

Sh'lach - The Sins of The Fathers
Parashat Hashavua Class June 17, 2020¹
By Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

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This source sheet is largely based on the comments to Numbers 14:18 and Deuteronomy 32:25 in my teacher Hahkham Isaac Sassoon's commentary on the Torah, [Destination Torah](#)², as well as the [JPS Torah Commentary](#)³ on Numbers by Professor Jacob Milgrom (commentary and Excurses 32). All texts from Bar Ilan Responsa version 24 except as indicated. All translations are my own.

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¹ Please note I originally presented this class to a local minyan I attend, Sha'arei Orah in Bala Cynwyd PA. Sha'arei Orah is not affiliated with UTJ.

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³ See footnote 2.

I. MOSHE'S PLEA

After the spy incident, God resolves to destroy the Israelites and build Moshe's (Moses's) progeny into a great nation. Moshe pleads before God.

Numbers 17:17-18

במדבר פרק יז פסוק יז – יח

(17) Now let My Lord's strength prevail⁴ as You have stated: (18) The LORD is slow to anger and of abundant kindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression, not acquitting,⁵ who visits the iniquities of ancestors on children up to third and fourth generations.

(יז) ועתה יגדל-נא כח א-דני⁴ כאשר דברת לאמר: (יח) יקוק ארך אפים ורב-חסד נשא עון ופשע ונקמה לא ינקוה⁵ פקד עון אבות על-בנים על-שלישים ועל-רבעים:

Moshe is referencing God's description of Godself during the golden calf incident:

Exodus 34:6-7

שמות פרק לד פסוק וז

(6) And the LORD passed over his (i.e. Moshe's) face and called: The LORD, the LORD, is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and of abundant kindness and faithful, (7) bestowing kindness to thousands [of generations]⁶ forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, not acquitting,⁵ who visits the iniquities of ancestors on children and children's up to third and fourth generations.

(ו) ויעבר יקוק על-פניו ויקרא יקוק יקוק אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב-חסד ואמת: (ז) נצר חסד לאלפים⁶ נשא עון ופשע וחסמה ונקמה לא ינקוה⁵ פקדו עון אבות על-בנים ועל-בני בנים על-שלישים ועל-רבעים:

The fact that Moshe references a prior biblical text raises unique opportunities and challenges. When texts overlap, there is clearly an opportunity to use one text to enlighten our understanding of the other. However, this opportunity also presents challenges. While the two texts may be in lock step with each other, they may for instance use common metaphors to express different ideas or even ideas that are at tension with each other. Therefore, we must both *compare* and *contrast* the texts in order to do our best to understand them as well as possible. Each text must breathe on its own, even as

⁴ It is notable that Moshe sees God's forbearance as an expression of strength.

Rashbam Numbers 14:17

רשב"ם במדבר פרק יד פסוק יז

Let My Lord's strength prevail – To slow your anger, as it is written “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules one's emotions [is better] than one who seizes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32)

יגדל נא כח [י"י] - להאריך אפר, דכתי' טוב ארך אפים מגיבור ומושל ברוחו מלוכד עיר:

Pirkei Avot 4:1

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ד משנה א

Ben Zoma said: Who is strong? One who conquers his emotions as it says, “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules one's emotions [is better] than one who seizes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32)

בן זומא אומר ... איזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו שנאמר טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומושל ברוחו מלוכד עיר

⁵ The formula *x doesn't x* means that God doesn't do *x*. Hence, the phrase *ינקוה לא ינקוה* indicates that God doesn't do whatever is implied by the verb *נקוה*, though making it less than clear if God does something else instead (e.g. JPS renders the phrase “not remitting all punishment” implying that God does, at least to some degree, remit punishment). We will discuss below the possible meanings of this phrase.

⁶ I.e. rewarding a thousand generations for good deeds, CF Exodus 20:6 below p. 4.

other texts may supply some of the oxygen. As we explore the meaning of Moshe's plea, we should keep in mind this set of challenges.

