



A Topography of Distance

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Parashat Ha'azinu 5787

“I will hide My face from them” (Deuteronomy 32:20)—so declares the Holy Blessed One in Parashat Ha'azinu. This is one of the most painful and jarring statements in the Bible. It describes a deep rift in the relationship between God and Israel: a dynamic of hiding, withdrawal, and a sealed face. This is called in Jewish theology and tradition *hester panim*, the hiding of God's face.

God's hiding was already introduced in Parashat VaYeilekh, the result of God's disappointment in our abandonment of the covenant.¹ But Parashat Ha'azinu adds a complex and intriguing layer: “I will hide My face from them; **I will see what their end shall be.**” Before us, then, are two different, seemingly contradictory psychological movements: concealment and sight, withdrawal and observation, hiding and contemplation. How should the connection between hiding and seeing be understood? How can One Who hides their face simultaneously continue to see?

¹ See Deuteronomy 31:17-18.



In the early midrashic collection Sifrei Devarim, two fundamental conceptions are presented:

ספרי דברים פסקא שכ

”וַיֹּאמֶר אֱסֻתִּירָה פָּנַי מֵהֶם” – אָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: הֲרִינִי מִסֵּלֶק שְׂכִינָתִי מִבֵּינֵיהֶם, ”אֲרָאָה מָה אַחֲרֵיהֶם” וְאֵדַע מָה סוּפָם.
דָּבָר אַחֵר: הֲרִינִי מוֹסְרָם בְּיַד אַרְבַּע מַלְכוּתוֹת שְׂיָהוּי מִשְׁעַבְדִּים אוֹתָם.

Sifrei Devarim #320

“I will hide My face from them”—The Holy Blessed One said, “Behold, I am removing My Divine Presence from among them; ‘I will see what their end shall be,’ and I will know what their final end is.”

Another explanation: “Behold, I am handing them over into the power of four kingdoms that will subjugate them.”

According to the first explanation, the hiding expresses withdrawal and removal of presence. God, as it were, watches events from the side, as an uninvolved observer. Hiding of the face means standing from afar, seeing from a distance. According to the second explanation, hiding means abandonment—not just distance. In this explanation the distance has negative implications. The distance is a risk, it brings a reality of vulnerability, and the gap creates a void into which foreign, subjugating forces enter.²

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² For other diverse explanations, compare R. Saadiah Gaon, the Ramban, and R. Ovadiah Seforno in their comments to this verse.



The Talmud offers an emotional-psychological lens, aligning the two contradictory modes, that of seeing and that of hiding. In this wonderful and touching description, God is not portrayed as a distant figure watching from the side, but as a figure with deep emotional involvement, responding with pain and vulnerability to what occurs:

תלמוד בבלי חגיגה ה:

אמר רב שמואל בר אינאי משמיה דרב: מקום יש לו להקדוש ברוך הוא ומסתרים שמו.

Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 5b

R. Shmuel bar Inya said in the name of Rav: The Holy Blessed One has a place, and its name is *Mistarim* ("Mystery/Secret Place").

According to this tradition, there exists a divine space named "*Mistarim*." And what does the Holy Blessed One do in this mysterious place? The Talmud relies on the text in Jeremiah: "But if you will not hear it, my soul shall weep in *Mistarim* for your pride" (Jeremiah 13:17). There, in the mysterious place, God weeps.

When the Holy Blessed One enters *Mistarim*, God does not disappear or perhaps even turn God's back. The divine weeping turns the hiding from a space of abandonment and nothing more into an activity that also has an emotional dimension. The space of hiding is no longer only distant, the kind that might generate dangerous vulnerability, but rather becomes an almost intimate space in which deep pain is exposed and revealed, pain that stems from a connection or a desire for a connection. The "I will hide" is no longer just an expression of distance, but another painful and sensitive form of connection and the aspiration for connection.



The talmudic *midrash* gives us an opportunity to see the One Who hides, the One Whose face is hidden, the Holy Blessed One in *hester panim*.

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These midrashic readings in the Sifrei Devarim and Hagigah reflect a threefold distance created as a result of hiding of the face, *hester panim*: simple distance; distance that creates a void into which various dangers can enter; and the withdrawal of the Holy Blessed One to the side, to a “Secret Place” (*Mistarim*), where God weeps over the distance, reflecting that hiding of the face is actually an experience of deep solitude.

These diverse interpretations of *hester panim* map the complex topography of human and divine relationships in moments experienced and perceived as profound distance and abandonment. They describe possible bonds—not severed, but strained. *Hester panim*, hiding of the face, forces us to confront the vulnerability of our connection.

We who were created in the image of God are invited and required to walk in God’s ways. Thus, this exploration invites us to reflect not only on our relationship with the Divine, but on our relationships in general: when we are caught in a dynamic of *hester panim*, what we do which creates disconnection, and allows dangers to enter and inflict harm, or engenders a profound experience of distance in the face of which all that remains is to weep. It also invites us to consider steps toward repair—where our relationships with God and with our fellow human beings are characterized by closeness, protection, and shared openness. May these fill our coming year.

