

The Masked Divine: Finding the Shekhinah in Purim **Yali Szulanski, Class of '25**

Purim is unique among the festivals of the Jewish calendar. Megillat Esther is the only story in the Bible where God's name is never mentioned. At first glance, the Megillah seems to present a secular narrative—one driven entirely by human action, manipulation, and luck. It is easy to imagine the story unfolding without the undercurrent of Divine orchestration: a queen, a villain, a people on the brink of destruction, and a miraculous turn of events. Yet the absence of God's name does not signify the absence of God's presence. Instead, it invites us to look deeper, to seek meaning in the unseen, and to find holiness amidst ambiguity.

This absence of overt Divine intervention mirrors a profound reality of human existence: the struggle to find meaning in moments of darkness, chaos, or uncertainty. Much of life is spent searching for clarity when the path ahead feels obscured, when answers remain elusive, and when our deepest questions seem to go unanswered. The story of Purim does not provide easy assurances. It does not offer miracles tied with bows or tell us that redemption will arrive in the ways we expect. Instead, it reminds us that the Divine often works quietly, hidden in the folds of everyday life, present in ways that are invisible yet undeniable.

In this way, the Megillah becomes more than a historical account; it transforms into a mirror of our own lives. God's name may not always be spoken aloud, yet moments of redemption whisper to us that we are never truly abandoned. The silence of the Divine compels us to ask: What happens when we can no longer feel God's presence? How do we move forward when the answers to our prayers come, not in the form of miracles, but through the subtle, ordinary rhythms of life? Perhaps this silence is an invitation to look for God in places we might not think to search—in the quiet strength of a friend's encouragement, the small acts of kindness that ripple through the world, or the resilience we discover within ourselves.

The Megillah reminds us that holiness is often concealed, waiting to be uncovered by those who are willing to seek it. Divine presence is not always found in grand revelations but often in the gentle unfolding of daily life. When we attune ourselves to the sacred in ordinary moments, we begin to see that God is not distant but woven into the fabric of our existence. The question is not whether God is present, but whether we are open to noticing the quiet ways the Divine speaks—through hidden blessings, whispered grace, and the spaces where light emerges from the shadows.

This is where the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of the Divine, enters the story. In Kabbalistic thought, the Shekhinah represents the Divine presence closest to humanity. She dwells with us in exile, holding us in our pain and gently guiding us toward healing. The Shekhinah embodies the tension between hiddenness and presence, reflecting a world where God's face may be concealed, but the spark of holiness is never extinguished. Purim's narrative of hidden identities, unseen forces, and veiled truths resonates deeply with the Shekhinah's role in Jewish tradition. It teaches us that what is hidden is not absent; it is filled with potential. Like the Shekhinah, Esther, Vashti, and even the Purim

mitzvot—mishloach manot (gifts to friends) and matanot l'evyonim (gifts to the poor)—reveal that the concealed often holds the seeds of transformation and redemption.

Esther, whose name shares the Hebrew root *s-t-r* (to hide), is the embodiment of concealment. Her story begins with a secret. From the moment she is taken into Achashverosh's palace, Mordechai instructs her to hide her Jewish identity (Esther 2:10). This act of concealment is not merely strategic; it carries an emotional and psychological toll. Esther lives a dual reality: outwardly a queen of Persia; inwardly a daughter of Israel. This duality demands that she silence parts of herself—her heritage, her truth, and even her sense of belonging.

Esther's journey, often framed as one of bravery and self-sacrifice, takes on deeper spiritual meaning when viewed through the lens of the Shekhinah. Esther becomes a vessel for the feminine Divine, embodying qualities of nurturing, protection, and redemption. Her words, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16), reflect the Shekhinah's role as a guardian, shielding the Jewish people even in exile. Esther's transformation from a passive participant to an active savior reflects the Shekhinah's journey—working quietly within human systems to guide them toward redemption. Her ultimate decision to reveal her identity is not merely an act of courage; it is a declaration of authenticity. Through her, we learn that while concealment may sometimes be necessary; embracing our full selves is essential for transformation and redemption.

While Esther's story is central to Purim, Vashti's narrative offers a parallel model of courage. Her refusal to appear before Achashverosh and his drunken guests (Esther 1:12) is often viewed as defiance, but it is also a profound assertion of dignity. Vashti's "no" is a declaration of autonomy, reflecting the Shekhinah's demand for respect and recognition. Just as the Shekhinah insists on Her worth even in exile, Vashti reminds us of the power of self-respect.

Her actions carry spiritual undertones that complement Esther's bravery. While Esther works within the system to save her people, Vashti challenges the system outright. Together, they reveal the dual nature of the Shekhinah: nurturing yet defiant, hidden yet present. Vashti's willingness to set boundaries, demand respect, and assert her humanity reminds us that there is holiness in saying no—even when it comes at great personal cost.

The Shekhinah's presence, however, is not confined to these grand gestures. It is found in the everyday acts of care and kindness that sustain us. Mordechai's care for Esther, raising her as his own daughter (Esther 2:7), mirrors the Shekhinah's nurturing qualities. His faith in her potential reflects the Divine trust that the Shekhinah places in humanity, even when the path forward seems unclear. The mitzvot of Purim—mishloach manot and matanot l'evyonim—are further tangible expressions of the Shekhinah's presence. These acts remind us that holiness is not reserved for extraordinary moments but is embedded in the simple, generous gestures that connect us to one another. Through these mitzvot, the Shekhinah's light transforms concealment into connection and isolation into community.

The theme of concealment in Purim is not merely about what is hidden but about the potential it holds. Concealment creates a space for transformation, a spiritual gestation where something new can take root. Esther's hidden identity allows her to grow into her role as a leader and savior, a process shaped

by quiet strength and deliberate choices. Similarly, the Shekhinah, often described as hidden and vulnerable, reflects the brokenness of the world while holding the seeds of healing. This hiddenness is not a sign of weakness but of profound resilience. Like the Shekhinah, we can find strength in hidden places, transforming pain into growth and challenges into redemption.

Purim's lessons extend far beyond its story. In moments when we feel disconnected—whether from community, faith, or ourselves—it reminds us that the Divine is always near, working quietly to guide us. By leaning into acts of kindness, nurturing relationships, and finding meaning in the everyday, we can reconnect with the Shekhinah's presence.

This experience of living with a hidden identity resonates with modern struggles. Many people navigate spaces where they feel compelled to conceal parts of themselves—their faith, their values, or their true emotions. Such concealment often leads to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and disconnection. Yet Esther's story reminds us that hiddenness can also be a source of strength. Her ability to remain composed and strategic in the complexities of palace life demonstrates remarkable inner resilience.

As we don masks and celebrate this Purim, let us also reflect on the hidden parts of our own lives. What truths need to be revealed? What strengths are waiting to emerge? Like Esther and Vashti, we are called to embody the Shekhinah in our actions and choices. Through these reflections, we honor the sacred story of redemption that continues to unfold—within us, around us, and through the Divine presence that is always near.

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