II. IS "VISITING THE INIQUITIES" MERCIFUL?

God's declaration in Exodus 34 seems to have two parts, first speaking of God's mercy and forgiveness and then speaking of God's justice, mentioning that God does not acquit wrongdoers (וְיִנְקָה לֹא יִנְקָה), even punishing later generations for the sins of earlier generations. If that is the force of the latter part of God's declaration, then it is surprising that Moshe would raise this point while pleading for divine mercy.

One possible solution is to understand the latter part of the God's declaration as also indicating a sense of divine mercy. Rashi's commentary to Exodus 34:7 suggests this possibility.

Rashi Exodus 34:7

רש"י שמות פרק לד פסוק ז

Not acquitting – According to the plain meaning, it implies that God does not entirely forgive the iniquity, but rather exacts payment (i.e. punishes) slowly. But our sages expounded "God acquits those who repent but does not acquit those who do not repent."

ונקה לא ינקה - לפי פשוטו משמע, שאינו מוותר על העון לגמרי, אלא נפרע ממנו מעט מעט. ורבותינו דרשו מנקה הוא לשבים ולא ינקה לשאינן שבים:

Rashi suggests that God spreads punishment out over time in order to ameliorate its harshness. Although Rashi doesn't make this explicit, his interpretation of "not acquitting" seems to be informed by the succeeding phrase "visits the iniquities of ancestors on children," seeing that as a matter of spreading out punishment over generations to ameliorate the harshness of the punishment.⁷ Interestingly, Rashi does not mention this interpretation in Numbers 14, nor does Rashi attempt to explain why Moshe makes reference to God's visiting punishment on progeny. However, several commentators use Rashi's understanding of God's "visiting the iniquities" to explain why Moshe uses this part of God's nature in his plea to God. Note that in some of these examples it is clear that the commentator assumes that Moshe's reference to this quality means that it is a quality of mercy and therefore they are seemingly forced (or at least pushed) into this explanation.

Ramban Numbers 14:17

רמב"ן במדבר פרק יד פסוק יז

Moshe mentions [that God] "visits the iniquities of ancestors [on children]" to say that if God chose not to expunge their iniquity, God should visit the iniquities of the ancestors on their children in order to spread out [the effects of] God's anger. (NB: *I am highly uncertain of how to translate this last phrase*).

והזכיר "פוקד עון אבות", לאמר שאם יראה שלא למחות עונם יפקוד עון אבות על בניהם ולא רך אפים יקחם

⁷ Note that this quality is potentially even more merciful if later generations can avoid punishment if they behave better. See discussion in section III, below p. 6.

Bekhor Shor Numbers 14:18

כבוד שור במדבר פרק יד פסוק יח

Since Moshe mentions [God's] "visiting the iniquities of ancestors on children" [we learn that] this too is a quality of mercy because [God] doesn't exact [full] payment from the first [generation] or [second generation] until the fourth [generation].⁸

Da'at Z'kenim Numbers 14:18

דעת זקנים מבעלי התוספות במדבר פרק יד פסוק יח

Visits the iniquities of ancestors on children. This is a quality of mercy, that [God] does not exact payment (i.e. punish) [completely] until the fourth generation. ... And also from here you can learn that "not acquitting" is also a quality of mercy, since Moshe references it here.

God accepts Moshe's plea, saying "I have pardoned according to your words") but declares that the generation at fault for the spy incident will not enter the land:

Numbers 14:33

במדבר פרק יד פסוק לג

Your children will wander the wilderness for forty years and will carry your faithlessness until the last of your carcasses lie in the wilderness.

In the JPS commentary, Professor Jacob Milgrom notes this could be direct application of visiting the sins on the children in a way that results in relative mercy toward the sinners.

