

- a) Rabbi Ute Steyer, M.A.
- b) The Jewish Theological Seminary
- c) utsteyer@jtsa.edu

d) A Different Interpretation of *Hester Panim* in the Rabbinic Tradition and Application to Pastoral Care

The problem of suffering in the face of the theological understanding of a benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God has been challenge for theologians through the ages. Different explanations for the existence of suffering have been offered, more or less inadequate in the face of real suffering. One answer that has been offered by the Chazal is the notion of God's presence or absence among those who suffer. Most notably these explanations are connected with the Biblical notion of *hester panim* – the hiding of the face.

The following paper will investigate the origins of this notion and the different possible interpretations of the concept of *hester panim* as an expression of divine punishment or even divine indifference. But there is another possibility of looking at the sources and understanding *hester panim* as an expression of divine empathy – when God is “in the moment” with the sufferer.

In the light of the philosophical dilemma of anthropomorphizing God: are these sources simply to be understood as metaphorical use of language or can we indeed see an attempt of the rabbis to do away with the restrictions against anthropomorphisms for the sake of offering an image of the divine / human relationship that is more intimate?

In the face of suffering and evil theologians came up with a variety of scenarios explaining the puzzling “absence” of God that stands in contradiction to the assumptions about God as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. Various scenarios have been outlined to explain this: ranging from the extreme Nietzschean concept of “God is dead” over Aristototele’s “unmoved mover”, and to various explanatory models of God exercising self-restraint in order to guarantee human free will. They all have in common that they react to a lived reality in which God seems no longer immanent compared to some depictions in the Bible in which God is described as imminently involved in human history. The later perception is that God is the one withdrawing and causing the evil to happen or at least seems indifferent or uninvolved.

Much has been written about the “absent” or “hidden” God. The idea of the “Death of God” on the other hand is a notion that is now familiar from Nietzsche’s interpretation in the “The Gay Science” – overcoming God in order to free man from the yoke of religion. The idea of the death of God first emerged within Protestant theology where the idea of a dying God, though radical, is also part of the foundational myth: God, in the form of Jesus Christ, died already once. But also in Jewish circles the “Death of God” has become a familiar concept through some post-Holocaust theologians, most famously Rubinstein.

The most widely used metaphor in the Jewish tradition is that of “*hester panim*” – “hiding of the face” or “turning away” which is mentioned already in the Torah:

יז) וְחָרָה אַפִּי בּוֹ בַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְעִזְבֹתֵימִי וְהִסְתַּרְתִּי פְנֵי מַהֵם וְהָיָה לְאֹכַל וּמִצָּאָהוּ רָעוֹת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְאָמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא הֲלֹא עַל כִּי אֵין אֱלֹהֵי בְקִרְבִּי מִצְאוֹנֵי הָרְעוֹת הָאֵלֶּה:

יח) וְאֲנֹכִי הִסְתַּר אֶסְתִּיר פְּנֵי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כֹּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי פָנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים:

Deut. 31:17-18 “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, ... And I will surely hide my face in that day for all the evil which they shall have done...”

The image invoked is terrifying, God abandoning humankind, expressed in this image of “hiding the face”. Part of the terrifying nature of this picture is a creation of our own imagination because the notion of a hiding God is in parts also a reflection of a very fundamental Jewish concept; that of the essentially unknowable God. The culmination of this ontological assumption is familiar to us in Maimonides’ *via negativa*. An interesting dichotomy is at play here: on the one hand the theological understanding of a transcendent God that cannot be grasped completely and that remains absent and on the other hand the yearning for the immanent God which brings along the terrifying notion of a God turning away. And even when speaking of the God who hides his face: this is not the same as the “unmoved mover” of Aristotle, the rabbis always speak of a God who “hides” but is not “hidden”. Two very different concepts about God are balanced side by side: the theological concept of the transcendent God and the concept of a God who temporarily is “hiding”. God’s absence is not a permanent state but rather a process, a temporary state, either reactive or pro-active, and as such reversible. This differentiation is crucial. Now, if God is temporarily hiding than this must mean that God is either limited, overwhelmed, or God does so by choice. Hence there must be a powerful motivation for overriding God’s compassion for the sufferer and for God’s non-interference. This is where we

usually are confronted with the various attempts of explaining the existence of suffering and evil of serving a higher motif: as punishment, deterrent, “yisurin shel ahava” – afflictions out of love etc.

