

“THE FACE OF GOD: THOUGHTS ON THE HOLOCAUST”

By DR. NORMAN LAMM
President, Yeshiva University

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YU STUDENTS

YOM HASHOAH

COMMEMORATION

1

In my attempt to formulate a Jewish approach to the Holocaust, it should not be expected that I will venture an answer to the ancient question of צדיק ורע לו ("the righteous whom evil befalls"), the vexing problem of the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the wicked, one that puzzled such Biblical giants as Samuel, David, and Jeremiah.

The problem of theodicy—"justifying" the ways of God to man, offering rational explanations for the ethical and philosophical dilemmas presented by the disjointedness and inappositeness of conduct and circumstance, the quality of one's moral life and his fortune or misfortune—has a long and honorable history. But there is no one theodicy in Judaism. From Job to the Sages of the Talmud, from Maimonides to Luria to the Besht, there is only one constant, and that is the *question* of צדיק ורע לו, the righteous who is afflicted with evil. The number of *answers* varies with the number of interpreters. No one approach has official, authoritative, dogmatic sanction in Judaism, although each has something of value to contribute. And the question remains the Question of Questions for Judaism, as it does for every thinking, believing human being.

How, then, shall we approach the problem? Let us begin by dividing it into two parts: first, the universal problem of suffering, the cry of צדיק ורע לו, why should the innocent suffer, intensified in the Holocaust by its unprecedented magnitude and cruelty. In kind, the Holocaust mystery is a continuation of the ancient question of evil and suffering—more urgent perhaps, but essentially the same.

The second part is not universal-metaphysical but national-theological. The Holocaust is not only a human challenge to God's justice and goodness, but a Jewish challenge to His faithfulness and promise. The absolute novelty of the Holocaust lies in its threat to the continuity of the Jewish people as such. It not only outrages

man's ethical sensibilities, but it throws into disarray most of our notions of the philosophy of Jewish history.

In other words, the novelty, the demonic novelty, of the Holocaust lies not so much in murder of six million Jews as much as in the decimation of one third of the Jewish people and the trauma to the remaining two thirds.

2

In trying to come to grips with the Holocaust and to probe, haltingly but inevitably, for some scrap of understanding of this cataclysm, we are confronted with an immediate dilemma: the very relevance of "meaning" to the Holocaust. Can we hope to find even a shred of meaning in this "black hole" in Jewish history? If we maintain that we can, we are in effect asserting a **צידוק הדין**, a justification for the death, torment, and suffering of one million children and five million adults. We shall come back to this later, but I will say now that the very idea is repugnant to me and bespeaks an insufferable insensitivity. Moreover, if the "meaning" we purport to discover does not measure up to the magnitude of the suffering, then we have not only erred, but we have profaned the memory of the martyrs. However, if we then pursue the other alternative, and declare that the Holocaust had no meaning, we seem to rob their death of any redeeming dimension and, furthermore, appear to deny a great and abiding principle of Judaism, that of **השגחה פרטית**, divine providence over all human individuals.

Apparently, not everyone appreciates that a dilemma even exists. Thus, almost all of those (few) Orthodox thinkers who have ventured into this area at all offer variations of the **מפני חטאינו** thesis (*mipnei hata'einu*, "because of our sins," the initial words of the special Musaf section of the service for the new month and the festivals, declaring that we only *recite* the order of the sacrificial Temple service liturgically, but do not actually *make* the offerings, for the reason that the Temple was destroyed and we were exiled "because of our sins"). They see the Holocaust as punishment for Israel's sins.

The late Satmerer Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Moshe Teitelbaum, is clear and unambiguous. In his two books, **"ויואל משה"** and **"על הגאולה ועל התמורה"**, he decides that the Zionists are responsible for the tragedy of the Six Million. The arrogance of nationalistic self-determination in trying to build a Jewish state caused the great destruction. The fact that so many Zionists were secularists, non-believers, only made matters worse. They violated the injunction to remain passive, refrain from interfering in the divinely preordained plans of

redemption, and to await the miraculous coming of the Messiah. Hence, the Zionists are guilty, and all the Jewish people suffered because of their sins. This theme is interwoven with another, and both recur throughout the Satmerer's writings: the power of Samael, the archdemon, to test and seduce Israel into sin. These cruel tests with which Samael accosts us, often with the help of miracles, are characteristic of our pre-messianic tribulations. Of course, it does not occur to the Satmarer or his followers, in their anti-Zionist demonological interpretation of history, that the reverse might be true: that the Holocaust was the bitter test, and the "miracles" of statehood and military triumph and national survival were and are the reward for our sufferings and anguish.

