



Elul Half Hours 5780 To Speak about God in a time of Pandemic

29 August 2020 / 9-10 Elul 5780
Shekhinah, Rabbi Josh Levy

Some background:

From the Hebrew root **שכן** meaning to dwell / settle down

Refers to God as immanent / present among us.

As in:

Exodus 25:8

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכָם :

And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

which, in Targum Onkelos (early 2nd Century Aramaic translation) becomes

וַיַּעֲבִדוּן קֳדָמִי מִקְדָּשָׁא וְאֲשָׁרִי שְׁכִינְתִּי בִינְיָהוּן :

And let them make before Me a sanctuary, and I will cause my Shekhinah to dwell among them.

Deuteronomy 12:5

כִּי אִם-אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִכָּל-שְׁבֵטֵיכֶם לְשׂוֹם אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שָׁם לְשַׁכְּנוֹ תִדְרְשׁוּ וּבָאתָ שָׁמָּה :

To the site that the Eternal your God shall choose among all your tribes to put the Divine Name there, God's habitation, shall you seek, and shall you come there.

In Targum Onkelos

אֲלֵהֲזָן לְאַתְרָא דִּי יִתְרַעֲי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִכָּל שְׁבֵטֵינוּ לְאַשְׁרָאָה שְׁכִינְתָּהּ תִּמְנָן לְבֵית שְׁכִינְתָּהּ תִּתְבַּעֲוֹן וְתִיתוֹן לְתִמְנָן :

To the site that the Eternal your God shall choose among all your tribes to cause the Shekhinah to dwell there, the House of the Shekhinah, shall you seek, and shall you come there.

How does Targum Onkelos use the idea of Shekhinah?
What theological problem is the Targum attempting to resolve? Is this a problem for us?

What is special about this idea 1

Where does responsibility for divine presence lie?

Bereshit Rabbah 19:7

on Genesis 3:8 THEY HEARD THE SOUND OF THE ETERNAL GOD MOVING ABOUT (MIT'HALECH) IN THE GARDEN

א"ר אבא בר כהנא מהלך אין כתיב כאן אלא מתהלך מקפץ ועולה עיקר שכינה בתחתונים היתה כיון שחטא אדם הראשון נסתלקה שכינה לרקיע הראשון חטא קין נסתלקה לרקיע השני דור אנוש לג' דור המבול לד' דור הפלגה לה' סדומיים לו' ומצרים בימי אברהם לד' וכנגדן עמדו ז' צדיקים ואלו הן אברהם יצחק ויעקב לוי קהת עמרם משה עמד והורידה לו' עמד יצחק והורידה מן ו' לה' עמד יעקב והורידה מן הה' לד' עמד לוי והורידה מן הד' לג' עמד קהת והורידה מן הג' לב' עמד עמרם והורידה מן הב' לא' עמד משה והורידה מלמעלה למטה
אר"י כתיב צדיקים יירשו ארץ וגו' ורשעים מה יעשו פורחים באויר אלא הרשעים לא השכינו שכינה בארץ :

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: It is not written *m'halech* [walking] but *mit'halech* [moving to and fro] which means that it skipped and ascended.

The real home of the Shekhinah was in the lower sphere.

When Adam sinned it departed to the first firmament; when Cain sinned, it ascended to the second firmament; when the generation of Enosh sinned, it ascended to the third; when the generation of the Flood sinned, to the fourth; with the generation of the separation [of tongues], to the fifth; with Sodom, to the sixth; with the Egyptians in the days of Abraham, to the seventh.

And against these there arose seven *tzadikim*: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohat, Amram, and Moses.

Abraham arose and descended from the seventh to the sixth; Isaac arose and it descended from the sixth to the fifth; Jacob arose and it descended from the fifth to the fourth; Levi arose and it descended from the fourth to the third; Kohat arose and it descended from the third to the second; Amram arose and it descended from the second to the first; Moses arose and it descended from above to below.

Rabbi Yitzchak said: It is written THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL INHERIT THE LAND AND DWELL (VAYISHK'NU) IN IT FOREVER (Psalm 37:29). So what do the wicked do? Do they hover in the air? Rather it means that the wicked do not permit the Shekhinah to dwell on earth.

What does Shekhinah mean in this midrash?

How has the idea of Shekhinah evolved from its use in the Targum?

How does the midrash use the idea of Shekhinah to speak about the human-divine relationship?

What emotional power does the imagery of this midrash have?

Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 6a

ומנין לעשרה שמתפללין ששכינה עמהם - שנאמר: אלהים נצב בעדת אל
ומנין לשלשה שיושבין בדין ששכינה עמהם - שנאמר: בקרב אלהים ישפוט
ומנין לשנים שיושבין ועוסקין בתורה ששכינה עמהם - שנאמר: אז נדברו יראי ה' איש אל רעהו ויקשב ה'
וגו'...
ומנין שאפילו אחד שיושב ועוסק בתורה ששכינה עמו - שנאמר: בכל המקום אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא
אליך וברכתך.

From where do we know that when ten assemble for prayer, the Shekhinah is among them?

It is stated GOD STANDS IN THE DIVINE CONGREGATION (Psalm 82:1)

From where do we know that when three sit and judge, the Shekhinah is among them?

It is stated IN THE MIDST OF THE JUDGES GOD JUDGES (ibid.)

From where do we know that when two sit and occupy themselves with Torah, the Shekhinah is among them?

It is stated THEN THEY THAT REVERED THE ETERNAL SPOKE ONE WITH ANOTHER; AND THE ETERNAL HEARD AND TOOK NOTICE, AND A BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE WAS WRITTEN AT GOD'S BEHEST FOR THOSE THAT FEARED THE ETERNAL AND THAT CONTEMPLATE GOD'S NAME (Malachi 3:16)

From where do we know that even if one person sits and engages in Torah, the Shekhinah is with them?

It is stated WHEREVER I CAUSE MY NAME TO BE MENTIONED, I WILL COME TO YOU AND BLESS YOU (Exodus 20:21)

According to the Talmud, for what activities does the Shekhinah dwell among us?

What are the implications of this text for our behaviour?

What other activities might we describe as welcoming the Shekhinah?

Do we / how do we experience the Shekhinah among us in our lives?

I do not encounter a transcendent 'other' who commands, who intervenes, who judges.

I have no experience of that God, and good reasons to suggest that such a God is not active in the world, whatever the language of the literary corpus I have inherited and so cherish.

But I do encounter Shekhinah –the possibility of divine presence.

I experience this in my religious life: in good, participative prayer, community togetherness, pastoral care; in the experience of real thought and intellectual challenge that our Judaism promotes; in the experience of grappling with rabbinic texts, with their extraordinary complexity and beauty. I know that something awesome can happen in those moments.

This is not something original. The rabbis stated that the Shekhinah dwells with us when we gather for prayer and for study. Like them, I have experienced a unique sense of awe at these times, not found in the mundane.

The rabbis also knew that we can crowd out the divine presence by our actions and I have experienced that as well..

At those moments, something happens which is not the same as 'mere' joy, 'mere' accomplishment, 'mere' fulfilment. It is more than just the special spark that exists between human beings. Something more, something 'other' is present between us, dwells among us, in our relations at those moments.

And that experience of otherness brings with it obligation: the obligation to create the space for God - through the way that we behave to one another, the way that we approach the world and our religious lives.

Rabbi Josh Levy, June 2013

What is special about this idea 2 Shekhinah is with us wherever we are

Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Shirata

כשירדו למצרים שכינה עמהם שנאמר אנכי ארד עמך מצרימה
עלו עליה שכינה עמהם שנא' ואנכי אעלך וגו'.
ירדו לים שכינה עמהם שנאמר ויסע מלאך האלהים ההולך לפני וגו'
יצאו למדבר שכינה עמהם שנא' וי' הולך לפניהם יומם

When Israel went down to Egypt the Shekhinah went with them, as it is said

I MYSELF WILL GO DOWN WITH YOU TO EGYPT (Genesis 46.4).

When they came up from Egypt the Shekhinah came up with them, as it is said

AND I MYSELF WILL ALSO BRING YOU BACK (ibid.).

When they went into the sea, the Shekhinah was with them, as it is said

THE ANGEL OF GOD, WHO HAD BEEN GOING AHEAD OF THE ISRAELITE ARMY, NOW MOVED AND FOLLOWED BEHIND THEM (Exodus 14.19).

When they went out into the wilderness the Shekhinah was with them, as it is said

THE ETERNAL WENT BEFORE THEM IN A PILLAR OF CLOUD BY DAY, TO GUIDE THEM ALONG THE WAY (Exodus 13.21)

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 29a

תניא, רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר: בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא. שבכל מקום שגלו
- שכינה עמהן. גלו למצרים - שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: הנגלה נגליתי לבית אביך בהיותם במצרים וגו',
גלו לבבל - שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: למענכם שלחתי בבלה.
ואף כשהן עתידין ליגאל שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך, והשיב לא נאמר אלא ושב,
מלמד שהקדוש ברוך הוא שב עמהן מביין הגליות.

