

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

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### SAYING THE UNSAYABLE: WHY G-D WORE A TALLIT TO LEAD THE FIRST SELICHOT

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On Rosh HaShannah 17b, Rabbi Yochanan explains the opening of Exodus 34:6 via an arresting image.

"ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא..." –  
אלמלא מקרא כתוב, אי אפשר לאומר!  
מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור,  
והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה.  
אמר לו:  
כל זמן שישראל חוטאין –  
יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל להם.

*"Hashem passed before h/His face, and h/He proclaimed":*

Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!

This teaches us that The Holy Blessed One wrapped Himself like a congregational prayer leader and showed Mosheh the order of prayer.

He said to him:

Whenever Israel sins,  
they should do before me just like this order, and I will forgive them.

Rabbi Yochanan seems shocked by his own theological audacity. But what is it about this image that so shocks him? Is it the blatant anthropomorphism of G-d wearing a tallit?

This aspect of the image certainly bothered many later rabbis. Rabbi Yom Tov ibn Ashbili (RITVA) hastens to explain that the verse is written from Mosheh's perspective - he saw this in a prophetic vision, but it was only a metaphor. Rabbeinu Chananel contends that G-d ordered an angel to appear as if he were wearing a tallit, or alternatively, that G-d created an angel with the appearance of a tallit-wearing human.

I am not convinced, however, that Rabbi Yochanan's shock issue here was anthropomorphism (or that any of the later rabbis believed it was). Anthropomorphism is all over Tanakh, and RITVA and Rabbeinu Chananel are trotting

out standard solutions for the issue. Something more must have triggered Rabbi Yochanan's assertion that Scripture here writes the otherwise unsayable.

What might this have been?

The declaration "Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!" appears seven times in the Talmud. Several of these can be understood as referring to anthropomorphism, but several of them cannot. The clearest example is Bava Batra 10a, also said by Rabbi Yochanan.

א"ר יוחנן:

מאי דכתיב "מלוה ה' חונן דל"?  
אלמלא מקרא כתוב, אי אפשר לאומר!  
כביכול - עבד לזה לאיש מלוה

Said Rabbi Yochanan:

What is the meaning of "Those who are gracious to the poor are Hashem's creditors" (Proverbs 19:17)?  
Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!

As if it were possible – the borrower is slave to the [human] creditor.

There is no physical imagery at all here. What then is the issue?

Let's look at one more example, from Berakhot 32a:

"ועתה הניחה לי ויחר אי בהם ואכלם ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול וגו'"  
אמר רבי אבהו:

אלמלא מקרא כתוב, אי אפשר לאומר!  
מלמד שתפסו משה להקדוש ברוך הוא כאדם שהוא תופס את חבירו  
בבגדו,

ואמר לפניו:

רבונו של עולם, אין אני מניחך עד שתמחול ותסלח להם!  
*"Now you leave go of Me, and My anger will burn amidst them and consume them . . ."*

Said Rabbi Abbahu:

Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!

This teaches that Mosheh seized The Holy Blessed One like a person seizing his fellow by the garment, and said before Him:

Master of the Universe, I will not leave go of you until you absolve and forgive them!

I suggest that common denominator, the issue in each case, is not anthropomorphism, but rather the depiction of G-d as subject or servile to human beings. Berakhot 32a depicts G-d as subject to detention by Mosheh; Bava Batra 10a as subject to the will of charitable people; and Rosh HaShannah 17a as manipulable by human beings via the recitation of a verbal formula, namely the “13 Attributes”. Call it magic or theurgy, the last is surely the most shocking.

Now Rabbi Yochanan states that he can say this only because Scripture says it – but what if Scripture could be understood differently? Would we be allowed to take one of several possible interpretations and claim that it permitted saying the otherwise unsayable?

Here again it is vital to understand exactly what Rabbi Yochanan thought was unsayable. If the issue were anthropomorphism, he could simply agree with Ramban that *על פניו ה' יעבור* means that G-d passed before **Mosheh's** face, and nothing would compel him to permit or accept the image of G-d's tallit. But he was bothered by magical theology, not by anthropomorphic metaphors.

Rabbi Yochanan could not evade the issue by having *Mosheh* be the subject of *ויקרא* (h/He proclaimed). He **knew** that G-d was the One who proclaimed the 13 Attributes, and that He intended them to be recited efficaciously by Mosheh, because in Bamidbar 14:17-18 Mosheh recited them after declaring that this is “as G-d had previously spoken = *כאשר דברת לאמר*”, and G-d then forgives them “in accordance with Mosheh's speech = *כדברך*”. Rabbi Yochanan's challenge was to make sense of this apparent theological absurdity in some way. His solution was the image of G-d as Shaliach Tzibbur.

Some background information is necessary here. Rabbinic literature depicts human beings as wrapped in tallitot for prayer even when they are praying alone, and both G-d

and humans as wrapped in tallitot even when not praying. So Rabbi Yochanan has no *exegetical* need to introduce the notion of G-d as congregational prayer leader even if he translates “passed before His face” as a reference to wrapping a tallit.

Now only Mosheh was present atop Sinai – there was no “congregation” (although Mosheh was “equal to all of Israel”). Furthermore, Bamidbar 14:17–18 proves only that Mosheh could use the formula, not that it would be useful permanently for the Jews. Rabbi Yochanan presents G-d as a **congregational prayer leader** in order to move from the verse to a claim that the formula works for post-Mosheh congregations as well.

Based on Shemot 34 and Bamidbar 14, we can only know that reciting the 13 Attributes works to save *all* of Israel, so most likely Rabbi Yochanan treats a halakhic *tzibbur* as a formal representation of the entire Jewish people.

The question that remains is – (how) does presenting G-d in this way solve the underlying problem of G-d's apparent manipulability? Why does this image help make the verse's theology sayable, if only barely?

My very tentative answer is that Rabbi Yochanan's goal was to connect the verses to the practice of communal fasts. Why? Because if reciting the 13 Attributes were simply a matter of magic, with forgiveness automatic, there would be no need to fast or repent. By limiting the efficacious recitation to the context of a communal effort at repentance, Rabbi Yochanan opens up the possibility that the 13 Attributes work only insofar as they help us change into the sort of people who can be at least plausibly worthy of Divine forgiveness.

At the same time, the depiction of G-d as shaliach tzibbur emphasizes that G-d very much wants us to make those changes, and that He Himself prays for His mercy to be revealed above His other attributes (see Berakhot 7a).

Shabbat shalom and shanah tovah!