ועכשיו...מקום שזרעו של שברהם הקריבו
קרבן לפניך...שעלים הלכו בו.

Finally, G-d's rachamim need not be induced by any specific action on Israel's part at all. Rather, Israel need merely depend on G-d's taking note of her dire condition, e.g. B. T. Berachot 16b:

ר' יוחנן בטר דסיים דלותיה אמר הכי "יהי
רצון מלפניך ה' אלהינו שתציף בבשתינו ותביש
ברעתינו ותתלבש ברחמיך ותתכסה בעוזך ותתעטף
בחסידותך ותתאזר בחגינותך ותבא לפניך מדת
טובך וענותותך."

B. Rachamim as Induced by Intermediaries

One way in which Israel is able to induce G-d's rachamim is by asking G-d to take note not of their relationship with Him, but rather the relationship that their ancestors had with Him. This is generally referred to in the literature by the phrase zechut avot, "the merit of the fathers," although the concept does appear in some texts without the use of this specific phrase. Most often the phrase zechut avot does not refer to the patriarchs and matriarchs themselves, but rather to specific acts in their lives.⁵ For instance, the circumcision by Abraham of all those in his household was deemed meritorious enough to induce G-d's mercy upon later generations. Note the following illustration in Bereshit Rabbah 47:7:

בשעה שמל אברהם אותן ילידי ביתו העמידן גבעה
עורלות וזרחה עליהם חמה והתליעו ועלה ריחן
לפני הקב"ה כקטורת סמים וכעולה שהיא כליל
לאישים אמר הקב"ה: בשעה שיהיו בניו של זה
באים לידי עבירות ולידי מעשים רעים אני
נזכר להם הריח ומתמלא עליהם רחמים ומרחם עליהם.

Isaac is remembered for the only major event of his life - the akedah. In spite of the fact that according to the simple reading of the biblical text Isaac is a passive participant, the rabbis see Isaac's inaction as a classic example of absolute obedience to G-d's will. The merit of his obedience lasts eternally, causing G-d to extend His mercy to Isaac's descendants, e.g. Bereshit Rabbah 56:10:⁶

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהינו כשעה שיהיו בניו
של יצחק באים לידי עבירות ומעשים רעים תהא
נזכר להם אותה העקידה ותתמלא עליהם רחמים...

A case in which a specific act of Jacob induces G-d's rachamim can be found in Bereshit Rabbah 75:13. In this text, Jacob prays to G-d prior to his confrontation with his brother Esau (Genesis, Chapter 32). In that prayer Jacob asks that in the future G-d will express His mercy to Israel by letting there be a "breathing space" of time between her troubles. G-d answers that He will do so for Jacob's sake (i.e., because of the merit of his life):

"ויתן ביד עבדיו עדר עדר לבדו ויאמר אל
עבדי עברו לפני ורוח תשימו בין עדר ובין
עדר" (בר' לב:יז). מהו "רוח תשימו" אמר יעקב
לפני הקב"ה: "רבובו של עולם אם יהיו צרות
באות על בני לא תביא אותם זו אחר זו אלא הרווח
להם מצרותיהם." באותה שעה נשא יעקב את עיניו
וראה את אשו שהוא בא מרחוק ותלה עיניו למרום
בכה ובקש רחמים מלפני הקב"ה ושמע תפלתו
והבטיחו שהוא מושיעו מכל צרותיו כזכותו של
יעקב שנאמר "וענך ה' ביום ישגבך שם אלהי
יעקב" (תהילים כ:ב).

There are instances in which Israel does not remind G-d of the merit of her ancestors in order to induce G-d's rachamim, but rather calls upon the avot themselves to argue her case directly before G-d in heaven. Curiously, in this role of direct advocacy, the avot cannot induce G-d's mercy, e.g. B. T. Shabbat 89b:

...לעתיד לבוא יאמר להם הקב"ה לישראל: לכו
נא אצל אבותיכם ויוכיחו אתכם ויאמרו לפניו
רבש"ע אצל מי נלך אצל אברהם שאמרת לו "יודע
תדע (כי גר יהיה זרעך...וענו אתם...)". (בר' טו:יג)
ולא בקש רחמים עלינו? אצל יצחק שבירך את עשו
והו' כאשר תריד" (בר' כז:ט) ולא בקש רחמים
עלינו? אצל יעקב שאמרת לו "אנכי ארד עמך
מצרימה" (שם טו:ד) ולא בקש עלינו רחמים?...

A final point regarding zechut avot itself is that there are texts which attempt to determine how long zechut avot and its ability to induce G-d's rachamim will last. In these texts the root ר-ח-ם in a proof text is often used to demonstrate that zechut avot is still functional. Some texts, like Leviticus Rabbah 36:6, attempt to determine until when in biblical history zechut avot was operative:⁸

עד מתי זכות אבות קיימת? ר' תנחומא אמר בשם ר' חייא בר סנחמא ואמרי לה ר' ברכיה בר חלבון בשם רבה בר זבדא: עד יואחז הה"ד "ויתן אותם וירחמם וגו'" (מ"ב יג:כג) עד עתה זכות אבות קיימת. ר' יהושע ב"ל אמר אד אליהו הה"ד (שם א יח:לו) "ויהי געלות המנחה ויגש אליהו הנביא וגו'". שמואל אמר עד הושע הה"ד (הושע ב:יב) "ועתה אגלה את נבלותה לעיני מאהביה ואיש לא יצילנה מידי" ואין איש האמור כאן אלא אברהם כד"א (בראשית כ:ז) "ועתה השב אשת האיש" ואין איש אלא יצחק שנאמר (שם כה:כז) ויעקב איש תם. ר' יודן אמר עד חזקיה כד"א (ישעיה ט:ו) "למרבה המשרה ולשלום אין קץ וגו'".

The text concludes with proof that zechut avot is eternal, as demonstrated by G-d's eternal rachamim:⁹

לעולם זכות אבות קיימת לעולם מזכירים ואומרים "כי אל רחום ה' אלהך... ולא ישכח את ברית אבתך" (דב' ד:לא).

Thus far we have only noted texts which mentioned zechut avot as a vehicle by which Israel can arouse G-d's mercy. On rare occasions zechut avot is functional for the world at large, e.g. Bereshit Rabbah 71:9:

ומה מקיים ר' נהוראי קרא דר' אליעזר "ויערשיה ואלהו" (ד"ה א ח:כז) אלא מדראשית הן. בשעה שהיה הקב"ה מרעיש עולמו היה מזכיר זכות אבות "בני ירוחם" (שם) והקב"ה מתטלא רחמים על עולמו.