It has been taught (in a baraita)

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: Come and see how beloved are Israel in the sight of God. To every place to which they were exiled the Shekhinah went with them.

They were exiled to Egypt and the Shekhinah was with them, as it says, WAS I NOT REVEALED TO THE HOUSE OF YOUR FATHER WHEN THEY WERE IN EGYPT (1 Samuel 2:27).

They were exiled to Babylon, and the Shekhinah was with them, as it says, FOR YOUR SAKE I WAS SENT TO BABYLON (Isaiah 43:14 *ish*).

And when they will be redeemed in the future, the Shekhinah will be with them, as it says, THEN THE ETERNAL YOUR GOD WILL RETURN [WITH] YOUR CAPTIVITY (Deuteronomy 30:3). It does not say here *v'heishiv* [God shall bring back] but *v'shav* [and God shall return]. This teaches us that the Holy One will return with them from the places of exile.

Blessing for travel

ברוך אתה יהוה ששכינתך נוֹסֶעֶת עִם עַמֶּךָ :

Blessed are You, our Living God, whose presence journeys with Your people.

How do these texts use the imagery of Shekhinah?

What are the implications of this for our religious lives (compare it to Exodus 25:8)?

What does it say about our present situation?

What is the emotional power of this imagery?

What is special about this idea 3

Shekhinah suffers with us:

Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5

From a text describing the carrying out of executions

אָמַר רַבִּי מֵאִיר, בְּשָׁעָה שְׂאָדָם מְצֻטָּעַר, שְׂכִינָה מָה הִלְשׁוּן אוֹמְרָת כְּבִיכּוֹל
קִלְנֵי מְרֹאשֵׁי, קִלְנֵי מְזֻרְעֵי.
אִם כֵּן הַמָּקוֹם מְצֻטָּעַר עַל דָּמָם שֶׁל רְשָׁעִים שֶׁנִּשְׁפָּדוּ, קָל וְחֹמֶר עַל דָּמָם שֶׁל צְדִיקִים.

Rabbi Meir said: When a human being is in distress, what does the Shekhinah say (*ki-v'yachol* - if it were possible to say such a thing)? "My head is heavy, My arm is heavy."

If this is so, and HaMakom feels distress over the blood of the wicked that is spilled; how much more so over the blood of the righteous.

What theological idea is being expressed by this text?

What is the emotional power of this imagery?

The word ki-v'yachol is used to express the idea that what comes next can hardly be said, that it is a statement of metaphor or a radical idea. What is radical here?

What is special about this idea 4

We can encounter Shekhinah - as nourishment, protection, inspiration.

Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 17a

מרגלא בפומיה דרב:

לֹא כְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא אֵין בּוֹ לֹא אֲכִילָה וְלֹא שְׂתִיָּה וְלֹא פְרִיָּה וְרִבִּיָּה וְלֹא מִשָּׂא וּמִתֵּן וְלֹא
קְנָאָה וְלֹא שְׂנְאָה וְלֹא תַחְרוּת, אֲלֵא צְדִיקִים יוֹשְׁבֵין וְעִטְרוֹתֵיהֶם בְּרֹאשֵׁיהֶם וְנִהְנִים מִזִּיּוֹ הַשְּׂכִינָה, שְׂנֵאמַר:
וַיַּחֲזוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ.

A common saying of Rav:

The World to Come is not like this world. In the World to Come there is no eating or drinking, or procreation or business, no jealousy or hatred or competition; Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads, and feast on the radiance of the Shekhinah. As it says AND THEY GAZED AT GOD, AND ATE AND DRANK (Exodus 24:11).

Midrash Tehillim 17:14

אני בצדק אחזה פניך

בא וראה כמה גדול כח הצדקה שבשביל פרוטה אחת שנותן לעני זוכה ומקבל פני שכינה.

I SHALL BEHOLD YOUR FACE WITH JUSTICE/TZEDAKAH (Psalm 17:15)

Come and see how great is the power of tzedakah, that because of one *perutah* that someone gives to the poor, one merits to experience the face of the *Shekhinah*.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

לימים נזדווגו שלשתן למקום אחד,

אמרו: קפדנותו של שמאי בקשה לטורדנו מן העולם, ענוותנותו של הלל קרבנו תחת כנפי השכינה.

Some time later, the three met in one place. They said: The impatience of Shammai sought to drive us from the world, the patience of Hillel brought us under the wings of the Shekhinah.

What do these texts suggest that we can do to experience Shekhinah? What might it feel like?

Do we ever merit this in our lives?

How has this imagery radically departed from our first encounters with the idea?