

1. **The parallel prayers of G-d and Yishmael ben Elisha.** The gemara tells us that G-d prays, and this is His prayer: "May it be My will that My compassion overcomes My anger, and My compassion should be more powerful than My other emotions, and let Me be kind and compassionate in the way I treat My children and go beyond the boundary of judgment." The gemara continues by sharing a parallel to this prayer, found in a *beraita* - which has become a popular song, composed by Yossi Green and made famous by Avraham Fried: Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha said, "One time I went into the Holy Temple into the Holy of Holies to bring the ketoret, and I saw Akasriel, Ya-h, the Lord of Hosts, Who was sitting on an exalted and elevated throne, and He said to me, 'Yishmael, my son, bless me.' I said to him, 'May it be Your will that Your mercy conquer over Your anger, and may Your mercy overcome Your stricter feelings, and may You behave towards Your children with the attribute of mercy and for their sake go beyond the limits of justice.'" What is going on here? Though Akasriel sounds like the name of an angel, many commentators suggest that it is referring to G-d. G-d's own prayer is that His anger should be suppressed, and we bless Him the same way. Why do we pray for G-d not to be angry? In a relationship, anger signifies that you care. If you love somebody very much and they don't reciprocate, wouldn't that make you angry? We have a jealous G-d Who loves us very much, and He gets "upset" when we don't reciprocate. It's foundational in the Zohar and Kabbalah, and obviously here as well, that what we do here on Earth affects G-d. Our actions make Him angry, but we pray that His mercy overcomes that anger. That is why we pray on Rosh Hashana for G-d to move from His Throne of Judgment to His Throne of Mercy. And just as we do not want G-d to be angry at us, He does not want to feel anger. Maimonides, who emphasizes the unchanging nature of the Divine, understands these sections of the Talmud in a non-literal way.
2. **We learn from this not to discount the blessing of a simple person.** We tend to covet the esteem of our equals and our superiors and to see others as less important. But G-d is not like that. Compared to Him we are all insignificant, and yet because we are all striving to be in a relationship with Him He chooses to be in a relationship with each one of us. He is happy to hear from even the poor and the destitute. If G-d, Who is so high above any person in this world, cares about these people, surely we, mere humans, must also care. We must never underestimate a person's importance. No matter how unaccomplished the person appears, we should take them seriously just as G-d does.
3. **G-d's anger management.** The gemara has a protracted conversation about G-d's anger. It says that G-d gets angry for a moment every day, and we should not try to appease G-d at the moment His anger flashes. Just as when a person gets angry it's best to wait until the heat subsides before trying to calm them down, so must we take care with G-d's anger. But G-d's daily anger lasts for barely a millisecond. Why is that dangerous? Because if someone knew that exact moment, they'd be able to manipulate G-d, so to speak. In fact, that was the power Bilaam had and the reason he was such a threat to us in the desert. The commentaries try to understand the nature of this "anger." According to the Sefer Hachinuch, what it means is that the world is always in balance between good and bad, rejuvenation and destruction, and tipping that balance towards the bad puts the whole world in jeopardy. One negative action could be the straw that breaks the camel's back, so whenever there is a danger of that happening G-d has a moment of anger. But His compassion immediately kicks in, and the balance shifts back.
4. **What was Moses asking when he wanted to see G-d's face?** In Exodus 33, right after the Golden Calf incident, Moses prayed to G-d for three things. The third prayer was, "Let me know Your ways." He also asked to see G-d's face, and G-d replied that he could only see His back. We have to understand what Moses was really asking for. He was asking G-d about the much-discussed conundrum of *tzaddik ve'ra lo, rasha v'tov lo* - why do good people suffer while good

things happen to bad people? According to one opinion G-d started to answer Moses, but according to another opinion He said that this is a secret He can't let Moses know.

