



Look to the World and Find God

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As someone who longs to feel God's presence in my life in a clear and direct manner, I have always been struck by the fact that God is noticeably absent from Megillat Esther. In a story that is about the near demise and heroic salvation of the Jewish people, it is not God's hand that is featured in this story as the saving force, but rather the human hands of Queen Esther and her uncle Mordechai.

The Rabbis in the Talmud (Hullin 139b) also notice and wonder about God's presence or rather absence in Megillat Esther, and they ask, "Where in the Torah do we find an allusion to Esther?" Rav Mattanah answers with a verse from Devarim:

Devarim 31:18

And I will hide (*haster astir*) My face.

דברים לא:יח

וְאֶנְכִּי הַסְתֵּר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי

Where is the story of Esther alluded to in the Torah? We see a hint to Megillat Esther in God's very absence, in God's description in the book of Devarim of a future deliberate choice to hide God's face. The linkage of *haster* to Esther's name suggests to our Sages that God's absence in the *megillah* is similarly deliberate.



If the backdrop of Megillat Esther is God's hiddenness, what is Megillat Esther teaching us about living in a world in which, as in our own, God's presence is unseen?

In Devarim, God vows to deliberately hide God's face as punishment on the day that the Jewish people go astray and worship the idols in their midst. However, even in the best of times and closest of relationships, Moshe still experiences Divine Hiddenness. In the book of Shemot, Moshe pleads with God,

Shemot 33:18

"Oh, let me behold Your Presence!"

שמות לג:יח

הֲרֵאֵנִי נָא אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךָ:

Even Moshe, who is privy to intimate conversations with God, still experiences an aspect of God that is hidden from him. While God agrees to pass God's goodness before him, God maintains that Moshe still cannot see God's face; a part of God must remain hidden. Rather, God commands that Moshe should be "upstanding on the rocky mountain," and God will shield Moshe with God's hand as God passes by.

R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, who wrote from the Warsaw Ghetto, lived during a time in which many in his community experienced God as hidden, at best, and absent, at worst. He draws on these verses in Shemot and teaches, "Even when we experience, God forbid, God's hiddenness (*hester*), and endure physical and spiritual troubles, we should not allow into our hearts the thought that we are really hidden, God forbid, from God..." He then quotes from Shemot, "And you will be upstanding on the rocky mountain," and teaches, "one can be



strong and upstanding even at a time of hiddenness (*hester*). This is also a commandment; God is commanding you to strengthen yourself and be upstanding.”¹

God is still hidden even in this moment in which God reveals God’s goodness to Moshe—and yet God commands Moshe to stand tall on the mountain. So too, in all moments of hiddenness, R. Shapira teaches that we are commanded to stand tall on the rocky mountain and take strength.

In the modern *midrash*, “The Shepherd in the Lilies,” Dini Deutsch Frankel uses *midrash* to construct a post-Holocaust theology that speaks to God’s apparent absence in the world.² In her midrashic readings of verses from Shir ha-Shirim, the longing and relationship of the two lovers becomes symbolic of Israel seeking and longing for God during and after the devastation of the Holocaust. In Shir ha-Shirim, the male lover (God) calls out to the female lover (Israel),

Shir ha-Shirim 2:14

O My dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff, let Me see your face, let Me hear your voice.

שיר השירים ב:יד

יוֹנְתִי בְּחִגְוִי הַסֵּלַע בְּסִתְרֵי הַמְּדִבְרָה הָרָאִינִי
אֶת־מַרְאֵיךְ הַשְּׂמִיעִינִי אֶת־קוֹלְךָ

Israel is the dove and God is seeking her, hidden in the cranny of the rocks. Frankel, in her *midrash*, flips the gender of this verse. Instead, it is Israel who is seeking God, the dove that has disappeared into the mountain:

¹ R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, *Eish Kodesh*, Shabbat Hol ha-Mo’ed Pesah (1940). Translated by J. Hershey Worch, *Sacred Fire: Torah From the Years of Fury*.