A less well known figure (Rabbi Emanuel Hartom, writing in the Israeli journal "דעות" a few years ago), takes the opposite view of the Satmarer: The Holocaust is the punishment for our neglect of Eretz Israel. Our failure to participate en masse in the Return to Zion indicated a tragic defection from Judaism, a betrayal of the Promise to Abraham, and hence the unprecedented punishment we call the Shoah. That at least a portion of our people was spared is in itself a tribute to divine compassion for, having chosen to remain in exile, we implied our readiness to assimilate and thus turn our backs on God. One wonders what this particular rabbi would answer to the criticism, levelled at him in a later issue of the same journal, that it certainly is odd that the Holocaust struck first and hardest at those very centers of Jewish life that were most intensively Jewish, pro-Eretz Israel, and anti-assimilationist.

There is a third variation of the *mipnei hata'einu* thesis, this time by an American (Rabbi Avigdor Miller), a *mashgiah* or spiritual supervisor at a Brooklyn yeshivah. Let me quote a few of his precious lines: "Because of the upsurge of the greatest defection from Torah in history, which was expressed in Poland by materialism, virulent anti-nationalism, and Bundism (radical anti-religious socialism), God's plan finally relieved them of all free will and sent Hitler's demons to end the existence of these communities before they deteriorated entirely" (*Rejoice O Youth*, pp. 278-9). One wonders at the statement that Polish Jewry experienced the greatest defection from Torah in history: more than the days of the prophet Elijah? Isaiah? worse than German Jewry? American Jewry?

But let us not quibble about such trivial matters as facts. Is there any validity to the *מפני חטאינו*, the Holocaust-as-punishment explanation, on which the various responses we have mentioned are based?

Of course, there is. The thesis is a corollary of the whole principle of *שכר ועונש*, Reward and Punishment. It is a theme found throughout the Prophets and the Talmud.

And yet—I reject the cavalier invocation of this theme as a way of “explaining” the Holocaust. Indeed, in these special circumstances of such unprecedented butchery and unequalled suffering and unimagineable danger to our survival, recourse to *mipnei hata'einu* is massively irrelevant, impudent, and insensitive.

Why so? First, there are many approaches to suffering, as I indicated at the outset, and sin is not the only one. Indeed, the whole brunt of the Book of Job is to reject the simplistic recourse to *mipnei hata'einu* in any and all circumstances: Job was not guilty of any sin—that is the premise of the whole Book—and yet he suffered. It was the friends of Job, who insisted he must be guilty of some hidden sin, who were rebuked by God. Hence, for us who live in comfort and security years after the event to point an accusing finger at European Jewry—probably one of the greatest and most creative and most beautiful in all Jewish history—and castigate them for shortcomings of one kind or another ostensibly deserving of such horrendous suffering, is an unparalleled instance of criminal arrogance and brutal insensitivity. How dare anyone even suggest that any “sin” committed by any significant faction of European Jewry was worthy of all the pain and anguish and death visited upon them by Hitler’s sadistic butchers? How dare anyone, sitting in the American or British or Israeli Paradise, indict the martyrs who were consumed in the European Hell?

Second, whoever undertakes to expound the thesis of *mipnei hata'einu* for any specific event, in the gory detail we mentioned earlier, risks violating a most heinous sin of his own—that of צידוק הרין, justifying the punishment and travail of the people of Israel. The sages did not take to this too kindly.

According to the Rabbis, Moses himself was punished for offensive statements about his people. Moses told the Israelites: “Listen, ye rebels” (Nu. 20:10). His punishment: “. . . you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them” (*ib.*, v.12). Elijah complained to God that “the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant” (I Kings 19:10). Shortly thereafter, we read of God’s command to appoint a successor, Elisha, in his place. Isaiah, too, used offensive language. In the course of a prophetic revelation, he confessed his feeling of worthlessness by saying: “Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips.” But he erred in adding the significant words: *ובתוך עם טמא שפתים אנכי יושב*, “and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” (Isa. 6:5). Soon afterwards we read of how one of the angels of God “with a glowing coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar,” touched the mouth of the prophet and said: “Lo, this hath touched thy lips and thine iniquity is taken away,” *וחטאתך תכופר*, “and

thy sin expiated" (Isa. 6:7). According to a Midrash, this was in atonement for the sin of criticizing his fellow Jews as "people of unclean lips" (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Isa., ch. 6). The Talmud tells us that King Menashe killed Isaiah, who died when the sword reached his mouth—which had uttered the defamation of Israel (*Yevamot* 49b).

The Sages' aversion to condemning one's fellow Jews and justifying their suffering, no matter how terrible their behavior, is taught in a famous tale of two great Amoraim (*Midrash Shir Hashirim* 1): R. Abahu and R. Shimon ben Lakish entered the city of Caesarea. R. Abahu said to R. Shimon: "Why did we come here, into this country of abusers and blasphemers?" Whereupon R. Shimon dismounted from his donkey, took some sand in his hand, and pushed it into R. Abahu's mouth. "What is this?" asked R. Abahu. R. Shimon replied: "The Holy One does not approve of one who slanders Israel . . ." (I am indebted to Prof. Eliezer Berkovits for this reference.)

