



Does God Sleep?

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From a theological perspective, the most striking feature of the Book of Esther is God's absence. God's name does not appear anywhere in the *megillah*, which—at least on the level of *peshat* (the simple, contextual meaning)—presents an entirely human story.

I would like to focus on a surprising idea that appears in the Rabbinic tradition in this context: the idea of God's sleep. I do not mean “sleep” here in a physiological sense. The question before us is whether “sleep” is an appropriate metaphor for the degree of God's involvement in the world and God's providence over God's people. Are there moments of catastrophe that unfold not as part of a hidden divine plan, but simply because God is not watching? Is God absent from the *megillah* because God is “asleep”?

The root of this discussion lies in the *megillah*'s reference to insomnia. At the beginning of chapter 6, the narrative pauses to describe the king's sleepless night:

בַּלַּיְלָהָ הַהוּא נִדְּדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ

On that night, the sleep of the king was disturbed.



The Talmud comments on this verse:

תלמוד בבלי מגילה טו:

אמר רבי תנחום: נדדה שנת מלכו של עולם...

רבא אמר: שנת המלך אחשוורוש ממש.

Talmud Bavli Megillah 15b

R. Tanhūm said: The sleep of the King of the World was disturbed....¹

Rava said: It was literally the sleep of King Ahashverosh.

R. Tanhūm is fully aware of the absence of explicit divine presence in the plain sense of the *megillah*, and he employs *midrash* to reinsert God into the story. He does so by noting that the text refers not to Ahashverosh by name, but simply to “the king”—read as, “the King.” In his midrashic reading, there is a moment in the story when God can no longer sleep.

The king’s insomnia marks the turning point of the *megillah*. After Haman issues his decrees and the Jews mourn, Esther courageously steps forward and attempts to intervene, but her chances of success appear slim. Then, after Esther’s first banquet with Haman and Ahashverosh, the king’s sleep is disturbed. From that moment on, the dynamic shifts dramatically: Ahashverosh learns of Mordechai’s role in saving his life and is filled with gratitude; he simultaneously becomes aware of Haman’s true ambitions—fantasizing about royal garments and honors—and commands him to parade Mordechai through the city. Haman is humiliated, his supporters foresee his downfall, and the ground is prepared for the final act of salvation by Esther.

¹ I omitted a third opinion that is not my topic here.



R. Tanhūm's position, then, seems to be that God "slept" during the first half of the *megillah*. Divine providence was absent, allowing Haman to advance his plot. Then, midway through the story, God woke up. The return of divine supervision drives the process of redemption.

Rava responds: "It was literally the sleep of King Ahashverosh." What is Rava insisting on? Surely he understands that R. Tanhūm is offering a midrashic reading. I think Rava rejects the theological price R. Tanhūm is willing to pay in order to insert God into the story. God does not sleep, not even metaphorically. Therefore he neither awakens nor suffers from insomnia. Rava refuses to concede that God was absent, even temporarily, during the first half of the narrative. Against R. Tanhūm, Rava aligns himself with Psalm 121:4:

הִנֵּה לֹא יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.

God was always pulling the strings. Both during salvation, but also in the difficult moments that proceed it—the whole story is part of the divine plan. An extreme version of this position might suggest that even when tragedy hits and salvation does not come, it is not because God is absent but rather God is responsible for the tragedy as well.²

We are left, then, with two positions regarding God's sleep on Purim: one that claims God slept and then awoke in the middle of the story, and another that vehemently rejects the very notion of divine inactivity ("sleep").

² As a teacher of mine once said, provocatively: "What kind of question is, 'Where was God during the Holocaust?' Look how precisely the trains ran, how efficiently the gas chambers operated! God was the captain of the other team."



The Kabbalist R. Isaac Luria (the Ari) was certainly familiar with the talmudic *midrash*, but he deploys the idea of divine sleep on Purim in a far more radical way. He follows neither R. Tanhūm nor Rava, but suggests that in fact God was never awake at all for the entire episode.

The Ari returns to the creation of the human being. According to a *midrash*,³ man and woman were initially created as a single being with two faces, attached back to back. For the woman to emerge as an independent entity capable of standing face to face with the man, a process of separation was required.⁴ That separation could occur only when the human fell into a deep sleep, as Genesis (2:21) states: “The Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the human, and he slept.” Only through this sleep could the woman cease to be an appendage and emerge as a fully independent self, capable of authentic relationship.