The theory that God's "visiting the iniquities" has a merciful aspect has one very significant problem, which is that the first time we meet this quality, which is in the Ten Declarations (Ten Commandments) it is quite clearly presented as a harsh reality designed to warn the Israelites to remain faithful to God's commandments:

Exodus 20:5-6

שמות פרק כ פסוק ה-ו

(5) Do not bow down to them (idols) nor worship them, for the LORD your God am a jealous God who visits the iniquities of ancestors on children up to third and fourth generations for those who scorn Me (6) and does kindness to thousands [of generations] for those who love Me and keep My commandments.

⁸ Similarly:

אברבנאל במדבר פרק יד

וכבר יראה שאתה אלהינו ארך אפים ממה שאתה פוקד עון אבות על בנים. כי להיות טבע שלמותך שלא יכלה החוטא בעונו תפקוד ענשו עליו ועל בנו ובן בנו ושאר זרעו באופן שיתחלק העונש ביניה' ויוכלו שאתו ולא יתמו בעונו'. והוא כמי שיש לו חוב על אדם מאלף פרחי זהב שאם יפרע כל החוב יחד לא ישאר לו במה יחיה ולהיותו חומל עליו יתפשר עמו שיפרע הוא רביע החוב ובנו רביע אחר ובן בנו רביע אחר באופן שיהיה החוב נפרע כלו וירוח וינוח לו.

Hakham Sasson writes, "In the context 'visiting the sin' is surely being represented as a manifestation of divine jealousy ... rather than forbearance. For some, its decalogue sense influences the way they look at all occurrences of 'visiting the sin.'" (citations omitted) Hakham Sasson notes Professor Milgrom's comment in Excurses 32:

[I]n the Decalogue ... a quality of mercy has no place in the demand for retribution ... Here, then, it cannot mean a transfer of punishment but its extension to the children ... Thus, to judge by the Decalogue, there is no way that the doctrine of retribution can be interpreted as an aspect of God's mercy."

I would also note that if "visiting the iniquities" means spreading punishment over multiple generations, then logically the parallel "bestowing kindness to thousands [of generations]" should mean that the reward for good deeds is thinned out, which would significantly reduce the beneficence of this rule overall.

In Excurses 32 Professor Milgrom explains Moshe's comfort with mentioning God's punishing children in a different way. It is not a plea for forgiveness so much as a plea that God continue God's relationship with the Israelites. "Moshe is quite content to invoke the dreaded doctrine of vertical retribution, provided that *salah* will also be dispensed, justice will be tempered by mercy, and God will continue as Israel's God and fulfill the promise of His covenant."

More simply, it is possible that Moshe simply quotes God's attributes (more or less) in their entirety, accepting the bad (God's exacting just punishment) with the good (God's being kind and merciful).

Note also that to the extent God's "visiting the iniquities" always carries a harsh meaning, this might also indicate that the statement that God "נקה לא ינקה, does not acquit" should also be read more harshly.

III. CAN LATER GENERATIONS AVOID PUNISHMENT?

God's "visiting the iniquities of ancestors on children up to third and fourth generations" raises serious questions of fairness. Should descendants be punished for the sins of the ancestors?⁹ Yechezkel (Ezekiel) and Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) stress that a person is punished for her or his own sins:

Yechezkel 18

יחזקאל פרק יח

(1) The word of the LORD came to me saying: (2) What do you mean by this proverb which you recite on Israelite soil saying "Fathers eat sour grapes and the teeth of the children are blunted?" (3) As I live declares the LORD God, this shall no longer be your proverb in Israel. (4) For all souls are mine, the soul of the father like the soul of the son are mine – the soul that sins is the one that shall perish.

