

## Nitzavim-Vayelevh: Veiling the Divine Rabbanit Myriam Ackermann-Sommer Class of '23

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What if the veiling of God's face (*hester panim*) was not only a punishment, but also an unsuspected opportunity? What if the “eclipse of the divine” allowed us to set off in search of the divine?

In *parshat Vayelevh*, God bluntly announces that the people will turn away from Him, and that, in return, He will veil His face:

Then My anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and hide My countenance (*v'histarti panai*) from them. They shall be ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day, “Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us.” Yet I will keep My countenance hidden (*hester astir panai*) on that day, because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods (Devarim 31:17-18).

On close examination, this appears to be a two-stage process. First, the people forget the Covenant, and God's anger is kindled against them and he hides His countenance from them (Devarim 31:17). Then, instead of returning to God in a posture of contrition, the people cry out: “Surely it is because our God is not in our midst.” The Sforno affirms that the Bnei Yisrael will then say to themselves: “It is no longer worth doing *teshuva* (repentance). It is too late!” There will then be a second withdrawal of God's presence (Devarim 31:18), one that we are probably still coping with.

Indeed, Jewish history clearly indicates times of *hester panim*, such as those we have been living through since October 7th. But I believe there is something more to this phenomenon, more than just a succession of cataclysms that seem to testify to the arbitrariness of history. After all, to understand *hester panim* as pure punishment is to accuse all the Jewish victims of cruelty over the centuries of some kind of transgression. There would then be something unbearable in the theological violence of this passage. Perhaps we ought to understand *hester panim* differently.

A departure from the literalness of *hester panim* comes to us from the Bechor Shor's reading of the passage. This 12th-century Tosafist asserts that, if God turns away a second time, it is not to punish us for claiming that we've been abandoned, but because God is suffering too much. God, no longer able to bear witness to His people's torments, eases His own pain by withdrawing. God protects Himself from the horrors befalling His beloved by looking away.

Similarly, the Ramban, in the 13th century, states that when the people say to themselves, in Devarim 31:17, “Surely it is because our God is not in our midst.” it does not imply moral hardening. Rather, it is the beginning of *teshuva*, repentance. But if that is so, why doesn't God reveal His face again?

Here is my hypothesis: *Hester panim*, at least in its second iteration, is a hidden blessing. It is not a punishment, but an opportunity to exercise our free will to the fullest.

The Daat Zekenim, a Tosafic commentary written between the 12th and 13th centuries, links the *hester panim* to another (H)ester—that of the Purim story, in which God's name is not mentioned once. And yet, isn't the divine presence perceptible in the story of Esther? For whom did Esther fast, if not for God? How were we miraculously saved, if not through God's hidden hand? *Hester panim*, as manifested through Esther, is thus an opportunity to seek Him, like a second *tsimtsum*, the kabbalistic term that designates the divine withdrawal that enabled the creation of the universe and hence of mankind. *Tsimtsum* and *hester panim* open up space for our own actions and decisions—good or bad. God gives us enough room in the world for us to wonder: “Where is God?” and turn to Him.

A Gemara quoted in the commentary of Daat Zekenim notes that we deduce from this verse that “(the story of) Esther is from the Torah,” obviously playing on the Esther/*haster astir* pun. Why do we need to find an allusion to Purim in the book of Devarim? Simply because the world of Purim is our world, a world without obvious divine manifestations, where God's strong hand and outstretched arm are nowhere to be found. This commentary highlights the link of continuity between the quasi-divine immanence at work in the Torah and the rest of the Tanakh, but also between the God of the Torah and the God who is present in our daily lives. These are two completely different realities. The Daat Zekenim teaches us that the Torah anticipated that we could live in a world radically foreign from the one it describes. It reminds us that we live in a world where God is veiled, but not in a world without God. A distant God is not an absent God. An absent God would stop caring for His creations—the first understanding of *haster astir* being that He simply gave up on us. We went too far—we reached the point of no return. Such an interpretation would deeply miss the point. In fact, starting to notice that we no longer feel God's presence may precisely be what gives us the occasion to reconnect on a deeper level.

The 20th century scholar Rav Soloveitchik provides us with a fascinating insight, in a lecture that he gave in 1973. He begins by comparing two forms of leadership, two ways of guiding the people: that of Moshe and that of Esther and Mordechai. In Moshe's leadership, every decision is fully informed and guided by the divine word. In contrast, Mordechai and Esther are groping their way forward, unsure whether what they are doing will succeed; Esther is terrified of taking action. But they *do* take action. The success of their strategies is linked to a fine analysis of history and its

stakes, not to direct divine revelation. And yet God's will is expressed through them, as the Rav points out, quoting the Rashi on Esther 5:1. Esther could only have devised wiles of such finesse under God's guidance, but guided from afar. The same goes for Mordechai. But it is up to us to discern the divine hand when God's face does not reveal itself. "God," writes the Rav, "has been acting in this way since the withdrawal of *hester panim*."

Just as the withdrawal of an omnipresent God (*tsimtsum*) is necessary for the world to emerge and for us to take our place in it, *hester panim* marks a second withdrawal that allows the full expression of our free will. That is how I understand the midrashic tradition that affirms that it was on Purim that we truly accepted the Torah. Not at Mount Sinai, when God intervened directly in history, but in exile in a world of divine eclipse; it was there that we were able to fully accept the Law as true.

To conclude, this is my rereading of the phrase *haster astir*: while the first veiling indeed seems to be a punishment for our transgressions, the second eclipse responds to the people's sincere repentance, giving us a world where withdrawal is not a curse but an opportunity to seek God. This is undoubtedly the *teshuvah gemura* alluded to by the Ramban, which alone can put an end to divine veiling. This is what we must aspire to as the holidays approach. May we all be blessed with a *shana tova*.

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