Whereas the avot themselves, as was discussed earlier, did not succeed when they attempted to argue in Israel's behalf once they were in heaven, there are other intermediaries who, during their own lifetimes were able to induce G-d's mercy. Much of the time it is

prophetic figures who function in this role. Among these, it is Moses who appears most frequently. The choice of who can and cannot act as an intermediary is apparently up to G-d. This is made clear in the following text from Sifra, Shimini 3 in which Moses' ability to act as intermediary is demonstrated in the light of Aaron's inability:

וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל אֱלֹהֵי מִוְעֵד. כִּי־וַיִּרְאֶה אֶהְרֹן שֶׁקָּרְבוּ כָל הַקְּרִבְנוֹת וַנַּעֲשׂוּ כָל הַמַּעֲשִׂים וְלֹא יָרַד שְׁכִינָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הִיָּה עֹמֵד אַהֲרֹן וּמִצַּטְעָר... מִיָּד נִכְנַס מֹשֶׁה עִמּוֹ וּבִקְשׁוֹ רַחֲמִים וַיִּרְדֶּה שְׁכִינָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל.

Once, in his pleadings with G-d concerning Israel, Moses did not rely upon his own relationship with G-d in order to affect G-d's mercy, rather, he employed the power of zechut avot. Note in this regard Tanhuma Buber, Vayera #9:

...שֶׁהָיָה מִבְּקֵשׁ רַחֲמִים עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל... אָמַר לִפְנֵיָו: רְבוּנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם לְמַה "ה' יִתְּרָה אִפְךָ בְּעַמְךָ וּגְו'." לְמַה "יֵאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם וּגְו'." "זְכוּר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדֶּיךָ" (שְׁמוֹת ל"ב: י"ג).

We should note of course, that this use by Moses of zechut avot is not original to the Midrash, but was lifted directly from Exodus 32:13.

Mostly, however, it is by virtue of Moses' own unique relationship with G-d that he is able to arouse G-d's mercy. Generally, we find that he employs this influence midrashically in regard to the Golden Calf, e.g. Tanhuma Buber, Appendix to Shalach #14:

עָמַד לוֹ מֹשֶׁה מִבְּקֵשׁ רַחֲמִים מִן הַקַּב"ה. כִּי־צָדַד? בַּשָּׁעָה שֶׁעָשׂוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הָעֵגֶל, עָמַד לוֹ מֹשֶׁה. בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה הָיָה מִבְּקֵשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם...¹⁰

Other prophets could also serve as intermediaries. Hosea, in fact, was told by G-d that just as he prayed for mercy upon himself, it was also incumbent upon him, because of his prophetic role, to pray for mercy upon Israel. Yalkut Shimoni, Hosea I, Remez 516:

כִּי־וַיִּצְאֵהוּ (הוֹשֵׁעַ) בְּעַצְמוֹ שֶׁחָטָא עָמַד יִבְקֵשׁ רַחֲמִים עָלָיו עַצְמוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ הַקַּב"ה: עַד שֶׁאַתָּה מִבְּקֵשׁ רַחֲמִים עָלָיו עַצְמְךָ עָמַד וּבִקְשׁ רַחֲמִים עֲלֵיהֶם שְׂגוּרָתִי שֶׁלֹּא גִזְרֹת עָמַד וּבִקְשׁ רַחֲמִים עֲלֵיהֶם וּבִטַּל אֶת הַגִּזְרֹת וְהִתְחִיל לְבָרֵךְ וְהָיָה מִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחֹל הַיָּם.

In Rabbinic Literature the rabbis themselves are often depicted as acting as intermediaries on the peoples' behalf. This is often the case regarding fasts for rain in which the actions of the people are not sufficient.¹¹ A fine example of one such case concerns a fast for rain which was decreed by Rabbi Tannhuma. The fast itself proved to be of no avail. Finally, when a certain man had pity for the dire condition of his former wife, it appeared that G-d's mercy might be aroused. Still, it was necessary for R. Tannhuma to make specific mention of this man's action to G-d before He relented, e.g. Leviticus Rabbah 34:14:

באותה שעה הגביה רבי תנחומא פניו לשמים ואמר
לפני הקב"ה: "רבש"ע מה אם זה שהוא בשר ודם
ואכזרי ולא היה עליו מזונותיה נתמלא עליו
רחמים ונתן לה, אנו, שאנו בני בניך בני
אברהם יצחק ויעקב ומזונותינו עליך עאכ"ו
שתמלא עלינו רחמים." באותה שעה ירדו
גשמים ונתרווח העולם.

Besides intermediaries from the ranks of the rabbinic class, there were also famous non-rabbis who served in that role. The most famous of these is Honi Ha-Meagel, a magical sage of the first century whose powers came from the making of circles, as is indicated by his name. Many times his magical powers were called upon to end droughts, e. g. B. T. Ta'anit 19a:¹²

מעשה ששלחו לחוני המעגל וכו': ת"ר: פעם
אחת יצא רוב אדר ולא ירדו גשמים שלחו לחוני
המעגל התפלל וירדו גשמים התפלל ולא ירדו
גשמים עג עוגה ועמד בתוכה כדרך שעשה הבקוק
הנביא שני "על משמתי אעמדה ואתיצבה על מצור
וגו'" (הבקוק ב:א) אמר לפניו: רבונו של
עולם בניך שמו פניהם עלי שאני כבן בית לפניך
נשבע אני בשמך הגדול שאיני זז מכאן עד שתרחם
על בניך התחילו גשמים מנספין...

As the passage continues, Honi prays that the rains increase from the mere droplets with which it began and that the rain stop when flood seems imminent.

There are other intermediaries that induce G-d's mercy in Rabbinic Literature. In Exodus Rabbah 29:3 we find that the Torah pleads for mercy on Israel's behalf. According to this passage, Israel is so awe-struck upon hearing G-d's voice at Mt. Sinai that their souls depart from them. The Torah pleads for mercy upon Israel, that they not die. She says that it is ironic that all the other peoples of the world are rejoicing that the Torah has been given and that "the people of G-d's own house" are killed in the process:

אבל התורה בקשה רחמים מלפני הקב"ה: "יש מלך
משיא בתו והורג אנשי ביתו? כל העולם כולו
שמחים ובניך מתים." מיד חזרו נשמתם...