5. **You can't see My face, but you can see My back.** According to the gemara, G-d showed Moses the knot of His tefillin. G-d's tefillin represent the idea that we are a unique people designated by G-d with a unique calling. The Mei Hashiloach explains the difference between the front of the tefillin and the knot, or the back. The front represents how we are constantly connected to G-d no matter what we do. Even someone who appears to be doing something wrong may not be, because G-d has a plan. That's one way of understanding the *tzaddik ve'ra lo* issue - it might seem like a tzaddik is suffering, but in reality G-d has something better in store for him, such as real estate in the World to Come. The knot of the tefillin represents the same idea, but only in hindsight. It can be difficult to discern G-d's plan while things are happening that don't appear to make sense, but in hindsight we can understand the truth of why everything had to happen as it did. This hindsight is what G-d was showing Moses; how after the fact you can tell that someone was always connected to G-d even when it didn't seem like it. But the front of the tefillin, the ability to see G-d in the present, was not given to Moses. This level of understanding was achieved only by Rabbi Akiva. There's an amazing gemara in which Rabbi Akiva says that if he had lived in the time of the Sanhedrin, he would have made sure they never executed somebody with *arba misos beis din*. He believed that if you look deeply enough into anyone's actions, you can see that what they're doing can't really be evil. You can find merit in it and understand how it is part of G-d's plan in this moment. For Rabbi Akiva, there was no discrepancy between what he experienced and what he believed. Even when he suffered, he loved G-d because he could see His hand in everything. That's why Rabbi Akiva is the foundation of the Oral Torah; because he saw G-d in the present, the way even Moses couldn't. Moses did believe in the death penalty, because the way he saw things in the moment people could actually go against G-d's will, and in certain rare instances they could forfeit their own life with their actions.
6. **Leah was the first person to do thanksgiving.** When she gave birth to Yehuda, she said "hapa'am odeh at Hashem" - now I can acknowledge and be grateful to G-d. What is the power of acknowledging and thanking? Chassidus and Kabbalah explain that it's more than a simple thank you. When a waiter in a restaurant brings you a bowl of soup, you might say thank you. But what if you're dying and somebody saves your life? To that person, you don't just give a simple thank you. Similarly, we cannot just say thank you to G-d. We owe Him so much more than that. We owe Him our thanks for our very lives. When we acknowledge and thank G-d for life itself, we give ourselves over to Divine service in a very powerful way.
7. **How do you treat your firstborn?** Should they be given special treatment and a leadership role within the family? Or is it better to treat all your children as equals? There is support for both approaches. Where do we see that it's better to treat all children equally? From Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's father gave him special treatment and as a result his brothers hated him. We don't want to foster such animosity in our own children. On the other hand, the Torah itself has a concept of the firstborn's birthright. He is supposed to get a double portion of inheritance. Doesn't that mean the Torah recognizes the concept of leadership among the children? Perhaps the problem with Joseph's brothers wasn't that they didn't want a leader, but that they wanted a different leader. Reuven was Jacob's true firstborn, but because Jacob did not love Reuven's mother, Leah, he did not treat Reuven as such. Instead, he elevated Joseph, the firstborn of the wife he loved. We can learn from this story that the firstborn should be respected, and denying him that respect can create an imbalance in the family dynamics.
8. **Don't start fights with evil people.** You might be inclined to try to stop people from doing bad, but making yourself a judge can be very dangerous. You might become overly zealous, or you

might even end up becoming like the people you're trying to stop. If you fail, the people you are trying to stop might harm you. Sometimes it's best to just stay away.

9. **Serving Torah scholars is greater than studying with them.** Part of the reason for this is that when you spend time with Torah scholars you see more than how they learn and what they think. You can see how they act, how they treat people, and how they apply halacha in the real world. If you want to become a leader, study is not enough. You need to experience the embodiment of Torah.
10. **The concept of praying at the right time.** The Talmud spends a lot of time talking about the right time for prayer. It's usually best to pray with a minyan, but there's an idea that if you are not able to get to a minyan, you can still in a way make yourself part of the group. Find out approximately when the minyan will get to Shemonah Esrei, and try to pray at that time. This will connect you to the group energy that's so important to a minyan, even though you're not actually physically part of it.