SELIHOT and the secret of the 13 attributes

The core of the Selihot prayer we recite before and during Yom Kippur is the Biblical text ‘Amonay, Amonay, E-l Rahum veHanun….”. These words are known as the 13 attributes of God’s compassion.

Maimonides explains that by attributes, we should not understand that these are qualities of HaShem, i.e., what God “IS” (which is beyond our comprehension), but rather, how HaShem operates in this world as it appears to us.

These words were invoked by Moshe Rabbenu at a very delicate time: when the people of Israel built and worshiped the golden calf and HaShem wanted to destroy Israel. Moshe pleaded to HaShem to forgive ‘am Israel, and as we know, He did.

Rabbi Yochanan explained that God Almighty showed Moshe Rabbenu that *by invoking* these 13 principles, the transgressors would be forgiven.

The 13 principles say the following:

HASHEM – God, behaving with compassion. As opposed to Eloqim, which alludes to God, acting with strict justice.
HASHEM – (we will explain below this repetition of God’s name)
E-L – mighty in compassion to give all creatures according to their need;
RAHUM – merciful, that humankind may not be distressed;
VEHANUN – and gracious if humankind is already in distress;
EREKH APAIM – slow to anger;
VERAB HESED – and generous in kindness;
VE-EMET- and truth;
NOTSER HESED LAALAFIM – keeping His kindness for thousand generations;
NOSE AVON – forgiving iniquity;
VAFESHA– and transgression;
VAHATAA – and sin;
VENAQE – and pardoning.

Rabbi Eliyahu da Vidas (1518-1592) writes in his book Reshit Hokhma (□ □□□ □□□□□ □□□) that the expression of the Talmud “by invoking these 13 attributes, the transgressors will be forgiven” should not be understood as by reciting these 13

attributes but “by performing these 13 attributes”. This means that when we emulate these attributes of God with our peers, we will be forgiven by God.
A few illustrations:
HASHEM, HASHEM: The repetition of the name of God demands an explanation. Our rabbis taught that from this repetition, we learn a wonderful lesson about God’s complete forgiveness. When we truly repent for our transgressions, God will forgive us completely and will never remind us again of that sin. The repetition of God’s names teaches us thus that He will behave with us after we repent exactly as He behaved with us before we sinned. There is no grudge or resentment but total and complete forgiveness. Thus, if we want to be forgiven by God, we need to act toward others as we want God to act toward us. Namely, when we forgive others, we should delete and erase all bad feelings toward the person who offended us, and we should act toward him or her as we did before the offense.
EREKH APAYIM (Patient) HaShem waits patiently for us to repent. Instead of punishing us immediately for our sins, God gives us time to repent and avoid punishment. So too, if someone wrongs us, we should give that person time to repent and make amends.
VEEMET (Truth). He keeps His promises of good even if we do not deserve that good anymore. If we promise to do a good thing for another person, we should keep our word even if that person no longer deserves it.
NOTSER HESED LAALAFIM (Keeps His Kindness for thousand generations) If we owe a debt of gratitude to someone, we should continue to express that gratitude to that person’s descendants.
When we recite these attributes, we should learn from them, not just how HaShem behaves with us, but also how HaShem expects us to behave with others.