So, let all those who are quick to interpret the Holocaust as punishment for Jewish sins be warned that they risk running afoul of the Sages' anger at whoever undertakes the sordid task of blaming his fellow Jews—and especially if such accusations are unjust.

Third, I am also troubled by a certain moral deficiency in those who seek to apply the *mipnei hata'einu* philosophy to the Holocaust, and that is—their sense of utter self-confidence, their dogmatic infallibility. They *know* that six million Jews were killed because there were Zionists among them, or because there were non-Zionists among them, or because there were assimilationists or *apikorsim* or whatever among them. While the rest of us poor benighted souls cannot begin to fathom, today, some forty years after the Event, *that* it happened, *how* humankind could have degenerated so as to permit it, *what* all this pain and torture did to the martyrs and to their survivors—all this while, these smug interpreters of the Holocaust have no questions, no doubts, no problems, no uncertainties. They just know everything about the Shoah, especially *why* it happened. The enormity of this callousness, the outrageousness of such insensitive arrogance in elaborating this צידוק הדין, is mind-boggling. It is, to my mind, unforgiveable.

One last comment about the advocates of applying *mipnei hata'einu* to the Holocaust: this is the first time in Jewish history, to my knowledge, that supposedly pious and learned Jews—a rebbe, a rav, a mashgiah—made a colossal error in elementary grammar. They use the words ומפני חטאינו, "because of *our* sins," when they really mean to say ומפני חטאיהם, "because of *their* sins!" In the past, every case of interpreting a disaster as the result of sin was one in which the interpreter included himself in the group that was

guilty; it was "our sins," not anyone else's, that caused us to be exiled from our Land. Today, in trying to explain the greatest of all disasters ever to befall us, small-minded people blame others, not themselves. The anti-Zionists blame the Zionists, the Zionists blame the anti-Zionists, the secularists blame the Orthodox rabbis who did not encourage emigration, and the Orthodox blame the assimilationists and the Socialists and everyone else not in our camp. This last point alone is enough to disqualify the whole line of reasoning from being applicable to the Shoah.

In sum, if we ask if we may resort to the *mipnei hata'einu* rationale for the Holocaust, my answer is a resounding No—indeed, six million times No!

3

But if we cannot find meaning in the Holocaust as a sign of divine displeasure with Zionism or with anti-Zionism or with defection from Torah, what then was it all about? Is it possible that this was the way divine providence arranged to bring about the creation of the State of Israel?

Such an argument deserves no less contempt than the three Holocaust-as-punishment theories I mentioned above. It is incredible and unconscionable even to entertain the thought that a God who is just would ever indulge in such a cruel calculus as permitting the torturing, gassing, and burning to death of six million innocent victims in order to bring about the creation of a Jewish Commonwealth and the apparatus of statehood. Only the most devious mentality could long maintain such an obtuse notion. I would not want to be guilty of burdening every Israeli child, living or unborn, with the knowledge that his freedom was acquired at the expense of who knows how many other children who were tossed alive into the raging flames of the crematoria to make place for him in a Jewish state. Enough said about this.

But does all this mean that there is no meaning to the Holocaust? And is meaninglessness an adequate alternative? Does it not deny the principle of *השגחה פרטית*, of divine providence?

I cannot offer any pat answers for the enormous questions of the Holocaust. Short of the renewal of prophecy in Israel, I will challenge any interpretation which pretends to more than the human mind can undertake or more than the truly human heart can bear. What I would like to do is to explore this question of meaning—meaningfulness or meaninglessness—as it applies to the Shoah, in the hope of providing a *framework* rather than a solution. If I am right, and convincing, then in this framework, about which I have

thought and brooded for a long time, we may begin to grope for the formulation of our own responses and, perhaps, include other major historical events since the Shoah.

The conceptual framework I offer is that of *Hester Panim*, the “hiding of the face,” as the term is used both in Scripture and the Talmud.

4

All of the Bible is the record of the dialogue between God and Israel. From the moment we were chosen—whether one dates that from the revelation to Abraham or to Moses at Sinai—we were inextricably bound up with Him, never to be disentangled one from the other. Now, the fortunes of this dialogue are described by two terms: *Hester Panim* and *Nesiat Panim*, the “lifting up of the face.” When two people love each other, they face each other, they look adoringly at each other. This mutuality in love is the essence of the dialogue; whatever “words” flow from it, whether narrative or normative, are significant but secondary. But when one party is disloyal to the other, when he sins against the other, then that other turns his face away, he refuses to gaze at the one who wrongfully injured him. As a consequence, the party who first sinned too turns his face away. Their relationship thus sustains a blow. Should they feel a need or desire to reestablish relations as of old, then one of them will slowly lift up and turn his face to the other and await the reciprocal turning of the other’s face as a gesture of reconciliation.