Even parts of creation are called upon to serve as intermediaries to arouse G-d's mercy. In one text, R. Eliezer b. Dordia is told that because he has often bought the services of prostitutes, G-d will not accept him in repentance. R. Eliezer b. Dordia then calls upon various parts of creation to intercede for him and to beg G-d's mercy. When none of them agree to do it, he realizes that he himself must do what he can to repent. In the end, he dies, and is accepted into the world to come. Note B. T. Avodah Zarah 17^a:

הלך וישב בין הרים וגבעות אמר: "הרים
וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים" אמרו לך "עד שאנו
מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנ' 'כי ההרים
ימושו והגבעות תמוטינה' (ישעיה נד:י). אמר
"שמים וארץ בקשו עלי רחמים" אמרו "עד שאנו
מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמינו שנ' 'כי שמים
כעשן נמלחו והארץ כבגד תבלה' (ישעיה נד:ו).
אמר "חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים" אמרו "עד
שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמינו שנא'
'וחפרה הלבנה ובושה החמה' (ישעיה כד:כג).
אמר "כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים" אמרו "עד
שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמינו שנא'
'ונסקו כל צבא השמים' (שם לד:ד). אמר: "איו
הדבר בלוי אלא בי." הניח ראשו בין ברכיו
וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו. יצתא בת קול
ואמרה "ר"א בן דורדי' כזומן לחיי העולם הבא..."

Apparently, R. Eliezer b. Dordia tried to place the various aspects of creation into the same category as a prophet, i.e., as one who must not

only pray for G-d's mercy upon himself but also upon whom it is incumbent to pray for mercy for others. The various parts of creation, as depicted in Rabbinic Literature, do not function in this way.

There is a legend regarding one of G-d's creations which will eventually bring G-d's rachamim to the world. This creature is the vulture, רחם, linked to rachamim, of course, by having the same root in common. This linguistic connection led to the thinking which produced the following passage in B. T. Hulin 63a:

אמר רב יהודה קאת זו "הקוק" (ויקרא יא:יח)
רחם זו שרקק א"ר יוחנן למה נקרא שמו רחם?
כיון שבא רחם בא רחמים לעולם. אמר רב ביבי
בר אביו "והוא דיתייב אמידי ועביד שרקק
וגמירי דאי יתיב אארעא ושריק אתי משיח שנא'
"אשרקה להם ואקבצם" (זכריה י:ח).

The rachamim of which R. Yohanan speaks is usually interpreted as being mercy in the form of rain, a connection we have seen before. R. Bibi b. Abaye makes the connection to Zechariah 10:8 from the sound that the vulture makes, שרקק to the word אשרקה in the Zechariah verse. If we look at the passage as a whole, we can see that a conceptual link is being drawn between rain, the racham, G-d's mercy and the ultimate expression of G-d's mercy, the coming of the Messiah. Hence, whenever it rains, it is symbolic that at some future time the rain will be preceded by the shrieking of the racham and that, in turn, will bring the Messiah. Apparently, what was bothering the rabbis here was why a bird which was categorized as "unclean" by biblical law, would have as the basis of its name the same root as rachamim. How could such a despicable creature, one that survived by eating the flesh of dead carcasses, be in any way related to mercy? What became the obvious link was that the racham has the most to eat when the rest of creation is finding it difficult to survive, i.e., during a drought. If rain is an expression of G-d's rachamim then it is most natural that the coming of the racham would proceed the coming of rachamim in the form of rain. Finally, the

sound that the racham makes, שָׂרָקָק , has the same root as אֲשָׂרָקָה of Zachariah 10:18, and the second half of that Zechariah verse, "וְאֶקְבְּצֵם" can be seen as messianic in nature (i.e., indicative of גְּלוּיּוֹת). Thus, a connection is made between the racham and G-d's ultimate expression of mercy, the coming of the Messiah.

There is also one example of a non-Jew who was able to intercede for Israel and obtain G-d's rachamim. Ironically, this non-Jew was an enemy of Israel, a member of the conquering Babylonians who destroyed the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. He is variously called נְבוּזַרְאֲדָן or נְבוּזַר in Rabbinic Literature, i.e., a high officer in the army of King Nebuchadnezzar. It was he who was in charge of the destruction of Jerusalem. After the destruction, he saw that there was blood seething and bubbling out of the ground. He asked the Jews whom he had just conquered what blood this was and why it was acting in such a strange manner. They told him that it was the blood of sacrifices that was distraught over the destruction of the Temple. In order to try to appease the blood, Nebuzaradan had many animals slaughtered alongside the blood, but the blood continued to seethe and boil. Then he was told the truth. The blood was the blood of the prophet Zechariah whom the people had killed because they could no longer stand to listen to his prophecies concerning the Babylonian conquest. Nebuzaradan then had 80,000 priestly novitiates killed in order to appease the blood (according to one version he even slew both the Great and Minor Sanhedrins). When this, too, proved to no avail, he said to the blood (P. T. Ta'anit 4:5):¹³

א"ל "את בעי נובד כל אמתך עלך?" מיד נתמלא
הקב"ה רחמים ואמר "מה אם זה שהוא בשר ודם
ואכזרי נתמלא רחמים על בני אני שכתוב בי "כי
אל רחום ה' אלהיך" (דב' לא:ד) לא ירבך ולא
ישחיתך ולא ישכה את ברית אבותיך על אחת כמה
וכמה" מיד רמו דם ונבלע במקום.

C. Inducements Available Both to Israel and to Humanity in General

Foremost among the vehicles available either to Israel or to humanity to induce G-d's mercy is the doing of good deeds. In order to be counted among the children of Israel, a person must act with mercy towards others. Only then will he/she be worthy of receiving G-d's mercy, e.g. B. T. Betzah 32b:

"ונתן לך רחמים ורחמן" כל המרחם על הבריות
בידוע שהוא מזרעו של אברהם אבינו וכל מי
שאינו מרחם על הבריות בידוע שאינו מזרעו של
אברהם אבינו.

Further, Israel is specifically instructed to use G-d's mercy as a model for its own mercy, B. T. Shabbat 133b:

מה הוא חנון ורחום אף אתה היה חנון ורחום.

