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Parshat Vayelech: On Hiding and Seeking Shabbat Shuva

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Here we stand, on *Shabbat Shuva*, poised between the heights of Rosh Hashanah and the depths of Yom Kippur. We have come through Elul, a month characterized by intensity and access to the divine. "*Hamelech Ba'sadeh*," the Baal HaTanya writes. "The king is in the field" during this time, open to all who approach. We have celebrated Rosh Hashanah, a holiday marked by divine immanence and beneficence. Over and over again we declared our trust in a God who is forgiving. "*Einenu lecha teluyot*," we said. "We look toward and depend on You, God." We believe that you will answer our prayers. We believe that You are gentle and kind and concerned.

All believe that He is good to all...and guides every generation with His kindness. All believe that He preserves kindness...that His hand is open...that He is hard to anger...[and] easy to appease. (Machzor Rosh Hashanah)

וכל מאמינים שהוא טוב לכל...הנוהג בחסדו כל דור. וכל מאמינים שהוא נוצר חסד...שהוא פתוחה ידו...שהוא קשה לכעוס...שהוא רך לרצות...(מחזור ראש השנה)

We affirm that God is so very present and so very responsive on these days.

All believe that He responds to prayer, that He opens the gates to those who knock in repentance. (*Ibid.*)

וכל מאמינים שהוא עונה לחש, הפותח שער לדופקי בתשובה.

But when we exit the bubble of Rosh Hashanah, we encounter *Parshat Vayelech* this *Shabbat*, and all of the clarity, hope, and intimacy we cultivated seem to get crushed with ugly curses.

16 And the Lord said to Moses: Behold, you are [about to] lay with your forefathers, and this nation will rise up and stray after the deities of the nations of the land, into which they are coming. And they will forsake Me and violate My covenant which I made with them. 17 And My fury will rage against them on that day, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them, and they will be consumed, and many evils and troubles will befall them, and they will say on that day, "Is it not because our God is no longer among us, that these evils have befallen us?" 18 And I will hide My face on that day, because of all the evil they have committed, when they turned to other deities. 19 And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children

טז ויאמר ה' אל-משה הנך שכב עם-אבותיך וקם העם הזה וזנה | אחרי אלהי זכר-הארץ אשר הוא בא-שמה בקרב ויעזבני והפר את-בריתי אשר כרתי אתו: יז וחרה אפי בו ביום-ההוא ועזבתים והסתרתני פני מהם והיה לאכל ומצאהו רעות רבות וצרות ואמר ביום ההוא הלא על כן-אין אלהי בקרבי מצאוני הרעות האלה: יח ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא על כל-הרעה אשר עשה כי פנה אל-אלהים אחרים: יט ועתה כתבו לכם את-השירה הזאת ולמדנה את-בני-ישראל שימה בפיהם למען תהיה-לי השירה הזאת ליעד בבני ישראל:

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of Israel. Place it into their mouths, in order that this song will be for Me as a witness for the children of Israel.

In the midst of an experience of sweet divine presence, we are confronted with the bitterness of divine absence, the hiding of God's face, or *hester panim*.

Moshe is on the brink of death here, yet this is a message that is urgent enough, important enough, and enduring enough that it not only needs to be shared now, but must "bear witness" to the people of Israel over time. And note that it is not only to be preserved. It is to be sung. The doctrine of *hester panim*, of God's seeming abandonment of the Jewish people, is to be lodged in the hearts and minds of people through poetry and perhaps melody. How can we understand how a teaching so disturbing could become a song sung in perpetuity (see Deut. 31: 19, 21, 22, 30)?

There is abundant commentary on the meaning of *hester panim* and its limits offered throughout the ages. Challenged by the very possibility of divine absence, the medievals weighed in, among others. God acts *as if* God is not there, says Rashi (on 31:17). God, who always listens, punishes people by not responding to their prayers, says Ibn Ezra (on 31:18). God, who is always present, argues Seforno (on 31:18), sometimes chooses not to save. All of these preserve God's omnipresence and omnipotence, but fail to make sense of the urgency, persistence, and apparent elevation of the doctrine of *hester panim*. The *Toldot Yaacov Yosef*, R. Yaacov Yosef of Polnoye (d. 1783), offers one alternative view that does.