Now, the beginning of the rupture of the dialogue is *Hester Panim*, the initial turning away of the face by the one sinned against. The beginning of reconciliation takes place with *Nesiat Panim*, when the first effort is made to face one another in love and devotion, and to forgive past sins. In terms of the God-Israel dialogue, *Hester Panim* denotes God’s self-removal from the context of Israel’s company into His transcendence and remoteness, and *Nesiat Panim*—the reverse. This is the meaning of the verse in the three-fold priestly blessing, **יְשַׁא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ**, “may the Lord lift up His face unto thee” (Nu. 6:26).

What causes *Hester Panim* and *Nesiat Panim* to take place? Sin brings in its wake punishment, the acme of which is *Hester Panim*; the turning aside of God’s face is worse than any punishment He metes out to us directly. **תשובה**, repentance, is generally the precipitating factor in the era of *Nesiat Panim*. But that is not always so. Sometimes it is God who initiates the process of *Nesiat Panim* by turning to us, in a special historic act of compassion and pity—what the Kabbalah calls **אתערותא דלעילא**, “the arousal from Above.”

There is thus a reciprocity in both of these polar acts. If either of the partners turns away from the other, the other similarly turns away, and hence—*Hester Panim*. If one seeks to restore relations through *Nesiat Panim*, the partner has the opportunity to respond likewise. It is in these basic terms that we may endeavor to understand the drama of Man and God as it is played out not only in Scripture, but in all of Jewish history.

This bipolar mechanism of *Hester Panim/Nesiat Panim* as the fundamental structure of the divine-human dialogue is already prefigured at the very beginning of human history—in the story of Cain (Gen. ch. 4). Thus, God turns to Abel, but not to Cain, accepting the offer of the former but not the latter. "But of Cain and his offering He had not respect" (4:4). The rather awkward English is the translation of *לא שעה*, or "He did not turn," implying a state of estrangement which is almost but not quite that of *Hester Panim*. Cain's reaction is one of petulance, in which he too almost turns his face away: "And Cain was very angry and his face fell" (*ib.*), *ויפלו פניו*. Note the use of the term *פנים* or "face" in both this passage and the verse that follows: *ויאמר ה' אל קין למה יחרה אפך ולמה נפלו פניך הלא אם תטיב שאת* "And the Lord said to Cain, why are you so angry—and why the fallen face? If you will do good, it will be lifted up (or: the sin will be forgiven)." Interestingly, according to Ibn Ezra, the word *שאת* refers to *Nesiat Panim*, and means that Cain can reestablish relationships; he can again, as it were, look at God directly, by means of his *תשובה* or repentance.

Cain, however, is obstinate. Instead of resuming his dialogue with God, he does the reverse—by rising up against his brother Abel and killing him. It is, as the Jerusalem Targum implies, the desperate act of a man who has proclaimed *לית דין ולית דיין*, there is neither Judge nor justice, i.e., there is no one with Whom to carry on a dialogue. God's response is to place a curse upon Cain and declare him a wanderer on the face of the earth. Cain is now in a full state of alienation from his Maker. He is under *Hester Panim*, and divine providence has been removed from him. Note Cain's plaintive response to his fate: *גדול עוני מנשוא*, "my sin is too great to bear" (4:13). But the word for "forgive" or "bear," *מנשוא*, is of the same root as *Nesiat Panim*; hence, "my sin is too great for me ever to be worthy of Your turning Your face back to me." Cain effectively despairs of *Nesiat Panim*.

The next verse is even more explicit: *הן גרשת אותי היום מעל פני האדמה* and *ומפניך אסתר*, "behold, You have banished me this day from the face of the earth, and from Your face I shall be hidden." Here is the first full mention in the Bible of the concept of *Hester Panim*, "the hiding of the face." In this alienated state, divine providence is removed

from Cain, and so it follows that "whosoever finds me will slay me"; he is abandoned to blind fate. But God then informs Cain that his *Hester Panim* is not absolute, and the situation is not irremediable. He places a "sign" upon Cain to signify that although he is in a state of *Hester Panim*, his alienation is not total, not beyond recall.

So, we have in the Cain story the classical instance of *Hester Panim* as applied to an individual. *Hester Panim* (for an individual) is the abandonment by God, the removal of divine providence from him. Physically, it means that he is subject to death and suffering, as if God is indifferent to him. He may live or he may die, be healthy or sickly, rich or poor, all depending on the vagaries of natural causation—not on God's providence, His loving interest in him.