When Israel does display goodness, then G-d's mercy is quickly forthcoming. For instance, a three-year famine was ended by Israel showing kindness to the remains of Saul and his son Jonathan by bringing them within the borders of Israel. Note, in this regard, Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezar 17:¹⁵

בשנה ג' עלו ישראל לרגל אמר לה דוד "צאו וראו
שמה יש בככם שופכי דמים שבעון שופכי דמים
הגשמים בעצריין שנאמר (במדבר לה) 'ולא
תחניפו את הארץ בדקו ולא מצאו.' " אמר להם
דוד "מכאן ואילך אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי." מיד
עמד דוד לפני הקב"ה והתפלל ואמר לו על שאל.
אמר דוד "רבש"ע אויבי שאול שבימי לא נעשתה
עבודת גלולים בישראל. ואיני שאול שנמשח.
בשמן המשחה. ואיני שאול שתלק עם שמואל
הנביא." אמר לו "אתה בארץ והוא בחוצה לארץ"
מיד עמד דוד ולקח את כל חכמי ישראל וגדוליהם
ועברו את הירדן ובאו ליבש גלעד ומצאו את
עצמות שאול ויהונתן בנו שלא שלטה בהם רמה
ועליו נאמר (תהילים לד) "שומר כל עצמותיו
אחת מהם לא גשברה" ולקח את עצמותם ונתנם
בארון ועברו את הירדן שנאמר (ש"ב כא)
"ויקברו את עצמות שאול ויהונתן בנו ויעשו
להם כל אשר צוה המלך" מה צוה המלך? להיות
מעבירין את ארונו של שאול בכל גבול ישראל
ככל שבט ושבט והיה הגבול שנכנס בו ארונו של
שאל היו יוצאין הם ובניהם ובנותיהם וגומלים
חסד כדי שיצאו ידי חובתן בגמילות חסדים עד
שאל לגבול ישראל לארץ בנימין שנאמר (ש"ב כא)
"ויקברו אותו בגבול נחלתו" כיון שראה הקב"ה
שגמלו לו חסד כל ישראל מיד ותמלא רחמים ונתן
מטר על הארץ.

Some texts regarding the doing of good deeds are not related directly to Israel, but rather are put in more general moralistic terms, as if to relate to the whole world. For example, in B. T. Shabbat 151b a series of axiomatic expressions are based on the rabbinic expression, "גלגל הוא שחוזר בעולם," i.e., there are certain ways in which the world was meant to operate and these principles are true for all people. One of the axioms that is based upon this emphasizes the direct relationship between the doing of good deeds and the manifestation of G-d's mercy (and vice versa):¹⁶

כל המרחם על הבריות מרחמין עליו מן השמים.

Israel's repentance as a vehicle for inducing G-d's mercy is a natural part of the contract which binds Israel to G-d and makes Israel responsible for her misdeeds. The following passage illustrates Israel's special position. Here, as in other texts, a petach harachamim is described as being opened specifically for Israel at the time of the world's creation. Seder Eliahu Rabbah 14:¹⁷

באותו שעה פתח להם פתח רחמים לפושעי ישראל
לקבלן בתשובה. ולומר לפניו: רבונו של עולם
גלוי וידוע לפניך (כי יצר הרע מגרה בנו)
ברחמין הרבים קבלנו בתשובה שלימה לפניך.

Many of the passages about repentance specify times when Israel as a people or as individual Jews should implore G-d's mercy. In the following text, B. T. Berachot 19a, the prayer of the mourner is formulated. It includes both a vidui, a confessional, as well as a plea for mercy:

רבון העולמים הרבה חסאתי לפניך ולא נפרעת
ממני אחד מני אלף יה"ר מלפניך שתגדור
פרצותינו ופרצות כל עמך בית ישראל ברחמים.

Note that the individual mourner expands the petition for mercy to one that includes all of Israel. Many texts are concerned with repentance specifically on Yom Kippur. Note the following illustration, B. T.

18
Yoma 87b:

...הרי אני לפניך ככלי מלא בושה וכלימה יהי
רצון מלפניך ה' אלהי שלא אחטא עוד ומה
שחטאתי לפניך מרק ברחמיך הרבים אבל לא על
ידי יסורין וחלאים רעים...

As with the doing of good deeds, there are texts in which Israel is not specifically mentioned as the only group of people for whom repentance is a vehicle for G-d's mercy. Instead these texts are written in a more generalized, almost axiomatic form. They begin either with the phrase, "The one who..." or the phrase, "A person who..." Most of these texts are from later collections, although there are those that are from earlier sources as well, like this one from Sifrei Numbers

Bechukotai Piska 2:3:

והתודו את עונם ואת עון אבותם לצד התשובה הם
הדברים שמיר שהם מתוודים על עונותיהם מיד
אני חוזר ומרחם עליהם...

The following passage from Seder Eliahu Zuta Chapter 4 is a good example of such an axiomatic text from a later source:¹⁹

...אדם עובר עבירה לפני אם חוזר בו ועושה
תשובה הרי אני ברחמים ומקבלו בתשובה...

As was noted in the discussion of repentance, much of the expression of repentance comes within the framework of prayer. So it is that prayer is also a vehicle for inducing G-d's mercy. The earliest linkage between prayer and the arousal of G-d's rachamim is found in The Mishnah, Avot 2:13:

...וכשאתה מתפלל אל תעש תפילתך קבע אלא
רחמים ותחנונים לפני המקום ברוך הוא...

To understand the full import of this mishnah let us look at the translation in the Blackman edition of The Mishnah:

...and when thou prayest make not thy prayer
a fixed mechanical task, but (an appeal for)
mercy and supplication before the Omnipresent,
Blessed be He...²⁰

In this mishnah then, prayer is virtually defined as a request for mercy. This concept is accepted in the Babylonian Talmud, as is evidenced by the discussion in B. T. Berachot 26a. In discussing whether one who misses the afternoon prayer must make it up at a later time, it is argued that inasmuch as prayer is a supplication for mercy, it is possible that a person can pray at any time:

...כיון דצליתא רחמי היא כל אימת דבעי מצלי
...ואזיל

Even if individual supplications are welcome, the rabbinic opinion is that the communal prayer of Israel is more effectatious than individual prayer when it comes to inducing G-d's mercy. See, for example, B. T. Ta'anit 8a:

"ויפתחו בפיהם וכלשונם יכזבו לו ולכם לא נכון
עמו ולא נאסרו כבריתו "ואף על פי כן'הוא רחום
יכפר עון וגו' " לא קשיא כאן ביחוד כאן בצבור.