And still, the notion of a temporarily absent God doesn't really solve the problem of evil and suffering. But maybe it isn't God who is turning away? A.J. Heschel in his book “Man is not alone” devotes a chapter to the hiding God. He writes that God is never absent: *“God is not silent. He has been silenced... Through centuries His voice cried in the wilderness”*. God is gradually banished from the souls of humans and is vanishing more and more. He continues: *“Man was the first to hide from God, after having eaten of the forbidden fruit, and is still hiding. The will of God is to be here, manifest and near; but when the doors of this world are slammed on Him, His truth betrayed, His will defied, He withdraws, leaving man to himself. God did not depart of His own volition; He was expelled. God is in exile.”*

A beautiful hasidic tale about rabbi Baruch of Medzhibozh, quoted by A.J. Heschel in *Man Is Not Alone*, comes to illustrate this: two children are playing hide and seek, yet the seeker gets distracted and finally forgets all about the play and about his hidden friend. His friend is waiting and waiting and finally in despair bursts out in tears to be comforted by his grandfather, the rabbi, who draws the analogy: ‘just as you are crying because you were only hiding in order to be found, so too God is crying because we have ceased to look for him.’

Here, God is in a state of calculated absence, meaning God's temporary absence is necessary to give the mutual satisfaction of finding and being found, where both sides are part of an active relationship. This also relates to the idea of God withdrawing partially to “make space” for a relationship. This imagery is familiar to us from the kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum*. The question for the philosopher is whether God is transcendent and dons the cloak of immanence or if God is immanent but has to withdraw. The answer to this question will put a person on two sides of the theological divide but I think we can leave this for the moment and return to the divine-human relationship.

The ultimate purpose of religion, including Judaism, is *imitatio dei*, the strive for perfection of humankind in imitating the divine. Rabbinic commentators have coined the expression *b'zelem elohim*, based on the verse in Genesis 1:27. According to this, the truly righteous are closest to achieving perfection and hence are closest to God. They are given a special place of honor in the writings of Chazal and still, but not even they are spared suffering. And yet there is the following surprising sugya in Berachot 34b that gives us a different set of values: *“For R. Abbahu said: In the place where penitents stand even the wholly righteous cannot stand, as it says: Peace, peace to him that was far and to him*

that is near (Isaiah 37:19) — to him that was far first, and then to him that is near. R. Johanan, however, said: What is meant by 'far'? One, who from the beginning was far from transgression. And what is meant by 'near'? That he was once near to transgression and now has gone far from it."

What does this sugya have to say about the problem of divine presence in the face of evil and suffering? The rabbis in the Talmud interpret the sugya as talking about the reward that a person receives that has transgressed or was close to transgressing and repented or abstained in the last moment from transgression. The rabbis recognize the truly amazing strength it takes for a person to turn his or her life around. The rabbis put them not only on par with the truly righteous but even think that a person who has struggled and overcome the evil inclination is sometimes more praiseworthy. To be clear, the strive for perfection, *imitatio dei*, is still the motivating factor. God is true perfection and this is the ultimate goal of achievement for humanity. But the statement of R. Abbahu can also be read in the light of a slightly different interpretation which I encountered in Yohanan Muffs's work:

Yohanan Muffs in his "The Personhood of God" writes about the divine image in the Bible that presents to us a picture of a flawed God which Muffs calls "humanity of God". He argues that an educational goal must be in the realms of the possible for reasons of good pedagogy. "...one cannot imitate perfection", Muffs writes and quotes the sages and the Bible as examples portraying the great Biblical heroes with all their short-comings and hence so close to the human experience.