Spiritually and existentially, it means that the removal of divine closeness and friendship catapults man into a state of doubt and denial, of coldness and a darkness of the spirit. As King David put it: *הסתרת פניך הייתי נבהל*—"You hid Your face, and I was confounded" (Ps. 30:8). (Perhaps this is as good a reason as any for the custom of covering up the mirrors in the home of a mourner: it is a symbol of the hiding of the divine face, of *Hester Panim*.)

This spiritual consequence of *Hester Panim* is not one whit less devastating than its physical impact upon man. Indeed, it prevents man from properly interpreting his condition under *Hester Panim*; it confounds his self-understanding. The Besht thus interprets the key verse in Tanakh on *Hester Panim*: *ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני*, "and I will surely hide My face in that day" (Deut. 31:18). The double verb is normally interpreted as the intensive form, thus: "surely hide My face." For the Besht, however, a far deeper layer of meaning is uncovered as he takes the double verb quite literally: and I will hide the hiding of My face from you. The *Hester Panim* itself is in hiding! The obscurity itself is obscured. Man suffers from *Hester Panim*—and he doesn't even know that God is turning His face from him. Hence, his physical travail—whether economic or political or medical in nature—leads to a deep questioning of "whether there is anyone out there," whether the God who doesn't care really exists. His physical suffering leads to religious morbidity.

Perhaps the most poignant expression of this "hiding of the hiding" in world literature may be found in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. The protagonist waits for a message from the king—waits and waits and waits, until the reader feels that the infinite tarrying of the messenger may well mean there is no king in the first place. Suffering on the physical plane leads to existential doubt, and thence to religious denial, to *נכירה*, and from there to the death of the spirit.

What, however, does *Hester Panim* imply for a national collectivity, for *Am Yisrael*? It is clear that for an entire people, the concept of *Hester Panim* makes no sense unless they were previously in a state of dialogue or mutuality with God. If the people had not been originally engaged with the Divine, *Hester Panim* is simply irrelevant. Indeed, that is what the Talmud teaches us (*Hag. 5b*): **כל שאינו בהסתר פנים אינו מהם**, only Israel can experience *Hester Panim*, for only Israel has that kind of special relationship with God that makes for the vicissitudes of *Hester Panim* and *Nesiat Panim* in history.

Let us therefore explore further the nature of this historical *Hester Panim*, the one that refers to the whole people of Israel. There are two verses in **ויילך**, Deut. (31:17,18): **וחרה אפי בו ביום ההוא ועזבתים והסתרת**: פני מהם והיה לאכול ומצאוהו רעות רבות וצרות ואמר ביום ההוא הלא כי אין אלקי בקרבי מצאוני הרעות האלה: ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא . . .

Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them, so that they will say in that day: are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us? And I will surely hide My face in that day for all the evil which they have wrought, in that they turned to other gods.

Some commentators see this as representing two levels or a two-step process; so, for instance, Ramban and Netziv. Maimonides (in both the *Yad* and the *Guide*) tells us that in both cases, that of the individual and that of the nation, the **סילוק השכינה** (the removal of the Shekhinah, which is equivalent to *Hester Panim*) implies the end of divine protection. *Hester Panim* means one is exposed to all dangers and becomes the butt of all fortuitous circumstances.

This is how Maimonides puts it: "His fortune and misfortune depend upon chance. Alas! How terrible a threat! . . . Hence, it may occur that the good man at times suffers, whilst no evil befalls those who are wicked; in these cases, what happens to them is due to chance. This principle I find also expressed in the Torah: 'And I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?' (Deut. 31:17). It is clear that we ourselves are the cause of this hiding of the face, and that the screen that separates us from God is of our own creation. This is the meaning of the words: 'And I will surely hide My face in that day, for all the evils which they shall have wrought' (*ib. v.18*). There is undoubtedly no difference in this regard between one single person and a whole community.

It is now clearly established that the cause of our being exposed to chance, and abandoned to destruction like cattle, is to be found in our separation from God" (*Guide*, 3:51).

For Maimonides, then, the dynamic of *Hester Panim* is as follows: first there is sin, and then there is divine retribution. This punishment is *part* of divine providence. Man, however, misinterprets the nature of the punishment, and repudiates the dialogue altogether, holding that his misfortune signifies the absence of God, not just His displeasure, and therefore the unhappy events are interpreted by him not as punishment, but as chance occurrences precisely because God is either "absent" or indifferent to man. This is, in essence, a denial of God's providence, and the punishment (for this consequent theological rather than original behavioral sin) is ironically appropriate: the true denial to man of divine providence, i.e., *Hester Panim*. In this state of alienation, Israel becomes a derelict people, left by God to its own resources and to the mercy of both nature and history.