The implication is that individuals can easily lie in their own prayers, whereas when they participate in public prayer, they are forced to tell the truth due to social pressure as well as by praying the same prayers as those around them.

Just as we found in relationship to the doing of good deeds and to repentance, there are statements regarding prayer that do not apply to Israel specifically, but rather to the world as a whole. All of these texts express some portion of the rabbinic worldview, i.e., the basic principles upon which the world functions. The inducing of G-d's mercy through prayer is subject to and a part of these principles. For example, in the following text from B. T. Ta'anit 7b the rabbis see it as natural that the deeds of an unrighteous generation would adversely effect the weather (for farmers). Supplications for mercy are the only remedy:

אם ראית רקיע שקיהה כברזל מלהוריר טל ומטר
בשביל מעשה הדור שהן מקולקלין...מה תקנתן?
יתגברו ברחמים...

On the other hand, prayers for mercy cannot change something which has been pre-ordained. A good example is Rabba's response to a man who prayed for G-d's mercy in order that he would succeed over rival suitors for a certain woman. We find the statement in T. B. Moed Katan 18b:

...א"ל "לא תיבעי רחמי הכי איחזיא לך אזלא
מינך ואילא כפרת בה'...

Finally, the rabbis thought that if a person was either fated to poverty, controlled by an evil spirit or a practicer of idol worship, it would be unnatural for that person to turn to prayer as a vehicle to induce G-d's mercy because he/she would not think of it. Note T. B. Eruvin 41b:

תנו רבנן שלשה דברים מעבירין את האדם על דעתו
ועל דעת קונו אלא הן כותים ורוח רעה ודיקדוקי
ענות למאי נפקא מינא למיבעי רחמי עלוהו.

Notes on Chapter Four

1. The effects of the merits of former generations will be discussed in the next subsection.
2. See also Midrash on the Psalms 47:2.
3. See also Seder Eliahu Rabbah Chapter 19.
4. See also T. A. Ta'anit 14b.
5. See Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 7 in which the mere fact of Abraham's birth arouses G-d's rachamim.
6. See also Leviticus Rabbah 29, 9 and Aggadat Bereshit Chapter 38.
7. See also Lamentations Rabbah Petichta #24.
8. See also Aggadat Bereshit Chapter 10.
9. See also P. T. Sanhedrin 10a.
10. See also Tanhuma Buber Balak #18, Sifre Numbers Pinhas 134; Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 46.
11. See also B. T. Ta'anit 25a and b.
12. See also B. T. Ta'anit 23a.
13. See also B. T. Sanhedrin 96b, Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Eichah Piska 15, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:16.
14. See also Sifre Deuteronomy, Ekev 11; Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata, Chapter 3; Tosefta Baba Kama 9:30, Tana debei Eliahu Rabbah, 29.
15. See also Sifrei Deuteronomy 21:13, B. T. Baba Metzia 85a; and Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:7.
16. See also P. T. Baba Kama 8a, Pesikta Rabbati 10:9, Bereshit Rabbah 33:3, and Midrash on Psalms 36:5.
17. See also Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 5, Pesikta Rabbati 44:1, and Seder Eliahu Zuta 23.
18. See also B. T. Yoma 87b and Seder Eliahu Rabbah 17.
19. See also Exempla of the Rabbis, 48(10), P. 127; Hovot Halevavot, "Repentance," Chapter 2.
20. Philip Blackman, The Mishnah, Vol. II, 503-504.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHO ARE THE RECIPIENTS OF G-D'S RACHAMIM?

A. Israel as a Special Recipient of G-d's Rachamim vs. the Universality of Rachamim

It is natural, that within Rabbinic Literature, Israel would stand out as the chief recipient of G-d's rachamim. There are many texts which clearly demonstrate this bias, yet not all the passages which are quoted below reflect absolute particularism. Most texts merely show a prejudice towards Israel. This passage from B. T. Berachot 32a serves as a good example:¹

"ויחל משה את פני ה' (שם' לב:יא) אמר רבא
אמר רב יצחק: "מלמד שהחלה עליהם מדת רחמים."

Not only was the Attribute of Mercy seen as resting upon Israel, as the above passage demonstrates, but also it was seen to be there permanently, e.g. Tanna debe Eliahu Chapter 18:

רחמיו של הקב"ה מרובין על ישראל לעולם.

As was mentioned earlier, there are those texts which seem to indicate that G-d's rachamim belongs exclusively to Israel. For example, rachamim is among the many divine kindnesses which are given to Israel in Exodus Rabbah 15:23:

"החדש הזה לכם" (שם' יב:ב). הה"ד (משלי ה:יז)
"יהיו לך לבדך ואין לזרים אתך" אמר הקב"ה:
איני מזהיר עובדי כוכבים על עבודת כוכבים
אלא לכם שנא' (ויקרא כו:א) "לא תעשו לכם
אלילים." לא נתתי המשפט אלא לכם שנאמר
(הושע ה:א) "שמעו זאת הכהנים והקשיבו בית
ישראל ובית המלך האזינו כי לכם המשפט."
הצוקה שלכם, שנאמר (דברים כד:יג) "ולך תהיה
צוקה." הרחמים שלכם, שנאמר (שם יג:יח)
"ונתן לך רחמים ומרחם והרבך..."

Another fine example of how rachamim belongs to Israel comes to us from Song of Songs Rabbah I, 4:3, in which G-d's dealings with Israel are differentiated by the use of rachamim:

"משכני אחרין נרוצה" (שה"ש א:ד) ר' יודן
אמר: "אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקב"ה: רבש"ע
על שטהגת עם שכינותי במדת הדין ועמי במדת
רחמים "אחרין נרוצה."

Here Israel expresses gratitude for their special treatment by devotion to G-d.

Even those Jews who did not fall within the rabbinic majority were still eligible for G-d's rachamim. Note in this regard B. T. Berachot 7a:²

ההוא צדוקי בשכבותיה דר' יהושוע בן לוי היה
קא מצער ליה טובה בקראי יומא חד שקל תרנגולא
ואיקמיה בין קרעיה דעכסא ועיין ביה סבר מטא
ההיא שעתה אלטייה כי מטא ההיא שעתה ניים אמר
ש"מ לאו אורח ארעא למעבד הכי "ורחמיו על כל
מעשיו" (תהי' קמה).