(א) ויהי דבר יְקוֹקֵק אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: (ב) מַה לָּכֶם אַתֶּם מְשַׁלִּים אֶת־הַמִּשָּׁל הַזֶּה עַל־אֲדַמַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אָבוֹת יָאֲכְלוּ בֹטָר וְשָׂנֵי הַבְּנִים תִּקְהֶינָה: (ג) חַי־אֲנִי נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְקוֹקֵק אִם־יִהְיֶה לָּכֶם עוֹד מִשָּׁל הַמִּשָּׁל הַזֶּה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: (ד) הֲנֹן כָּל־הַנְּפֹשׁוֹת לִי הֲנֹה כְּנֹפֵשׁ הָאָב וּכְנֹפֵשׁ הַבֵּן לִי־הֲנֹה הַנְּפֹשׁ הַחַטָּאת הִיא תָמוּת:

(20) The soul that sins shall die, the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father and the father will not bear the iniquity of the son, the righteous person's righteousness shall be upon him, and the evildoing of the evildoer will be upon him.

(כ) הַנְּפֹשׁ הַחַטָּאת הִיא תָמוּת בֶּן לֹא יִשָּׂא בְעוֹן הָאָב וְאָב לֹא יִשָּׂא בְעוֹן הַבֵּן צְדָקַת הַצַּדִּיק עָלָיו תִּהְיֶה וְרָשָׁעַת רָשָׁע הַרָשָׁע עָלָיו תִּהְיֶה:

Yirmiyahu 31:28-29

ירמיהו פרק לא פסוק כח-כט

(28) In those days [people] will no longer say "Fathers ate sour grapes and the teeth of the children are blunted." (29) Rather, each person will die for his own sins, each person who eats sour grapes – his teeth will be blunted.

(כח) בַּיָּמִים הַהֵם לֹא־יֵאמְרוּ עוֹד אָבוֹת אָכְלוּ בֹטָר וְשָׂנֵי בְנִים תִּקְהֶינָה: (כט) כִּי אִם־אִישׁ בְּעוֹנוֹ יָמוּת כָּל־הָאָדָם הָאֲכָל הַבֹּטָר תִּקְהֶינָה שְׁנָיו:

The Talmud exhibits two strategies in responding to the juxtaposition of the "visiting the iniquities" doctrine to Yechezkel's and Yirmiyahu's rejection of the concept that children suffer for the sins of parents.

Rashi succinctly summarizes one approach. Commenting on the statement in Exodus 20:5 that God "visits the iniquities of ancestors on children up to third and fourth generations for those who scorn Me,"¹⁰ Rashi writes:

Rashi Exodus 20:5

רש"י שמות פרק כ פסוק ה

Those who scorn Me – [This is to be understood] according to its Targum (i.e. the Aramaic translation of the Torah) [which is to say that children suffer for the iniquities of their parents] when they hold on to (i.e. continue) the [evil] deeds of their ancestors.¹¹

⁹ Note that some arguments could be made for the fairness of this rule. For instance, if fear of retribution on one's children was a sufficient deterrent to wrongdoing, later generations might in fact benefit from the deterrence more than they suffer from being punished for a prior generation's misdeeds.

¹⁰ The text of this verse can be found above at p. 4.

אבותיהם
בידיהם¹¹

This is to say that a person only suffers for the deeds of ancestors if that person continues those evil deeds. Rashi's reasonably reads "those who scorn me" to refer to the progeny, rather than (or in addition to) the original evildoer.¹² This read is perhaps informed by the fact that although Yechezkel 18 says that a righteous person's evil son dies and the evildoer's righteous son lives,¹³ Yechezkel never explicitly addresses what happens if a righteous person has a righteous child or wicked person has a wicked child. Thus, the "visiting the iniquities" doctrine is read in light of Yechezkel and Yirmiyahu's declarations and vice versa. However, as we have discussed, while reading one text in light of the other may be enlightening, it can also obscure the message of one or the other text by failing to let each text breathe on its own. One Talmudic discussion, which ultimately adopts the Targum/Rashi approach, begins by quoting Rabbi Yose, who apparently took a different approach to these texts, concluding that a righteous person could suffer for the sins of a wicked parent.