At this point, we must ask some pointed questions about this thesis of *Hester Panim*. If *Hester Panim* means, in the ultimate, death, then how do we explain the survival of Israel even from as massively convulsive an event as the Shoah? Even more, how explain such happy events as the restoration of Jewish independence in 1948 and the Six-Day War in 1967? Of course, according to the scheme I have elaborated, it is logically possible to attribute these national triumphs as well to divine indifference, in which luck and Jewish brains played a major role. But can we, realistically and not just logically, say that these too were "chance" events played out by conflicting vectors in a meaningless historical continuum under the cloak of *Hester Panim*?

I do not believe so. It taxes credulity too much to accept that such extraordinary occurrences are the result of mere chance, of a throw of dice on the stage of history. My critical faculties refuse to assent to such events at such a time as the result of mere randomness. And yet I do believe we are in a state of *Hester Panim* which, existentially, implies meaninglessness. How, then, do I explain this?

The Talmud (*Hag. 5a*) records the following two opinions: **אמר רבא, אמר הקב"ה אע"פ שהסתרתי פני מהם, בחלום אדבר בו. ר' יוסף אמר, ידו נטויה עלינו.**

Rava said: "The Holy One said, 'even though I have hidden My face from them, "in a dream do I speak to him" (Nu. 12:6).'" R. Joseph said: "His hand is stretched forth over us."

I suggest that what we have here is not a classical **מחלוקת**, but rather a delineation of two levels of *Hester Panim*, yielding four separate stages in the dialogue between God and man:

- A) Absolute *Hester Panim*
- B) A survivalist *Hester Panim* (ידו נטויה עלינו)
- C) An intermediate *Hester Panim* (בחלום אדבר בו)
- D) *Nesiat Panim*

The first or lowest level, that of absolute *Hester Panim*, applies to individuals only. In its last stages it results in the death of the individual separated from his Creator.

Now, this category does *not* apply to עם ישראל, the people of Israel. It is a fundamental principle of Judaism that the Jews will survive and, through them, all of mankind will be redeemed. The covenant will never be revoked; the ברית will endure. God may "hide His face" from us and abandon us to historical causality, to the fate of deterministic laws that guide all mankind, but never will He allow us to be swallowed up forever in the eternal night of total extinction. Under *Hester Panim*, as the prophet Jeremiah said, we are כאלמנה, "like" a widow—but never actually אלמנה, forever forsaken. In Hosea's metaphor, God may have banished us as punishment for acting the harlot and being disloyal, but never does He send us a ספר כריתות, an actual divorce. Our chosenness in the first place was not based on our merit, and hence our demerits do not cancel our election. Our transgressions of the terms of the covenant are punished, but the covenant remains intact.

That is what is implied in R. Joseph's characterization of the second category: ידו נטויה עלינו, "His (divine) hand is stretched over us." His eyes may be averted from us, His face turned away in anger or disappointment, leaving us subject to all the twists and turns, all the tortuous torments of an aimless path in history—but His hand covers us and prevents our total extinction.

It is, indeed, the pit, the nethermost level of Israel's broken dialogue with God. Unlike individual man, for whom *Hester Panim* can result in death, for Israel it can never lead to extinction. But it remains indeed the worst of all suffering. So do we read in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sanh.* 10:2): "וחכיתי לה' המסתיר פניו מבית יעקב וקויתי לו" (ישעי' ח:יז), אין לך שעה קשה בעולם מאותה שעה שאמר לו הקב"ה למשה ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא. מאותה שעה—וקויתי לו, שאמר לו בסיני "כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו."

There is no more difficult hour in the world than that hour in which the Holy One said to Moses, "And I will surely hide My face in that day" (Deut. 31:17). From that time on—"And I will wait for the Lord who hideth His face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope for Him"—for He said at Sinai, "for [My covenant] shall not be forgotten by their seed" (Deut. 31:21).

The Yerushalmi seems to imply, first, that *Hester Panim* is the

most dreadful and terrible of all punishments and, second, that even during *Hester Panim* there is no *total* abandonment (what the Bavli calls *ידו נטויה עלינו*) so that the prophet can still hope (*בהלום אדבר בו*) for a renewal of relationship, and can still point to the Sinaitic promise of *Hester Panim* never being taken to its final conclusion (*כי לא תשכח מפי זרוע*).

However, other than sheer physical survival of the people, in however pitiable a condition, this state of *Hester Panim* is one of total eclipse of the divine in our national life; its terrors are awesome. God remains inaccessible through prophecy. Our prosperity or adversity are the products of chance and effort—but not ordained by divine destiny. During an extended period of historical national *Hester Panim*, we are given over to the uncertainties of nature and history, where we can be raised by the tides of time and circumstances to the crest of the world's waves—or hurled pitilessly into the fierce troughs of life. Neither our success nor our failure means anything during *this* stage of *Hester Panim*.