Note how here the צדוקי (or the מין in the B. T. Avodah Zarah version of this text) is eligible for G-d's rachamim based not on his Jewishness, but rather because he is one of G-d's creations ('ורחמיו על כל מעשיו'). There are other texts which seem to indicate that all of G-d's world is eligible to receive G-d's mercy. Sometimes the universality of G-d's rachamim is demonstrated by its extending to the animal realm as well as the human, as in this passage from Tanhuma Hanidpas Noah 6:³

הקב"ה, כשם שרחמיו אל אדם, כך רחמיו על הבהמה...

In some texts, however, G-d's rachamim is only distributed to non-Jews because of their association with Jews. In Tanhuma Buber Nitzavim #5, the phrase כל איש ישראל (Dt. 29:9) is interpreted to mean:

...ולא הגדולים שבכם בלבד אלא "טפכם נשיכם
וגרך" (דב' כט:י).

Once it is established that כל איש ישראל means the women, children and strangers (who have lived among Jews) as well, the text then goes on to demonstrate how, within the camp of Israel (which again includes both Jew and non-Jew), G-d's rachamim is universally applicable:

...לכך נאמר "כל איש" שבשר ודם מרחם על
הזכרים יותר מן הנקבות, אבל הקב"ה אינו כן
אלא "רחמיו על כל מעשיו" (תהילים קמה:ה) על
הזכרים ועל הנקבות, על הצדיקים ועל הרשעים.

Once again, as with the צדוקי, the basis for the granting of rachamim is that G-d's mercy extends to all of His creations.

Another example of the limited universality of G-d's rachamim is demonstrated by the following passage from Seder Eliahu Rabbah, Chapter (29) 27. Here it is expressed as a warning against those who would not display mercy toward humanity, especially Israel, and the poor and downtrodden of any people. The non-merciful are warned that if they do not want their loved ones to become poor or destitute that they should treat Israel and the poor and destitute with mercy. In this text then, the poor and underprivileged of any nation are eligible recipients of G-d's rachamim:

כשם שהקב"ה יהי שמו הגדול מבורך לעולם
ולעולמי עלמיה רחמן על ישראל בכל מקומות
מושבותיהן רחמן על עניים אביונים ועל דלים
ורשעין על יתומים בזמן ועל אלמנות בכל
מקום. כך יהא אדם רחמן על ישראל ועל עניים
אביונים וכו' כדי שלא תהא אשתו אלמנה ובניו
יתומים.

One also finds the general concept that G-d's rachamim is simply given to those who deserve it. This thinking is based upon the biblical verse Exodus 33:19: "וחנותי את אשר אחון ורחמתי את אשר ארחם". We find a good example of this in Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:1, in which Moses humbly maintains that he is not deserving of G-d's mercy, but nonetheless, is asking that it be granted to him. To this G-d answers:

אמר הקב"ה למשה: "וחנותי את אשר אחון" אמר
לו, "מי שיש לו בידי ורחמתי במדת רחמים אני
אושה עמו."

This principle is also found inverted (i.e., that there is mercy for those to whom it is not necessarily due!). E.g. Exodus Rabbah 45:6:

...מי שיש לו אני נותן משכריו ומי שאין
לו אני עושה לו חנם ונותן מזה שנאמר "וחנותי
את אשר אחון"...וכן "רחמתי את אשר ארחם."

From these passages, then, while it is clear that there is expression of rachamim as belonging only to Israel, there is also expression of the universality of rachamim, i.e., non-Jews can receive rachamim wherever they are, no matter what their condition, and no matter how little

they deserve it.

B. The Righteous and the Wicked as Recipients of G-d's Rachamim

There is a syllogism that can be found in two different places that claims—that the righteous seem to have special privy to G-d's rachamim, especially at the "עת רצון", the "time of favor." The following text is from Tosefta Berachot 4:14-15:⁴

מעשה כרבי טרפון שהיה יושב בצילו של שובך
בשבת בסנחה הביאו לפניו דלי של צונן אמר להם
רבי טרפון לתלמידיו "השותה מים לצמאו כיצד
הוא הפרך?" אמרו לו "למדינו" אמר להן "הרי
הוא אמר "ויושבו לאכל לכם וישאו עיניהם ויראו
והנה ארחת ישמעאלים וגו'" והלא אין דרכם של
ערביים להיות נושאים אלא עורות ריח רעה
ועיסרון אלא שנתנו את הצדיקים ההוא בין
דברים ההביבין והרי דברים כל וחומר: ומה
בשעה כעסן של צדיקים מרחמים עליהם בשעת
הרחמים על אחת כמה וכמה.

The "עת רצון" corresponds to the "שעת רחמי" but mercy at the time of wrath is vouchsafed only to the righteous.⁵ The special consideration for the righteous in relation to G-d's rachamim is also revealed in passages which maintain that their prayers for mercy are the most efficacious. Note this text from B. T. Yebamot 64a:

א"ר יצחק: למה נמשלה תפלתן של צדיקים כעתר
מה עתר זה מהפך התבואים ממקום למקום כך
תפלתן שן צדיקים מהפכת מנותיו של הקב"ה
ממדת רגזנות למדת רחמנות.⁶

As for the wicked, there are passages which declare forthrightly that G-d is merciful to them. Take, for example, this passage from Exodus Rabbah 12:2:

"ועתה שלח העז את מקנך" (ש"ס' ט:י"ט) בא וראה
רחמיו של הקב"ה אפילו בשעת כעסו ריחם על
הרשעים ועל הבהמות לפי שמכת הברד לא היה
משלחו עליהן...

or this from Seder Eliahu Rabbah, Chapter 26, in which G-d's mercy to the wicked serves as an example for humanity:

מה דרכי שמים רחום וחנון על הרשעים ומקבלן
בתשובה, כך אתה תהיה רחמנים זה את זה.

Even though G-d has mercy on the wicked, still He cannot fully accept some of them and so He mourns their loss. Note Zohar Bereshit 21:

בא וראה מדת רחמותו של הקב"ה של הקב"ה כי
אעפ"י שמתנהב לקח עצמו על אגידת הרשעים.

Apparently those whom He cannot accept are those who worship idols.

All others He is able to forgive; e. g., Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Bachodesh, 6:

כי אני ה' אלהיך אל קנא בקנאה אני נפרע מהם
מעבודה זרה אבל רחום וחנון אנו בדברים אחרים.