¹¹ Rashi also reads a similar meaning into the reference to "visiting the iniquities" in Exodus 34:7:

Rashi Exodus 34:7

רש"י שמות פרק לד פסוק ז

Who visits the iniquities of ancestors on children – When they hold on to the [evil] deeds of their ancestors, as has already been explained in another text "to those who scorn Me." (Exodus 20:5)

פקד עון אבות על בנים - כשאוחזים מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם, שכבר פירש במקרא אחר (שמות כ ה) לשונאי:

Hence, Rashi understands Exodus 34:7 in light of the word לשונאי (to those who scorn me) in Exodus 20:5, which is quite reasonable. On the other hand, it is possible that there is a reason why this term is not used in 34:7. It is also possible to argue that the fact that לשונאי does not appear in 34:7 (nor in our parashah at Numbers 34:18) suggests the word is not as vital to the meaning of "visiting the iniquities" doctrine as Rashi's interpretation would suggest.

¹² A similar conclusion can be made regarding the reward of one who does good in the phrase in Exodus 20:6, above p. 4 "and does kindness to thousands [of generations] for those who love Me and keep My commandments." Similarly:

Deuteronomy 7:9

דברים פרק ז פסוק ט

And you shall know that the LORD your God is the God, the faithful master who keeps his covenant and kindness to those who love Him and follow His commandments, up to a thousand generations.

וידעת כי יי' קונק א-להיך הוא הא-להים הא-ל הנאמן שמר הבְּרִית וְהַחֶסֶד לְאֲהֲבָיו וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מצותו מִצֹּאתוֹ לְאֶלֶף דּוֹר:

¹³ Yechezkel also notes that an evildoer can avoid his negative fate by repenting and that a righteous person's good deeds will not save her if she turns to evil.

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 7a

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ז עמוד א

Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Yose: Moshe asked for three things from the Holy One Blessed Is He and [God] granted him [his request]. ... Moshe said before God: Master of the Universe! Why is there a righteous person who has good [things happen] to him, a righteous person who has bad [things happen] to him, a wicked person who has good [things happen] to him and a wicked person who has bad [things happen] to him? God said to Moshe: A righteous person who has good [things happen] to him is a righteous person [and the] son of a righteous person, a righteous person who has bad [things happen] to him is a righteous person [and the] son of a wicked person, a wicked person who has good [things happen] to him is a wicked person [and the] son of a righteous person, a wicked person who has bad [things happen] to him is a wicked person [and the] son of a wicked person.

Master (i.e. Rabbi Yose) said: A righteous person who has good [things happen] to him is a righteous person [and the] son of a righteous person, a righteous person who has bad [things happen] to him is a righteous person [and the] son of a wicked person. Is this so? For it is written, "visits the iniquities of ancestors on children," and it is also written, "Fathers shall not be killed for [the misdeeds] of children, and children shall not die for [the misdeeds] of parents."¹⁴ We pit one text against the other and respond: It is no difficulty - this [verse which speaks of "visits the iniquities" refers to] when they hold on to (i.e. continue) the [evil] deeds of their ancestors while this [verse which says children should not die for the misdeeds of parents refers to] when they do not hold on to (i.e. continue) the [evil] deeds of their ancestors. Rather, this is what [God] said to Moshe: A righteous person who has good [things happen] to him is a completely righteous person, a righteous person who has bad [things happen] to him is not a completely righteous person, a wicked person who has good [things happen] to him is not completely wicked, and a wicked person who has bad [things happen] to him is completely wicked.

ואמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יוסי: שלשה דברים בקש משה מלפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ונתן לו; ... אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם! מפני מה יש צדיק וטוב לו ויש צדיק ורע לו, יש רשע וטוב לו ויש רשע ורע לו? אמר לו: משה, צדיק וטוב לו - צדיק בן צדיק, צדיק ורע לו - צדיק בן רשע, רשע וטוב לו - רשע בן צדיק, רשע ורע לו - רשע בן רשע.