The Ari⁵ explains that the same dynamic applies to the relationship between God and Israel.⁶ During exile, the relationship is “אחור באחור - back-to-back”: God provides protection and sustenance, but the bond is one of dependency rather than encounter. Redemption, by contrast, means returning to a “פנים בפנים - face to face” relationship marked by reciprocity and love. But for such a meeting to occur, God must first “sleep,” withdrawing active providence, and thus allowing God’s people to be “cut free” so that they could turn and face their Creator. These transitional moments are extremely vulnerable. There is no one watching. God is truly asleep.

According to the Ari, the story of Purim unfolds precisely in such a moment:

³ Bereishit Rabbah 8:1.

⁴ See Zohar I:35a.

⁵ Sha’ar ha-Kavanot, Discourses for the Festival of Purim, Discourse 1.

⁶ I have simplified the Ari’s position and avoided using Kabbalistic terms. So while my explanation captures the core of Ari’s idea, it should be noted that in his approach these interactions take place within Divinity itself and not just between God and Israel. For some background, see Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* (1980); and Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941).



ול להיות כי ענין מרדכי ואסתר היה בסוף השבעים שנה של גלות בבל... התחיל ענין התיקון... וענין
התחלה זו היא ענין הדורמיטא... וזה סוד הצרה העצומה שהיתה אז לישראל... והמן הרשע... ידע
בחכמתו ענין מיעוט השגחתו ית' על ישראל בימים ההם.

Because the events of Mordekhai and Esther occur at the end of the seventy years of
Babylonian exile... the process of repair had already begun... the beginning took the form
of divine sleep... that explains the immense danger Israel faced at that time.... Wicked
Haman recognized the diminished divine supervision in these days.

So the trouble starts when God is sleeping. But in the Ari's system God cannot wake up too
early—it would halt the redemptive process and return the relationship to its earlier,
back-to-back state.⁷ As the Ari continues:

ול להיות כי הדורמיטא ההיא היא לטובתן של ישראל... כדי שיחזרו פנים בפנים ויגאלו ישראל ויבנה בית
המקדש.

For this divine sleep is for the sake of Israel... so they may return face to face and be
redeemed and build the Temple.

Divine sleep as a complete absence of providence is painful and frightening, but it is also an
invitation to human responsibility.⁸ For the Ari, salvation in the *megillah* comes through
Esther, who must dig deep within herself to discover her identity and latent strength. There is
no point in searching for God in the story; the entire point is that God is not there. Rather, God
is asleep, leaving us to act on our own.

⁷ To further understand this point, imagine parents that realize they have to “let go” of their children in order for
them to become adults. It is clear that If they keep lurking around rushing to the child's aid every time they get
into trouble, the initial goal will not be achieved. The parents must remove themselves entirely from the
situation, despite the clear risk of the children getting hurt.

⁸ This Kabbalistic idea is resonant with Rav Yitz Greenberg's thought; see Irving Greenberg, *The Triumph of Life: A
Narrative Theology of Judaism* (2024).



According to the *megillah*, what we celebrate on Purim is “*ve-nahafokh hu*”—a complete reversal: a reality saturated with fear and danger that suddenly turns into one of joy and relief. But what lies at the heart of this reversal? What is the transformation we long for this Purim? And what kind of spiritual effort is required of us in order to bring that transformation about?

According to Rava’s position, the desired reversal is a shift in human perspective. It is the human being who awakens and discovers that divine providence never truly departed. According to R. Tanhum, by contrast, the reversal takes place within divinity itself. We celebrate the fact that even when God leaves us, God ultimately returns and draws us back into a divine embrace. A widespread Ashkenazic custom of chanting the verse “On that night the king’s sleep was disturbed” in the melody used for proclaiming God’s kingship on the High Holidays reflects an acceptance of R. Tanhum’s approach. There is something deeply tempting about waking God in the middle of the *megillah*.

Personally, however, I find myself identifying with the path of the Ari. (To the displeasure of the congregants in the synagogue where I read the *megillah*, I therefore read this verse in the regular tune.) In the end, God’s name truly does not appear in the *megillah*. No one will bring about the Purim reversal on our behalf.

God’s will—at the moment just before falling asleep—is that we take responsibility for our lives and confront the challenges the world places before us. This will is a remarkable and deeply moving testimony to the trust God places in us.

I bless us all that on the coming Purim we may be worthy of that trust; that like Esther and Mordekhai, we may find within ourselves the strengths God has planted within us; and then—after we have redeemed reality ourselves—we may merit once again to meet God face to face.

