

RACAMANUT



Compassion, Love, Pity

The origin of *rahamnut* is *rehem*, meaning “womb,” which reveals a most important insight: “*the compassion that a mother has for her child represents the highest type of love. It is unconditional, not depending on the ability of the infant to show his love in return.*”

This ability to show compassion, love, and pity not only to those who have shown the same feeling toward us but to those who may not even be aware of our presence reflects the true meaning of *rahamanut*. It includes the unique ability even to feel compassion for those who have wronged us or who have failed to develop the capacity to love others.

In short, it is the ability to mature beyond self-centeredness, to “*grow out of oneself*” and “*into someone else*,” accepting another’s pain as our own, that constitutes the essential meaning of *rahamanut*. One of the many names given to God in Jewish tradition is Rahamana, “*Compassionate One*.” One of our best-known prayers contains the request: “*Our Father, merciful Father, the ever compassionate, have mercy upon us.*”

Jews are required to be “compassionate sons of the Compassionate.” *Compassion is among the greatest of Jewish virtues*. Our tradition is clear in emphasizing that compassion must not be misunderstood as mere sentimentalism. Justice must not be put aside when discipline is called for. *The Bible warns that a judge must not favor the poor man if he has wronged a wealthy person*.

If there is no justice, there can be no recognition of wrong.

A society cannot endure without law. At the same time, justice must be tempered with mercy if we are to expect wrong doers to be rehabilitated.

Milton Steinberg, a well-known American rabbi, wrote this about the *quality of rahamanut*. “He is a failure as a human being, no matter what his other traits and achievements, whose heart does not hurt for his fellow man. And he is a successful human being, no matter where else he may be lacking, who is rich in compassion.”*

RACHAMANUT (Compassion, Love, Mercy, Pity)

by Jim Myers

Volume 3 1991 Number 5

RACHAMANUT means compassion - the feeling of sharing another creature's suffering, together with the wish to help. It is the norm governing the relationship between men and also regulating their behavior toward animals. RACHAMANUT is one of the great principles of Judaism and a central part of Jesus' teachings.

RACHAMANUT is also translated as pity or mercy, as well as compassion. RACHAMANUT can also be thought of as a form of prayer. The best kind of RACHAMANUT is shown when we don't look for credit for our actions. Here is a story that will help you better understand this principle.

Rabbi Israel Salanter was about to eat a meal. His students watched as he washed his hands. They were surprised to see how little water he took from the full pail. They remembered how important keeping clean was to Hillel and Rabbi Akiba. So they asked him, "Rabbi, why are you using so little water? The pail is full. And if we need more water, the servant will bring another pail!"

The rabbi answered, "That servant has to fetch water from a distant well and carry the heavy pails all the way back to the house. I know it is a Mitzvah (Commandment) to keep clean. **But my feelings of RACHAMANUT tell me it is not right to carry out a Mitzvah by making other people suffer.**"

This principle extends beyond one's fellow man to include the animals. For example, your friend is walking in the street with his ox and it topples over because its burden was too heavy. According to the principle of RACHAMANUT you are to run quickly, help the ox up and lighten its load. If one knows that the average ox can only carry half the load that was placed on this ox, he must help carry the other half of the load. We are not to put one ounce more on this ox's back. To do so would be a violation of RACHAMANUT (pity, mercy, love, or compassion).

*The Torah teaches that we must be merciful to man, woman, child, and animals. A Midrash tells us that when Moses saw the Egyptian task master strike a Jew he said, "Wicked man, why do you strike your neighbor?" Notice that the first words that came out of his mouth were "**wicked man.**" How did Moses know that the Egyptian task master was a wicked*

BHC TOV Lives 1st Education Network

man? He knew it because the man lifted up his hand toward his fellow man. *The principle of RACHAMANUT doesn't allow it.*

Suppose a father slapped his child across his fanny. One of the first things he would probably say is, "*It hurt me more than it hurt the you.*" Do you want to know the truth? It didn't hurt the father, it hurt the child more. Why did he do it in the first place? There could be many reasons, but one of the most common is that he didn't stop to think about what he was about to do. There are a thousand ways to punish a child without taking a swing at him. **However, prior to any punishment the parent is obligated to teach the child.** The objective is helping the child not repeat the mistake by teaching God's will in this situation. *Pain will not solve any problem, as a matter of fact, it will probably make it worse!*

Many people say that Jews are a very prejudiced people and don't give Jewish women their rights. **No one in the writings of Judaism portrays the essence of compassion more than a Jewish mother.** The greatest honor in the Talmudic writings is given to a woman when they call a Jewish mother the "**the mistress of compassion.**" It is one of the most magnificent concepts of Judaism.

The Torah is the most moral, the most righteous, the most compassionate, most just concept of law ever possessed by man. People have questioned and criticized everything there is about Judaism. But they have never succeeded in destroying it because it is still here. It is still the highest moral lesson and standard by which man can live. Unfortunately, in today's world, too many Jews don't live by it. Those who do are saintly in the sight of God."

Suppose you haven't been a very good in the past but now you want to become a good Jew or Christian. What do you do? **First you must study and learn what God's will is and what you are supposed to do.** *As you learn take one step at a time. Do one little deed at a time. You will see that once you perform the first deed, the second is easier than the first and the third is easier than the second.* Before you realize it people will say, "Now that's a righteous person." You will probably say, "Me righteous, I am far from it."

Do you know who prays the hardest for forgiveness on the Day of Atonement, it is the most righteous. Those who are less righteous say, "*I didn't do anything.*" The very pious are the ones turning to God and crying, "*I've done wrong, God please forgive me.*" We begin to see the weaknesses about which man is engulfed as we perfect ourselves and become holier.

BHC TOV Lives 1st Education Network

Sources:

* *The Language of Judaism* by Simon Glustrom © 1988; Jason Aronson, Inc. Northvale, NJ; p. 17.

* Encyclopedia Judaica (Keeter Publishing House, Jerusalem).

* Basic Judaism For Young People (Behrman House Publishers).

* Jim Myers Personal notes of Rabbi Zucker lectures.