Citing his teacher, the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), he writes:

I heard from my teacher of blessed memory [the Baal Shem Tov] that if a person knows that the Holy Blessed One is hiding, there is no hiddenness because "all workers of violence will scatter" [Psalms 92:10]. And the verse which states "I will surely hide [*haster astir*] my face from them" (Deut. 3:18) means that [God will] hide from them such that they will not know that God is there in the hiding. (*Toldot Yaacov Yosef*, Genesis 1)

דשמעתי ממורי זלה"ה שאם ידע האדם
 שהקב"ה מסתתר שם אין זה הסתרה כי
 נתפרדו כל פועלי און. וז"ש ואנוכי הסתר
 אסתיר פני מהם (דברים לא) ר"ל
 שיתיר מהם שלא ידעו שהקב"ה שם
 בהסתרה זו וכו' ודפח"ח. (תולדות יעקב
 יוסף, בראשית א)

The double language of *hester panim*—"anochi hastir astir"—reflects a double hiding. Not only does God conceal Godself from the life of an individual, but in so doing, that individual ceases to experience God in the world. A God who is distant—existent but imperceptible—thus becomes perceived as a God who is not existent. That is the tragic meaning of the question anticipated by the verse in Deuteronomy: "Is it not because our God is no longer among us, that these evils have befallen us?" (Deut. 31:17) People who suffer God's hiddenness might be doomed to give up on God altogether.

But, there is more. R. Yaacov Yosef continues to quote his teacher:

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I similarly heard from him that the first letters [lit. abbreviations] in the verse: "**The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will share the booty...**" (Exodus 15:9) are 5 *alephs* to indicate that there the master [*aluph*] of the world is hidden. (*Ibid.*)

וכיוצא בזה שמעתי ממנו כי ר"ת [ראשי תיבות] אמר אויב וגו' ["אמר אויב ארדף אשיג אחלק שלל"] (שמות טו) ר"ת הם ה' אלפין ששם אלופו של עולם מסתתר...

In the midst of a text from Song of the Sea that describes the pursuit of the Israelites by the Egyptians, the Baal Shem Tov sees the hand of God. The five letter *alephs* that begin this list of treacherous words, each one of them an intent on the part of the enemy to inflict harm, suggest that there hides "*alupho shel olam*," the singular master, the Aleph, of the world. Precisely in that place of dark threat, as the Israelites were running for their lives, when they could not detect the presence of God, there, says the Besht, God was in fact hiding. If they could come to know that—that God hides but *does not* disappear—then they could cross the Red Sea, then they could be liberated from that double pain of physical suffering and spiritual neglect.

The challenge to the Israelites then is the challenge to us now. R. Yaacov Yosef extends his rebbe's teaching thus:

When a person understands this principle, that there is no mask that divides between a person and her God...when a person recognizes that the Holy Blessed One is in hiding, hiddenness falls away. (*Ibid.*)

ואחר שידע אדם כלל זה שאין שום מסך מבדיל בינו לבין אלהיו...אחר שידע אדם שהקב"ה מסתתר שם אין זה הסתרה וכנ"ל.

The curse of *hester panim* in which a hiding God becomes totally obscured is a phenomenon that threatens always. Indeed, for the *Toldot Yaacov Yosef*, it is the very meaning of the "*tohu va'vohu*," the primordial chaos, into which the created universe was born. The capacity of human beings to simply miss the divine is embedded in the architecture of the world itself. So we must keep that vulnerability in view. We must have it as an "*ed*," a witness, to remind us of our tragic blindspot. However, there is redemption to be had. Armed with the awareness that there is a God in hiding, we just might become seekers. Recognizing in the darkness even a scintilla of divinity, one small *aleph*, we just might see "*alupho shel olam*." And that is when *hester panim* can become a "*shir*." That is when we might begin to sing.

Why must we confront divine hiddenness just on the other side of such divine closeness? Why must we read *Vayelech* against the backdrop of Rosh Hashanah (some years just before, some years just after)? Because the nearness of God stipulated by our tradition during this season must be counterbalanced by the very real experience of divine distance. Because we must make space in the midst of our affirmations about God for doubts about God. Because we must meet clarity with unclarity, light with darkness, yearning with *ye'ush*, desperation. We must learn how to say, particularly during these times, "שם אלופו של עולם מסתתר"—there, in the mess of life as much as the hallowed halls of the synagogue, there too the master of the world hides.





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