² Dini Deutsch Frankel, “The Shepherd in the Lilies,” in Tamar Biala (ed.), *Dirshuni*, pp. 207-209.



This is what the sacred community of Israel said to the Holy Blessed One, that there is none who is so hidden like a dove in the rock, but the Holy Blessed One, who hides His face from Israel from the day the temple was destroyed, and Israel calls to Him and says, “Show us Your look, let us hear Your voice.”

זהו שאמרה כנסת ישראל לקדוש ברוך
הוא, שאין לך נסתר כיונה בסלע, אלא
הקדוש ברוך הוא שמסתיר פניו מישראל
מיום שחרב המקדש, וישראל קוראים לו
ואומרים הראנו את מראיך והשמיענו את
קולך.

It is now Israel calling out to God in longing, “Let us see Your face, let us hear Your voice.” God seems to be hidden from this world, and Israel cries out to God, “Where are You?” In Frankel’s *midrash*, God responds:

And He answers them: Look deeply into the world I created,
and you will see My appearance; search the Torah that I
gave, and you will hear My voice.

והוא עונה להם: התבוננו בעולם שבראתי
וראו מראי, דרשו בתורה שנתתי ושמעו
קולי.

Surprisingly, perhaps God is not absent at all; God is right there when Israel cries out. Rather, where is God in this world of *hester panim*, a world in which God’s face is hidden? We can find God by looking at the world, a world full of people, creatures, and God’s Torah. We can find God through each other.

In Megillat Esther, Haman builds his case against the Jewish people, calling them, “עַם־אֶחָד,” מְפֹזָר וּמְפָרֵד - a people scattered and separated” (Esther 3:8). He argues that the Jewish people have kept to their own ways and failed to integrate into the Persian Empire. They are disloyal, they are a threat—and therefore, Haman argues, they should be destroyed.



In her poem “One,” Rivka Miriam uses this exact phrase from Megillat Esther, but instead applies it to God.³ It is not the Jewish people who are scattered and separated but rather God:

Through us God becomes one.

He that is in every place,

He who is scattered and separated,

here before us agitated and frightened—

behold, here

by us

He became one.

דַּרְכֵּנוּ הוֹפֵךְ הָאֱלֹהִים אֶחָד.

הוא, שְׂבִכָּל מְקוֹם

הוא, הַמְפֹּזֵר וְהַמְפֹּרָד,

הֵנָּה לְקִרְאָתֵנוּ נִרְעָשׁ וְנִפְחָד –

הֵנָּה כָּאן

אֲצִלָּנוּ

הָיָה לְאֶחָד.

God is the one who is scattered and dispersed. God is the one who seems to be missing. According to Rivka Miriam, however, though God may appear to be hidden from this world, we are the ones who together can manifest God’s presence. It is through us that God becomes one. Just as God in Frankel’s *midrash* instructs us to look to the world and the Torah to find God, Rivka Miriam writes, if we want to find God, we just need to come together. When we are one, God is One.⁴

Thankfully, Haman got it wrong. The Jewish people may have been scattered throughout different lands—but they were not separated, at least not from each other. When Esther makes the bold demand that the Jews of Shushan come together and fast collectively for three days (Esther 4:16-17), they are quick to do so and rally by her side.

³ Rivka Miriam, *Mi-Shirei Imot ha-Even*.

⁴ Bavli Berakhot 6a teaches that God said to Israel, “Because you have made me a single entity in the world, I will make you a single entity in the world.” In the Gemara, first we make God one and then God in turn makes us one. In Rivka Miriam’s poem, she imagines the relationship through the inverse: first we make ourselves one and through making ourselves one, we make God one. In the Gemara, God makes us one whereas in the poem, we make ourselves one.

Megillat Esther teaches us that in a world in which God is hidden, we draw God into this world when we join together. When we are one, God is manifest. When we are scattered and dispersed, then God, too, is scattered and dispersed.

The past six months have brought with them moments of great unity of the Jewish people, and also moments of painful schism. Amidst the sometimes horror of a world in which God's presence is not always apparent, may we stand tall on the mountain and together, perhaps through us, through our relationships with one another, make God one.