Muffs suggest that God appears with the full spectrum of human emotions, loving and warm but also at times harsh, "emotionally distant", and unfair, precisely because God became involved in the human condition. An interesting nuance is at play here: Muffs says in order to truly be part of the human condition, to be in relationship, one has to surrender some aspects of the self, in God's case this means to "live" the range of human emotions and had to abandon the aspects of divine omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Muffs writes: "*God appears to experience all the human emotions... By so doing, He gives the seal of divinity to the very essence of our humanity*".

"Hester panim" can then be understood along these lines of Muffs as one moment in which God is in relationship with humankind. As much as I like Muffs interpretation of valuing imperfection: I don't think it solves our problem. On the one hand as already mentioned above the ultimate goal is still to achieve perfection even though the pedagogy to achieve this goal is by setting more reachable intermediate goals. And on the other hand Muffs never claims that God is indeed flawed. It is essentially

an application of the rabbinic dictum of “God speaks in the language of humans” – God *appears* in the emotional range of humans. God playing a game of pretend granted a highly skilled pedagogical game.

When it says in Deuteronomy 31:17 “...I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them” it implies a causal relationship between the hiding of the face and the occurrence of calamity. God hides his face and evil will come to the world: Because of the transgressions committed by humankind and God decides to turn away his face and disaster will come upon the earth. When looking at verse 18 this causal relationship isn’t quite that obvious anymore! “And I will surely hide my face in that day for all the evil which they shall have done...” Its proximity to verse 17 defines its reading. Yet when looking at Isaiah 59:2 we see a truly different understanding:

כִּי אִם עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם הָיוּ מְבַדְּלִים בֵּינְכֶם לְבֵין אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְחַטָּאוֹתֵיכֶם הִסְתִּירוּ פָנִים מִכֶּם מִשְׁמוֹעַ:

But your iniquities have been a barrier between you and your God, your sins have made Him turn His face away and (refuse) [prevent] to hear you.

The transgressions have caused a barrier (mavdelim) to be put up between God and humankind and which caused the turning of the face that ultimately leads to disaster and calamity. This breakdown of relationship also prevents God from hearing – God’s face is turned away. A close reading of Psalm 44 too shows that God is not causing the suffering as a form of punishment by “turning away” rather God is indifferent to the suffering. Psalm 44 doesn’t give an explanation for the suffering, on the contrary: in verse 18-19 it says: “All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, or been false to Your covenant. Our hearts have not gone astray, nor have our feet swerved from Your path, though You cast us, crushed, to where the sea monster is, and covered us over with deepest darkness.” God has turned away, seemingly arbitrarily and is hiding, and refusing to hear the plea. It is unclear in Psalm 44 who or what brought on the suffering but it is clear that the people consider themselves as innocent and true to the covenant and God as absent and uninvolved. So is God really cold-heartedly “sticking it out”?

A suggestion can be found in some in Jeremiah 13:17 and Midrash Eikha Rabba:

Jeremiah 13:17

וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּהָ בְּמִסְתָּרִים תִּבְכֶּה נַפְשִׁי מִפְּנֵי גֹהַ וְדָמְעָ תִּדְמַעַ וְתִרְדַּ עֵינַי דְּמָעָה כִּי נִשְׁבָּה עֵדֶר יְקוֹק:

“If you will not give heed, my inmost self must weep, because of your arrogance; my eye must stream and flow with copious tears, because the flock of the Lord is taken captive.” (JPS translation). The

Hebrew can also be translated as “my soul will weep in hiding (b’ mistarim)”. This understanding is also reflected in the interpretation of the following midrash from Eikha Rabba:

איכה רבה (וילנא) פתיחתות ד"ה כד רבי יוחנן

באותה שעה בא מטטרון ונפל על פניו, ואמר לפניו רבש"ע אני אבכה ואתה לא תבכה, אמר לו אם אין אתה מניח לי לבכות עכשיו אכנס למקום שאין לך רשות ליכנס ואבכה, שנאמר (ירמיה י"ג) ואם לא תשמעוהו במסתרים תבכה נפשי מפני גוה וגו'

“At that time Metatron came, fell upon his face, and said to the Holy One, Blessed be He: ‘Sovereign of the Universe, let me weep, but You should not weep.’ He replied to him: ‘If you let Me not weep now, I will enter to a place where you have no permission to enter, and will weep there,’ as it is said, ‘if you do not give heed, my soul will weep in hiding...”

Here too God is described as being in hiding, withdrawn from humanity because an expressed need for privacy in order to weep. God is turning away his face and withdraws in order to give expression to his grief. Tractate Hagiga 5b also understands God’s hiding in that way:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף ה עמוד ב

+ירמיהו י"ג+ ואם לא תשמעוהו במסתרים תבכה נפשי מפני גוה אמר רב שמואל בר איניא משמיה דרב: מקום יש לו להקדוש ברוך הוא ומסתרים שמו.

b.Hagiga 5b

“But if you will not hear it (the reproof), My soul will weep in secret...” (Jeremiah 13:17). R. Shemuel ben Inia said in the name of Rav, ‘The Holy One has a place and its name is ‘Secret’.

At least in these examples we encounter an understanding of a hiding God that is conceptually completely different from our starting point. God’s hiding is portrayed an expression of God’s empathy over the suffering of the innocent. But to make sure, I am not claiming this to be a form of vicarious suffering, similar to what can be found in the Jesus-narrative. Speaking of divine empathy leads sometimes to the erroneous assumption that “God is suffering with us”, according to the popular understanding that one has to be in someone else’s shoes in order to know what a blister feels like. This assumption is based on human experience but it is not an ontological necessity but rather a contingent relation between suffering and empathy. On the contrary: I think many healthcare professionals will

agree that someone experiencing the same pain as another person might not necessarily result in a greater sympathy/empathy to the other suffering person, the sufferer might be so absorbed by his or her own suffering that it prevents him/her completely to be open to someone else's suffering.

I think it is in this notion that one has to understand Psalm 91:15 – *"immo anokhi b'tzara"* (I am with him in distress): God offers empathy and companionship – and not that God suffers.

Mishna Sanhedrin 6:5 notes:

*"Rabbi Meir said: "When man suffers, what expression does the shechinah (God's presence) use?
"My head is too light (a euphemism for heavy) for me, my arm is too light (a euphemism for heavy) for me." If God is so grieved over the blood of the wicked that is shed, how much more so over the blood of the righteous!"*

These examples from classic rabbinic writings are not just our Sages metaphorical descriptions of God's sympathy but I think rather a conscious choice. The "risk" of anthropomorphizing God was set aside for the sake of a very intimate picture of the divine – human relationship, God as intimately "present".

The Metzudat David (R. David Altschuler, Galicia) writes in his commentary to Jeremiah 13:17

מצודת דוד ירמיהו פרק יג פסוק יז

אם לא תקבלו אמרי הנה תבכה נפשי במסתרים במקום שהוא בחדרי הגוף כי רואה אני הרעה המוצאת אתכם

"if they do not accept", my soul will weep in hiding in a place deep within myself, because I see the evil that will find you.

This commentary of verse 17 understands that the refusal to obey will eventually lead to conditions that will be disastrous, but doesn't mention those to be a form of punishment but more like a disaster brought on by themselves, effecting guilty and innocent alike. God in agony will then withdraw and hide within himself in order to mourn.

God is described as someone affected by the relationship with humanity and with a "normal" reaction to witnessing disaster and injustice. The picture of a revengeful God who punishes is not replaced but I think these sources give another nuance to the range of understandings about the nature of God. It draws on Scriptural proofs and rabbinic interpretations and adds another facet to the theologies expressed in A.J. Heschel and Yohanan Muffs.