אמר מר: צדיק וטוב לו - צדיק בן צדיק, צדיק ורע לו - צדיק בן רשע. איני? והא כתיב: פקד עון אבות על בנים, וכתיב: ובנים לא יומתו על אבות ורמינן קראי אהדדי ומשנינן: לא קשיא, הא - כשאוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם, הא - כשאין אוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם! אלא, הכי קאמר ליה: צדיק וטוב לו - צדיק גמור, צדיק ורע לו - צדיק שאינו גמור, רשע וטוב לו - רשע שאינו גמור, רשע ורע לו - רשע גמור. ופליגא דרבי מאיר, דאמר רבי מאיר:

Rabbi Yose's teaching (quoted by R. Yohanan) seems to be clearly at odds with the declaration of Yehezkel and Yirmiyahu and consistent with a more harsh interpretation of the "visiting the iniquities" doctrine. Rabbi Yose bar Hanina, a student of Rabbi Yohanan puts a finer point on this:

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 24:16. Full text below p. 9. Note this text refers to the acts of a human court and not to divine punishment, as we will discuss further below.

Babylonian Talmud Makot 24a

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מכות דף כד עמוד א

Rabbi Yose bar Haninah said: There are four decrees which our teacher Moshe decreed upon Israel which four prophets came and voided. ... Moshe said: "visits the iniquities of ancestors on children," Ezekiel came and voided it: "The soul that sins shall die."

אמר ר' יוסי בר חנינא: ארבע גזירות גזר משה רבינו על ישראל, באו ארבעה נביאים וביטלום. ... משה אמר: פוקד עון אבות על בנים, בא יחזקאל וביטלה: הנפש החוטאת היא תמות.

IV. EMULATING GOD?

Rambam Laws of Personality 1:6

רמב"ם הלכות דעות פרק א הלכה ו

Just as God is called gracious, you, too, should be gracious, just as God is called holy, you, too, should be holy. In this manner the prophets referred to God with all these references, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, righteous, forthright, pure, powerful, strong, etc., to teach that these are the good and upright paths and a human being is obligated to conduct oneself in those manners and to imitate God as much as one is able.

מה הוא נקרא חנון אף אתה היה חנון, מה הוא נקרא רחום אף אתה היה רחום, מה הוא נקרא קדוש אף אתה היה קדוש, ועל דרך זו קראו הנביאים לא-ל בכל אותן הכנויין ארך אפים ורב חסד צדיק וישר תמים גבור וחזק וכיוצא בהן, להודיע שהן דרכים טובים וישרים וחייב אדם להנהיג עצמו בהן ולהדמות אליו כפי כחו.

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Hakham Sassoon notes that Rambam (and I would note Talmudic parallels¹⁵) do not encourage humans to emulate God's characteristic for vengeance¹⁶ or for "visiting the iniquities." To the contrary, such behaviors are generally forbidden to humanity:

Leviticus 19:18

ויקרא פרק יט פסוק יח

Do not take revenge nor bear a grudge against your kinsman, love your fellow as yourself, I am the LORD. **לֹא־תִקֶּם וְלֹא־תִטַּח אֶת־בְּנֵי עִמּוֹךָ וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק׃**

¹⁵ As noted by Hakham Sasson, Rambam's comment seems to be based on the following statement in the Talmud:

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 133b

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קלג עמוד ב

Abba Shaul says: "And I will extol Him" (Ex. 15:2) – emulate God: Just as God is gracious and merciful, you, too, be gracious and merciful. **אבא שאול אומר: ואנוהו - הוי דומה לו: מה הוא חנון ורחום - אף אתה היה חנון ורחום.**

A similar sentiment is expressed here:

Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף יד עמוד א

Rabbi Chamma bar Chaninah said: What is the meaning of that which is written, "Walk after the Lord Your God"? (Deut. 13:5) Is it possible for a human to walk after the divine presence? Is it not already written, "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire"? (Deut. 4:24) Rather, the text means to reflect (lit. "walk after") the qualities of the Holy One, Blessed is He. Just as God clothes the naked, as it is written, "and the LORD God made for Adam and his wife leather cloaks and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21); you, too, clothe the naked. The Holy One, Blessed is He, visited the sick, as it is written (immediately after Abraham's circumcision), "the LORD appeared to him in Elonay Mamre" (Gen. 18:1); you too, visit the sick. The Holy One, Blessed is He, consoled mourners, as it is written, "And it was after the passing of Abraham and God blessed Isaac his son" (Gen. 25:11); you, too, console mourners. The Holy One, Blessed is He, buried the dead, as it is written, "And God buried him (i.e. Moshe) in Gay" (Deut. 35:6), you, too, bury the dead. **ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב: +דברים יג+ אחר ה' א-להיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר: +דברים ד+ כי ה' א-להיך אש אוכלה הוא! אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה, מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב: +בראשית ג+ ויעש ה' א-להים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם, אף אתה הלבש ערומים; הקב"ה ביקר חולים, דכתיב: +בראשית יח+ וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, אף אתה בקר חולים; הקב"ה ניחם אבלים, דכתיב: +בראשית כה+ ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך א-להים את יצחק בנו, אף אתה נחם אבלים; הקב"ה קבר מתים, דכתיב: +דברים לד+ ויקבר אותו בגיא, אף אתה קבור מתים.**

For a related discussion see my sermon on "Cultivating Our Divine Image" at <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/2016yky.pdf>.

¹⁶

Nahum 1:2

נחום פרק א פסוק ב

The LORD is a jealous and vengeful God, The LORD takes revenge and is wrathful; the LORD takes revenge on His enemies and bears a grudge toward His foes. **אֲ-לֹהֵי קְנִיזָא וְנִקְמָם יְקֹוֹק נִקְמָם וַיַּעַל חֲמָה נִקְמָם יְקֹוֹק לְצַרְיוֹ וְנוֹטֵר הוּא לְאִיְבָיו**

Deuteronomy 24:16

דברים פרק כד פסוק טז

Fathers shall not be killed for [the misdeeds] of children, and children shall not die for [the misdeeds] of parents, each shall die for one's own sins.¹⁷ לא-יומתו אבות על-בנים ובנים לא-יומתו על-אבות איש בְּחַטָּאוֹ יוּמָתוּ: ס¹⁷

However, Rabbi Yoseph Ibn Kaspi (1279-1340) suggests that there is a place for vengeance in human behavior:

Mishneh Kesef Volume 2 Leviticus 19:18¹⁸

משנה כסף חבורה שניה ויקרא יט:יח¹⁸

Do not take revenge nor bear a grudge against your kinsman. Yoseph says: These commandments are primarily intended for the masses, because it is known that the masses only concentrate on current matters and many vanities, and that is where their concentration is. But the path of the exceptional individuals is different – even when they concentrate on current matters, their goal is spiritual ends. Therefore, the purpose of the commandments is not the same for the masses as for the [exceptional] individuals, and therefore the sages taught “any wise sage that doesn’t take revenge like a serpent is no sage” (BT Yoma 22b-23a).¹⁹ If this is the case, the לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך. אמר יוסף, הכונה העצמית וראשונה באלה המצוות לכלל ההמון, וידוע כי אין עסקי ההמון רק בעסקי הזמן והבלים הרבה, וכן כונתם בנפשם, ודרך היחידים סגולות דרך אחרת, ואף בהתעסקם בעסקי הזמן יהיה התכלית לשלמות הנפש, לכן אין תכלית המצוות אחת להמון וליחידים, ולכן אמרו חכמים ז"ל כל תלמיד חכם שאינו נוקם ונוטר כנחש אינו תלמיד חכם (יומא כג) א"כ

¹⁷

Hizkuni Exodus 34:17

חזקוני שמות פרק לד פסוק ז

Visits the iniquities of ancestors ... and that which is written “Fathers shall not be killed for [the misdeeds] of children” refers to an earthly court, while here [God is addressing what happens] in the heavenly court. פקד עון אבות ... והא דכתיב לא יומתו אבות על בנים התם בב"ד של מטה והכא בב"ד של מעלה.