The wicked, it seems, if they are to receive mercy at all, must receive it in "this world." As opposed to the righteous, no mercy awaits the wicked in the "world to come," only punishment. This is related beautifully in the tale of the soul being shown its possibilities for afterlife. Tanhuma Hanidpas Pikude: 3:

נוטלו המלאך משם ומוליכו לגן אדן ומראה לו
הצדיקים יושבין בכבוד ועטרותיהם בראשיהם.
ואמר המלאך לאותו הרוח, "תדע לך מי הם אלו?"
אמר לו הרוח "לא אדוני" חוזר המלאך ואמר
לו, "הללו שאתה רואה נוצרו בתחלה כמותך
בתוך מצי אמן ויצאו לעולם ושטרו התורה
והסודות. לפיכך זכו ונזדמנו לטובה זו שאתה
רואה. דע לך שסופך לצאת לעולם. ואם תזכה
ותשמר התורה של הקדוש ברוך הוא, תזכה לך
ולישיבה של אלו. ואם לאו, דע וראה שתזכה
למקום אחר." לערב מוליכו לגהינם ומראה לו
שם את הרשעים שקלאכי חבלה מכים אותן כמקלות
של אש. וקורין "וי" וי" ואינם מרחמים עליהם.

Apparently rachamim is given to the wicked in this world only in the hopes that it will cause them to become righteous so that they avoid the awful fate of hell.

There are texts which maintain that both the righteous and the wicked are eligible for rachamim. In the following text from Tanhuma Buber Nitzavim #5, G-d's giving of mercy is contrasted with humanity's giving of mercy:

...בשר ודם מרחם על הזכרים יותר מן הנקבות
אבל הקב"ה אינו כן. אלא ורחמיו על כל מעשיו
(תהילים קסה:ה) על הזכרים ועל הנקבות על
הצדיקים ועל הרשעים. שנאמר "מחוסב עציך עו
שואב מימך (דב' כט:י).

C. G-d's Rachamim as Given to the Sick

A special category of recipients of G-d's rachamim is the sick. When prayers are said concerning them, it is specifically rachamim that is requested. This is even true for prayers to prevent illness. Note for example, B. T. Shabbat 32a:

אמר רב יצחק בריה דרב יהודה: לעולם יבקש
אדם רחמים שלא יחלה...

Yet, there are many texts that demonstrate prayers for rachamim once someone is sick. Note B. T. Berachot 34b:

ת"ר: מעשה שחלה בנו של ר"ג שגר שני ת"ח אצל
רבי חנינא בן דוסא לבקש עליו רחמים כיון
שראה אותם עלה עלייה ובקש עליו רחמים...

Even on Shabbat when petitionary prayer is forbidden, still G-d's rachamim is requested for the sick; via the Shabbat herself in B. T. Shabbat 12a-b:

רבי מאיר אמר: יכולה היא (שבת) שתרחם. רבי
יהודה אומר: המקום ירחם עליך ועל חולי
ישראל. ר' יוסי אומר: המקום ירחם עליך
בתוך חולי ישראל...

Finally, at the end of an illness, recovery is attributed to G-d's mercy (as indicated by the term Rachmana) in B. T. Berachot 54b:

רבי יהודה חלש ואכפח על לגביה רב חנא
בגדתא ורבנן אמרי ליה "ברוך רחמנא דיהבך
ביהלן..."

D. G-d's Rachamim to the Underprivileged

We discussed earlier that G-d is specifically merciful to the poor and how that mercy often comes to them because of their living near Jews. However, there is a text that grants the poor more status, calling them "G-d's people." Take for example Tanhuma Hanidpas Mishpatim 9:⁷

והעניים, עמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר
(ישעיה מט) "כי נחם ה' עמו וענייו וירחם..."
כל העשר והכבוד שלו מהופך ומרחם על העניים.

Another underprivileged group that is specially designated as a recipient of G-d's rachamim is the slaves. Here, however, only Hebrew slaves are mentioned. In B. T. Kiddushin 20a, in trying to demonstrate that a slave should be treated equally in terms of food and lodging, the rabbis point out G-d's treatment of slaves as an example. Here, as in many other cases which we have seen, G-d is called Rachmana:

...אקיל רחמנא לגביה דתניא "כי טוב לו עמך"
(דברים טו:טז) עמך במאכל ועמך במשתה שלא תהא
אתה אוכל פת נקייה והוא אוכל פת קובר אתה
שותה יין ישן והוא שותה יין חדש אתה ישן על
גבי מוכים והוא ישן על גבי שתבן מכאן אמרו:
כל הסונה עבד עברי כקונה אדון לעצמו.

At the beginning and end of life, when human abilities are at their weakest, again it is G-d's mercy that steps in to compensate. In B. T. Berachot 60a, a list is given of proper prayers for a father to say concerning his unborn child. It is deemed inappropriate to phrase the prayers, "May it be Thy will...", for it is considered vanity to attempt to influence G-d's will directly. It is not inappropriate however, to ask for His mercy:

משנה...היתה אשתו מעברת ואמר "יהי רצון שתלד
וכו" הרי זה תפילת שוא. גמרא...דכתיב שלשה
ימים הראשונים יבקש אדם רחמים שלא יסריח
משלשה עד ארבעים יבקש רחמים שיהא זכר מארבעים
יום ועד שלשה חדשים יבקש רחמים שלא יהא סנדל
משלשה חדשים ועד ששה יבקש רחמים שלא יהא נפל
מששה ועד תשעה יבקש רחמים שיצא בשלום...

A simple statement concerning the other extreme of the cycle of life, namely death, assures that G-d is merciful then too; more merciful than humanity in Seder Eliahu Rabbah Chapter 4:

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אי אתם רחמנים בו
(המת) יותר ממני...

E. Special Recipients of G-d's Rachamim

Special recipients of G-d's rachamim are rare. Further the two that are mentioned are very unique individuals, Adam and the Messiah.

Adam's special treatment is noted in Bereshit Rabbah 21:1:

"זכור רחמים ה' וחסידיך כי מעולם המה" (תה' כה:ו)...א"ר יהושע בר נחמיה שבם ניהגת עם אדם הראשון שכך אמרת לו יום אחד משלך שהוא אלף שנה האיך בזקק להעמיד תולדה.

Here, were it not for G-d's mercy, Adam would not have been able to have progeny, i.e., history would not exist as we know it. G-d's mercy is also made especially manifest at the end of history, for the Messiah.