I would venture that this period began at about the time of the Destruction of the Second Temple, and extended to its nadir, the Shoah. Hence, before we entered the state of full-fledged *Hester Panim*, one could still say *mipnei hata'einu*, for “meaning” could still be attributed to our predicament, and exile as punishment made sense in a context of meaningfulness. But this is no longer relevant or permissible in a state of intensive *Hester Panim*.

6

Such was the period of the Holocaust. It was the ultimate expression of meaninglessness, and that was, perhaps, the ultimate blow to its victims—and we are all its victims, those who survived and those who did not. The extent of the tragedy cannot be conveyed in any matrix of meaning. Indeed, any ascription of meaning to the Holocaust comes close to blasphemy. Only a humble confession of intellectual and spiritual surrender in the search for meaning, uttered in shame and futility, can prevent the memory of the martyrs from being disgraced.

This is, I confess, a bold assertion: that other than God's role in preserving us (*ידו נטויה עלינו*), there is no clear “sense” or “meaning” in Jewish history since the Destruction of the Second Temple. I agree that this is a worrisome proposition. But our sacred sources not only support it, they point to it. We are in a state of *Keri*, of hapless aimlessness. We are, as the Sages put it in the Talmud, *מנודים לשמים*, excommunicated by Heaven.

Now, when I say that *Hester Panim* is a period of meaninglessness, I of course do not intend automatically to nullify all meaning in Jewish history. (I am not of the Ben-Gurion school which denies any significance or value to Diaspora history.) Rather, what I mean is that the *totality* of Jewish history, from the beginning to the Messianic end point, is the highest form of meaning, in that it represents the engagement of man with God; and by "meaning," I intend nothing less than the universal redemptive design of history. However, *within* this process of meaning there exists a hiatus, a blank, an empty space, a "bubble," in which meaninglessness pervades. In this period, which is the epoch of *Hester Panim*, the history of the people as such makes no sense; that is, this period taken by *itself*, other than the sheer survival of Israel, shows no specific responsiveness to a divine plan. It is thus, in a manner of speaking, a period of "meaningful meaninglessness."

This does not, however, imply that in the period of *Hester Panim* individuals can find no meaning in their lives. On the contrary, such an assertion constitutes a morally weak submission to *Hester Panim*. The period of God's hiding of His face is meant not only as punishment but also as challenge (see the Hasidic parable at the end of these remarks). During this period, we are called upon to break the vicious cycle of mutual turning and hiding from each other. It may be more difficult to pray, but pray we must. It may seem impossible to feel His presence, but feel we must as we bend all our energies and innermost emotions to His service. We must, indeed, storm the very gates of Heaven, hurling ourselves against the barred windows, demanding entrance, loving despite distance, trusting—against all the puny logic of mere philosophers—that our Creator is there, listening to us, beckoning to us, waiting for us and ready to respond. Yes, life is difficult under *Hester Panim*—but it is not impossible. There is a mysterious economy of meaning, whereby individuals may find meaning in their engagement with God while the people as a whole suffers meaninglessness—even as it is quite conceivable that individuals should be lost in a *Hester Panim* of meaninglessness while the people as a whole rises to new levels of meaningfulness.

7

I could conclude here, but both our Talmud text and the context of Holocaust Remembrance Day, followed soon thereafter by Israel Independence Day, make it imperative that I add a few comments for the sake of at least minimal comprehensiveness.

There is a third stage of *Hester Panim*, above that of R. Joseph's

ידו נטויה עלינו, of sheer survival, and just below that of *Nesiat Panim*, and that is Rava's category of *בחלום אדבר בו*, the "dream state" in which the ancient dialogue is resumed. I refer to this as the intermediate stage, one which may or may not lead to *Nesiat Panim* and *נאולה* שלימה, the ultimate redemption.

This "dream state" is one in which Israel can detect the first hints of a change in its fortunes. There is a whisper, a faint allusion, a rumor of divine reconciliation. There occur events which imply that, more than God's hand covering us, there is also the very beginning of a resumed dialogue, the barely perceptible turning of God's face to us. The dialogue is not yet by any means direct as between two friends in a state of wakefulness. There is no eye contact, no *עין נראה*; there is just a hazy sequence of events—a daydream that begs interpretation, that urges us to explore latent possibilities, that encourages us to decipher the symbols of the dream. This is a somnabulistic *Hester Panim* which presents us with the suggestion of grand, new historic opportunities. If both partners "play it right," their eyes will meet if only fleetingly, the old yearnings may yet be aroused, the embers of an ancient love yet be stirred up from the millennial abyss into which they had fallen, encrusted with ages upon ages of indifference and apathy and solitude.

