



**Elul Half Hour: To speak about God in a time of pandemic**  
**Hester Panim**

Rabbi Hannah Kingston, Saturday 5 September

Rebbe Barukh's grandson, Yechiel, came running into his study, in tears.  
"Yechiel, Yechiel, why are you crying?" asked his grandfather.  
His sobbing grandson explained, "I was playing hide and seek with my friend, but my hiding place was so good he stopped looking for me and left me alone."  
Rebbe Barukh caressed Yechiel's face, and with tears welling up in his eyes, he whispered softly, "God too Yechiel, God too is weeping. For, God too has been hidden, wanting us to seek him, but we have tired of the game and have given up looking."  
  
*Chasidic Tale adapted from Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim I*

**Deuteronomy 31:17**

וְחָרָה אַפִּי בּוֹ בַיּוֹם-הַהוּא וְעִזְבוֹתַיִם וְהִסְתַּרְתִּי פָנַי מֵהֶם, וְהָיָה לְאָכֵל, וּמִצָּאָהוּ רַעוֹת רַבּוֹת,  
וְצָרוֹת; וְאָמַר, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, הֲלֹא עַל כִּי-אֵין אֱלֹהֵי בְקִרְבִּי, מִצָּאוֹנֵי הָרָעוֹת הָאֵלֶּה

Then my anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and hide My face 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."

**Rashi on Deuteronomy 31:17**

11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> Century French Rabbi and commentator

והסתרת פני. כמו שאיני רואה בצרתם

and I will abandon them and hide My face from them, as though I do not see their distress.

**Chizkuni on Deuteronomy 31:17**

13<sup>th</sup> Century French commentator, based largely on Rashi

והסתרת פני מהם זו היא דרך חבה כאדם שחטא לו בנו ואומר להלקותו שלא בפניו מתוך שאוהבו

and I will abandon them and hide My face from them This is evidence of God's fondness of the Jewish people, God is acting like a parent who while forced to discipline their child cannot bring themselves to watch the pain inflicted upon them.

**Or HaChaim on Deuteronomy 31:17**

18<sup>th</sup> Century Moroccan kabbalist, commentator and Talmud scholar

ועזבתים וגו' והסתרת פני וגו'. הכוונה כי אם יתן ה' דעתו לדעת הצרות אשר יבואו עליהם, יהמו רחמיו ויסלק חרון אפו, לזה הוא מודיע כי יסתיר פניו, ובזה ימצאוהו צרות רבות

and I will abandon them and hide My face from them, etc. The meaning is that if God were to dwell on the troubles which will befall God's people, God's mercy would be stirred and God's anger would be banished.

This is why God informs the people in advance that if they were to turn to idols, God would turn away from them so as not to be tempted to show them compassion.

## bTalmud Chagigah 5b

(דברים לא, יז) וחרה אפי בו ביום ההוא ועזבתים והסתרת פני מהם אמר רב ברדלא בר טביומי אמר רב כל שאינו בהסתר פנים אינו מהם כל שאינו בוהיה לאכול אינו מהם

**Then my anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them** (Deuteronomy 31:17).

Rav Bardela bar Tavyumei said that Rav said: Anyone who is not subject to the hiding of the face [ whose prayers are invariably answered], is not from them.

Similarly, anyone who is not subject to: **They shall be ready prey** is not from them.

From the Deuteronomic point of view – with national transgression and its consequences already having happened – the passages serve to explain divine inaction. They imply that God could have saved the Israelites but chose not to do so, for when Israel breached the covenant, God was released from any obligations as Israel’s guardian and sovereign...

While medieval Jewish thought accepted these premises, modern post-Auschwitz thinkers have been unable to follow. They no longer believed in a God who could have saved Jews from the gas chambers but chose to look away instead. The *Shoah* could not be understood as the monstrous result of putative sins that Israel had committed. There remained only one alternative short of either total disbelief or a defiant “Yet will I believe” – and that was to give up the idea of an omnipotent God. Rather, one needed to see God as limited by human freedom. God is “hidden” as long as the world chooses to be alienated from the Divine; humankind – to whom God gave the choice to act for good or for evil – shuts the divine light out, or lets it shine in. It is we who hide God’s face. The Eternal took a chance on us when creating us free and – like us – must bear the consequences of human action. To phrase this in Deuteronomic terms: “I hide My face because I must.”

*Plaut ed. Torah: A modern commentary*

God is absent from our lives because we have stopped looking. Sometimes we have stopped looking because the people who speak on His behalf are small-souled, bigoted, and crass, sometimes because their human flaw and failings are too evident (and perhaps remind us of our own.) Sometimes we have stopped looking for God because (like people who keep postponing the visit to the doctor or dentist) we think we know what He will say to us and we don’t want to hear it. And sometimes we don’t look for God because it never occurs to us that we need Him.

*Harold Kushner, Who Needs God*

In an interview with the JC, Elie Wiesel spoke about the moment they put God on trial at Auschwitz: "Why should they know what happened? I was the only one there. It happened at night; there were just three people.

At the end of the trial, they used the word *chayav*, rather than ‘guilty’. It means ‘He owes us something’.

Then we went to pray."

<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/wiesel-yes-we-really-did-put-god-on-trial-1.5056>