Note the following passage from Yalkut Shimoni Jeremiah 31:315:

למה "רחם ארחמנו" שני פעמים? אלא "רחם" שרחם הקב"ה על מלך המשיח בשעה שהיה חבוש בבית האסורין... "ארחמנו" בשעה שהוא יוצא מבית האסורין.

This "special mercy" seems to be relegated only to the beginning and end of history. It did not function in relation to others, even more prominent figures, like Moses. Sifre Numbers Piskei 134 is a good example:

ומה אם משה חכם חכמים גדול גדולים אבי ונביאים אע"פ שידע שנגזרה עליו גזירה לא מנע עצמו מן הרחמים קל וחומר לשאר בני אדם...

Moses was fated to die outside Canaan. Despite his honored place in history, he could not ask G-d to change that which had been decreed. G-d's mercy, as we have seen, intervenes into history only at its beginning and its end.

Notes for Chapter Five

1. See also Aggadat Bereshit, Chapter 73.
2. See also B. T. Avodah Zarah 4b where the צדוקי is called a מיין.
3. See also Tanhuma Hanidpas, Noah 7, Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:1
4. See also Sifrei Numbers Piska 137.
5. Urbach, E., The Sages, p. 455.
6. See also B. T. Ta'anit 7b, 25b and Numbers Rabbah 10:5.
7. See also Exodus Rabbah 31:5.

CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSIONS

This study began with a survey of the usage of רחמים in the Bible. From this survey we learned several things, not the least of which was that the long-assumed notion that there is a conceptual linkage between rechem and rachamim is to be dispelled. We found that there is no biblical usage of these two words that would verify such a connection. We also determined that whereas "bowels" might indeed be a primary definition for rachamim, there is nothing biblical that would indicate that this meaning is intended in any usage of rachamim regarding divine behavior. We then focused on the meaning of rachamim itself as it related to G-d. We discovered, through a careful analysis of Nelson Gleuck's study of chesed, that G-d's rachamim is granted almost exclusively to Israel. In fact, the term rachamim was often found to be indicative of the covenantal relationship between G-d and Israel. Rachamim is descriptive of both G-d's "forgiving love" as well as His powers of redemption within that relationship. Further, even though we say that, in the biblical writer's mind, rachamim was thought of as having existed from Creation, it existed solely for the purpose of the expression of G-d's love to Israel. As a result, rachamim apparently lay dormant until the creation of the people Israel.

In Chapter Two we began to deal primarily with G-d's rachamim as it occurs in Rabbinic Literature. This chapter was an examination of the various definitions that rachamim can have. Primarily, rachamim, "mercy," is defined as a key attribute of G-d's personality, based upon the rabbinic interpretation of biblical verses that describe G-d's character (e.g., Ex. 34:6-7, Ps. 145:8-9). Often, it is G-d Himself who defines Himself as merciful in Rabbinic Literature. We also found that rachamim is sometimes defined by other common terms such as tsedakah and ahavah. Especially important regarding rachamim is the homiletic

principle that wherever רחמים is used for G-d's name, it is His mercy that is being indicated. Ironically, whereas the rabbis were reluctant to use rachamim itself or the form rachum as divine names, they often employed their own term, Rachmana, as a divine epithet. As in biblical literature, the term rachamim is often descriptive of the manner in which G-d relates to Israel. The metaphor often utilized in this regard is the Throne of Mercy and the Throne of Judgement. In a slightly more universalistic sense, rachamim appears in Rabbinic Literature as an essential element of Creation. Finally, we saw that G-d's rachamim is often embodied in one angel or a group of angels in G-d's heavenly court. When this is a single angel, it is most frequently Michael.

The third chapter dealt with the manner in which G-d's rachamim is made manifest. Most often, the rabbis saw G-d's rachamim as expressed through direct action of G-d Himself. Frequently, rachamim was mixed with G-d's anger, although most often G-d expressed His mercy by itself. He does this by healing the sick, granting that the rain fall (especially to end a drought) and protecting women from unwanted pregnancy. Specifically for Israel, G-d's rachamim is expressed by His giving them the commandments, His forgiveness of their sin and His redemption of them from adverse conditions. G-d's rachamim is expressed both in this world and in the world to come.

The fourth chapter concerned itself with how G-d's rachamim is induced and who can induce it. We noted that Israel has several unique means by which to induce rachamim. Among them are the performance of certain commandments, fasting (especially to obtain rachamim in the form of rain), the offering of sacrifices and by yearning for Zion. G-d's rachamim for Israel can also be aroused merely by His taking note of Israel's dire condition. Other inducements appear not to be restricted

to Israel alone, but are open to humanity in general. These means of inducing rachamim include the performance of righteous deeds, repentance and prayer. We also mentioned that often rachamim for Israel is not induced by Israel itself, but rather through intermediaries. These intermediaries include prophets, the rabbis themselves, the Torah and aspects of Creation. The merit of the lives of the patriarchs can also induce rachamim. This is referred to in the literature as zechut avot.

Chapter Five delineates those who are eligible to receive G-d's rachamim. We found that especially Israel, but also humanity in general, may be granted G-d's rachamim. Within both groups certain kinds of individuals are singled out as recipients. These are the righteous, the wicked, the sick, the poor, the dead and the unborn child. A special kind of rachamim seems to exist at the beginning of history, in order to allow Adam to procreate, and at history's end, to allow for the Messiah to fulfill his mission.

This study, by nature of its being a rabbinic thesis, has a limited scope. It is the hope of this writer that some meaningful groundwork has been laid here upon which future study can be based. The essential focus of this study has been the exploration of G-d's rachamim. The nature of humanity's rachamim as it is expressed one to the other still needs to be investigated. There is also need of a comparative study which would examine the differences and similarities between the view of rachamim in the various major works of Rabbinic Literature. This latter examination would hopefully yield a chronological picture of how the connotative nature of rachamim has developed and changed.

A philological study of the root ר-ח-מ and its derivatives has long been overdue. This is particularly true because of the prominence of the word rachamim in both Biblical and Rabbinic Literature. A word such as rachamim which occurs so frequently and in so many contexts,

has attached to it a tapestry of meanings, connotations and nuances. Understanding these various meanings enables us to know more about those who employed this term in the texts that they wrote. The result of such a study can serve as a window into the minds of those who went before us, revealing both their vision of themselves and their vision of G-d. It is the hope of this writer that this thesis has provided a glimpse through that window.

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