

דברים פרק לא

(טז) ויאמר יקוק אל משה הנה שכב עם אבთיך ועם העם זהה וזונה אחרי אלהי נכר הארץ אשר הוא בא שמה בקרבו ועזבני והפר את בריתך אשר כתתי אותך:

(יז) וחרה אף בו ביום ההוא ועצבתים והסתורתי פנוי מהם והוא למצאו רעות רבות וצרות ואמר ביום ההוא הלא על כי אין אלהי בקרבי מצאוני הרעות האלה:

(יח) ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פנוי 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, 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 say, 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.

They will say on that day: Is it not 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 it did, because it turned toward other gods.

This week's double parashah takes us on a roller-coaster of hypothetical futures, with promises and predictions of sin and virtue, redemption and destruction, following each other in dizzying fashion. The three verses quoted seem among the darkest passage because they appear to end without any promise of either spiritual or physical redemption. At the same time, their rhetoric is so confusing that it may leave room for more optimistic interpretations.

My focus this week is on the concept of "hester panim", the concealment of the (k'b'yakhol) Divine countenance. My sense is that most yeshivot teach, as I was taught, that hester panim is an ultimate tragedy, but that even at its worst, G-d still so-to-speak "peeks" – thus the Pentateuchal hint that legitimates the holiday of Purim is "haster astir", "I will emphatically conceal", which punningly refers to Queen Esther (see Chullin 139b).

Rereading the parashah, however, I was very confused by the flow of the verses. 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 not turn back to His people when they turn back to Him?

'Targum Yonatan' suggests that G-d continues the concealment only so long as the Jews' punishment for their past sin is incomplete – this fits the words, but to me seems 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 – but why should this not lead to an ever-worsening spiral?

Rashi and many other pashtanim suggest that the first concealment is less punitive; it is like 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 “haster astir” as limiting rather than expanding the concealment.

אמר רבא: אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אף על פי שהסתתרתי פניהם, בחלום אמר בון;
רב יוסף אמר: ידו נתויה علينا, שנאמר (ישעיהו נ"א) "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”.

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

וחכיתי לה' המסתיר פניו מבית יעקב וקוייתי לו:

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

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

I want to stay with Rav Yosef’s verse however. What does it mean 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. Here it is possible that the Rabbis saw 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 it did, because it 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, so that *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 – when we grow up, perhaps we and they do not have to worry that parental rescues will undo our maturity – we can accept their help and constant concern as a beautiful part of the adult world in which we find ourselves. 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

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