Such a state may have occurred during the Purim episode for Persian Jewry. Esther's very name was held by the Sages to symbolize a state of *Hester Panim*—*הסתר*—*אסתר מן התורה מנין, שנא' ואנכי הסתר*—*אסתר פני מכס* (*Hullin* 139a). The redemption took place, but God's name was not mentioned in the *Megillah*. There was not yet *Nesiat Panim*, but it certainly seemed like more than the *ידו נטויה עלינו* stage of *Hester Panim*. The late Zvi Singer (Yaron) has suggested that the Book of Esther's self-description as *דברי שלום ואמת*, "words of peace and truth," refers to the fact that the narrative can be read as a straightforward diplomatic success story—*דברי שלום*, "words of peace"—in which Ahasuerus and Mordecai and Esther are the heroes, especially the Persian King; or as *דברי אמת*, "words of truth": the hidden direction of all the events by the Creator of the world Who is also the Redeemer of Israel. The Purim miracle could be interpreted naturally or supernaturally, secularly or religiously, as would a pagan or a believer. They were in a dream state, the *Hester Panim* of *בחלום אדבר בו*. The results were felicitous; the *קיימו וקבלו* reaction of acceptance by the Jews, according to the well known passage in the Talmud, not only referred to the festival of Purim, but to the reconsecration of all Israel to the covenant of the Torah itself. The dialogue was resumed, and *Nesiat Panim* took place.

It is my belief that after the dreadful period of *Hester Panim* of the *ידו נטויה עלינו* variety, we have, since the Holocaust, been presented

with the possibilities inherent in the **בהלום אדבר בו** state. The Jewish State has been restored, and has in turn restored dignity to our people. Israel has demonstrated the kind of might and resolve that has won the begrudging admiration of the nations of the world. Jerusalem has been returned to us, the **כותל** liberated.

בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון היינו כחולמים, "When the Lord restored the captivity of Zion, we were as dreamers" (Psalms 126). We are in a dream-like trance. We have experienced the first stirrings of reconciliation, of **אתערותא דלעילא**, "the arousal from Above." God is turning His face towards us.

We have the choice, as did Jewry in the days of Mordecai and Esther. We can ignore the hints, attribute the victories either to our own military strength and diplomatic skill (**כחי ועוצם ידי**) or to sheer luck, or recognize in them the first rays of *Nesiat Panim*. We can, by failing to respond to the divine initiative with our own **אתערותא דלתתא**, our corresponding "arousal from below," forfeit our historic opportunities; or we can seize upon them so as to usher in a new age in Jewish history—one in which both success and failure will make sense, in which both national prosperity and adversity will be graced with meaning.

Which will it be? In the earlier years of the State, through the Six-Day War and the euphoria that followed it, I was truly optimistic. I thought that a genuine shudder of **תשובה** had been experienced by all our people, that the great Jewish renaissance had begun.

But then we settled into a routine and now—now I am less optimistic, although I have not despaired. If there is any *mipnei hata'einu* to be recited, it is ours—Orthodox Jews who love Israel. It is we who have so far failed to seize the historic opportunities—there, here, everywhere. We have failed to show our fellow Jews the beauty of Torah. We have alienated them instead of attracting them. We have managed to make them hate us instead of loving what we stand for. We have pushed them instead of pulling them, not only turning our faces from them, but our backs to them. We have been busy with building careers instead of studying and teaching Torah—the *sina qua non* for moving on to *Nesiat Panim*. We have been distracted by our pursuit of middle class luxuries, instead of dedicating our lives to sanctifying the divine Name and demonstrating Torah's loveliness to all Jews, in Israel and Diaspora alike, in fulfillment of the rabbinic injunction in *Avot* (1:12), to be **אוהב את הבריות ומקרנן לתורה**, "love people and bring them close to Torah." We haven't loved them enough, and we haven't brought them close enough.

But history proceeds in long strides, not in short steps. We still have the opportunity to return God's glance, to fill our lives with

meaning and not emptiness, with providence and not chance, with destiny and not fate.

The Rebbe of Mezhibozh commented on the verse in Jeremiah: **בְּמַסְתָּרִים תִּבְכֶּה נַפְשִׁי**, "My soul—says God—weeps in secret places." This can be explained, said the Rebbe, by what happened to me and my grandchild. He asked me to play hide-and-seek with him and I agreed. I closed my eyes and counted and he went to hide. I was suddenly distracted by a friend and forgot all about the child. Soon I heard him crying from his hiding place, "No one has come to look for me."

So does God cry in His secret place: "No one comes to look for Me."

The **רַב־שׁוֹעַ** is waiting for us to seek Him out. He is now more accessible than He was in the last two thousand years.

Let's search for Him—together.

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