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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חירות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

A PORTRAIT OF A NATION AS A YOUNG PERSON

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

ויאמר יקוק אל משה
 הנך שכב עם אבותיך וקם העם הזה
 וזנה אחרי אלהי נכר הארץ אשר הוא בא שמה בקרבו
 ועזבני והפר את בריתי אשר כרתי אתו:
 וחרה אפי בו ביום ההוא ועזבתים
 והסתרתני פני מהם והיה לאלכ
 ומצאהו רעות רבות וצרות
 ואמר ביום ההוא
 הלא על כי אין אלהי בקרבי מצאוני הרעות האלה:
 ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא
 על כל הרעה אשר עשה
 כי פנה אל אלהים אחרים.

Devarim 31:16-18

Hashem said to Mosheh:

*You will be lying with your ancestors, and this nation will arise
 and whore after the alien gods of the land to which it is going there, into
 its midst,*

*and they will abandon Me, and nullify My covenant which I have cut
 with them.*

*My anger will burn in them on that day, and I will abandon them,
 and I will conceal My face from them, and they will become prey,
 and many great and terrible evils will find them.*

He will say on that day:

*Isn't because my G-d is not in my midst that all these evils have found
 me?"*

*I will emphatically conceal My face on that day,
 on account of all the evil which he did,
 because he turned toward other.*

These verses seem to be among the darkest passages in Torah. They appear to end without any promise of either spiritual or physical redemption. Is that possible? Or is it our job to somehow find the light hiding beneath the bleakness?

Let's focus in on the concept of *bester panim*, the concealment of the Divine countenance (k'b'yakhol). My sense is that most yeshivot teach, as was taught, that *bester panim* is an ultimate tragedy, and yet that even at its worst, G-d still so-to-speak "peeks". Thus the Pentateuchal hint

that legitimates the holiday of Purim is "*baster astir*", "I will emphatically conceal", which punningly refers to Queen Esther (see Chullin 139b). Otherwise the Rabbinic institution of a ritualized annual celebratory day would be a clear violation of "Do not add onto or subtract from (the Torah's set of commandments)".

Rereading our parashah, however, I was very confused by the flow of the verses. It seems that

- the Jews abandon G-d, so
- He conceals His face and terrible things happen to them, so
- they realize and articulate that His absence is the cause of those terrible things, so He
- emphatically conceals His face!

Why does G-d "emphatically conceal" His face rather than turn back to His people when they turn back to Him?

'Targum Yonatan' [1] suggests that G-d continues His self-concealment only so long as the Jews' punishment for their past sin is incomplete. This is a reasonable literal translation of our verse, but seems to me a very difficult read of the whole unit. Netziv (and Malbim works along the same lines) tries to solve the problem in the opposite direction, by claiming that the Jews' use their recognition that G-d's absence is causing their troubles as an excuse to abandon Him further, rather than as a spur to teshuvah. He acknowledges that this leads to an ever-worsening spiral of sins, and it's not clear how we are ever to escape it and bring Redemption.

Rashi and many other pashtanim suggest that the first concealment is not punitive; it is rather the looking-away of an authority figure who cannot bear to see his charge punished. This seems to intensify rather than resolve our problem – what is the meaning and purpose of the emphatic second concealment?

Talmud Chagigah 5b records two rabbinic readings which apparently see the double "*baster astir*" as limiting rather than expanding the concealment.

אמר רבא:
אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא:
אף על פי שהסתרתני פני מהם, בחלום אדבר בו;
רב יוסף אמר:
ידו נטויה עלינו, שנאמר "ובצל ידי כסיתיך".

Said Rava:

Said the Holy Blessed One:

*Even though I have concealed My face from them, I will speak to him
in a dream;*

Rav Yosef said:

*His hand is outstretched over us (Rashi: to protect us),
as Scripture says "and in the shadow of My hand I have covered you"
(Isaiah 51:16).*

What generates these readings? Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:2
draws a connection to Yeshayahu 8:17:

וחיתי לה'
המסתיר פניו מבית יעקב
וקויתי לו:

*And I have waited for Hashem,
Who hides His face from the House of Yaakov,
and I have hoped toward Him*

The argument, in the manner of Rabbi Akiva rejoicing at seeing the fox on the Temple Mount, is that when the promise of deepest darkness has been fulfilled, surely the promise of dawn must be next. Devarim 31:21 does after all promise that the Torah will never be forgotten by the Jews.

I prefer, however, to stay with Rav Yosef's verse. What is the meaning of the metaphor that Hashem "covered you with My hand"? I suggest that this is a reference to Shmot 33:21-23, in which Hashem covers Mosheh with His hand so that Mosheh will not see His face (and die). In other words, it is a reference to a verse in which the concealment of Hashem's face is explicitly intended to protect rather than abandon.

With this in mind, it may be worth noting that Devarim 31:17 refers to concealing His face **from them**, whereas 31:18 speaks only of an objective concealment. The Rabbis may have seen here the image of a concealed face, as they saw it in Shmot, as establishing the metaphor of Hashem as tallit-wrapped, praying for His people (on account of all the evil which they did, because they turned toward other gods).

Note also that many theologians have built on Rashi by noting that looking-away can be a parental gesture of granting autonomy, of allowing a child to grow up. Hester panim, however regrettable, also represents an opportunity to take responsibility for our individual and national selves. Under this reading, for G-d to rush in to rescue us as soon as we recognized the costs of His absence would be to permanently infantilize us, and so G-d assures us – emphatically! that He will not do so.

And yet – human beings grow up. There comes a time in most lives when there is no longer room for concern that parental rescues will prevent or undo maturity – children can accept their help and constant concern as a beautiful part of the adult world in which they find themselves. This is also enormously liberating for parents.

What remains to be seen is whether nations can also achieve maturity, or whether that is instead exclusively the province of individuals. Clearly nations do not have the biological development that individuals do, and in that sense it seems likely that any national maturity is much more reversible than individual maturity. But it is possible that the accrual of moral, political, and social capital can have the same effects as maturity. (See in this regard [Yoni Appelbaum's article in the Atlantic](#) on how Americans are losing the habits of democracy. My thanks also to the friend who called my attention to Reinhold Niebuhr's [Moral Man and Immoral Society](#)).

In the specifically Jewish context, the question is whether profound maturity can genuinely be achieved in exile, or whether even millennia of exile at best brought us to bat/bar mitzvah age when we again achieved sovereignty. At the same time, it seems unlikely that the best way of confronting those challenges is to reject the lessons of the exilic past, and to believe that one has nothing to learn from those who retain them.

May we merit reaching that condition of spiritual excellency and maturity that enables the end of *hester panim*, and the return of the *Shekhinah* from exile.

Shabbat shalom

[1] (I grow more and more convinced that Limor Gottlieb is correct to identify this "targum" as a fairly late medieval commentary)