Note footnote notes that Hizkuni provides a different explanation at Exodus 20:4.

¹⁸ Text above typed by myself from text available at <https://hebrewbooks.org/9459>. Here is an image of the text I typed, in case of any typos.

(יט) לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך. אמר יוסף.
הכונה העצמית וראשונה באלה המצוות לכלל ההמון, וידוע כי אין עסקי ההמון רק בעסקי הזמן והבלים הרבה, וכן כונתם בנפשם, ודרך היחידים סגולות דרך אחרת, ואף בהתעסקם בעסקי הזמן יהיה התכלית לשלמות הנפש, לכן אין תכלית המצוות אחת להמון וליחידים, ולכן אמרו חכמינו ז"ל כל תלמיד חכם שאינו נוקם ונוטר כנחש אינו תלמיד חכם (יומא כג), ויותר חזק מזה כתוב אל קנא ונוקם הי' וכי' (נחום א' א'), איכ מתכונותיו ית' שהוא נוקם ונוטר, והתורה צותנו והלכת בדרכיה, וזה הענין סוד גדול ברוב מצוות התורה, ולא אוכל לפרש¹:

¹ ועיין למעלה פ' מקץ.

¹⁹

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף כב עמוד ב – דף כג עמוד א

Blessed One's nature is that he takes revenge and bears grudges, and the Torah commands us "and walk [in God's ways]" (Deut. 28:9), and this matter is a great secret in all of the Torah which cannot be explained.

מתכונותיו ית' שהוא נוקם ונוטר והתורה צותנו והלכת, וזה הענין סוד גדול ברוב מצות התורה ולא אוכל לפרש.

Hakham Sassoon:

[D]ivine NQM (vengeance) may indeed be synonymous with divine justice ... In the all-righteous Hands, retribution by any name is fair, impartial, and tempered with mercy. But as we know too well, in human hands anything that goes by the name NQMH is depravity. Hence, we would not expect its fostering to be advocated by Torah. And, as we have seen when Rambam lists those traits that should be adopted by man, 'who must try his utmost to walk in God's ways,' sure enough, NQMH finds no place in that league.

[Regarding Kaspi's comment] ... These 13 [attributes] alone are understood to be alluded to in the exhortation at Dt. 28:9 'to walk in God's ways.' To presume to emulate any additional divine attribute without explicit authorization smacks of impudence rather than piety. And when the attribute in question has been plainly proscribed, the impudence borders on treason. ...

As for his Talmudic citation, it is equivocal to say the least. ... 28:9 ... is addressed to all Israel. ...

[A]ny proper appraisal of the Yoma citation cannot – in our submission – ignore the context, viz., the discussion of Saul's excessive humility. ... The Talmud feels that such self-effacement as displayed by Saul is dangerous in a leader because it can be mistaken for weakness and invite attack. ...

[Hakham Sassoon continues to demonstrate the use of NQM in Yoma is hyperbolic]

(citations omitted)

We have an obligation to pursue justice on earth, to protect ourselves from the wrongdoing of others, and even a right to seek redress when we are wronged by others. However, only God's vengeance can be counted as justice. Similarly, there is no place for visiting the iniquities of ancestors on children in human behavior.

ואמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יהוצדק: כל תלמיד חכם (כג.) שאינו נוקם ונוטר כנחש - אינו תלמיד חכם.