

Nitzavim & Vayelech

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

God tells Moses that he must hand over the leadership of Children of Israel to Joshua. He then goes on to say that after Moses' death "this people will be seduced after the strange gods of the land that it is entering, and it will desert Me and renege on the agreement I made with it ... and I will hide My face on that day"(Deuteronomy 31:18).

This simple phrase disguises a major theological issue. The Torah is not a theological document in the way that Greek philosophy would have understood theology, or indeed in the way Christian theology developed. It is not a system based on pure logic or rational reasoning. Logically, a nonphysical, supernatural force cannot have a body or moods like humans. I know there is a heated debate about whether some great Jews of the past did actually think God had a body, but we now all accept, as we sing in Adon Olam, "He has no material form and has no body." So on that level, we do not take the Torah literally.

However, within Torah there are a series of statements about God's relationship to humanity that have come to influence Jewish thinking. This idea of "Hester Panim", hiding of God's "face", is one of these. Superficially, it implies that God engages with humanity on a reciprocal level. Our increase in spiritual activity acts as a sort of magnet that attracts Divine Intervention. Mystically, God interacts all the time with humanity. The problem we have is that we often do not see it or realize it. To hide a face is not to remove it, but to disguise it. So God is there all the time. It is just that we do not know how to experience God. While we live Jewish lives we have a chance to break down the barriers, through religious experience. But if we do not live a religious life, even if only superficially, then we will be less likely to establish any kind of contact. Pagan or secular life is so focused on physical targets and goals that it has no room for the spiritual.

The Kabbalists argued that God, in the absolute sense, is not subject to change. But for humans to interact with God, God has to find a way of "diluting" or "filtering" into a form that humans can relate to. This is the system of the Sephirot, the ten "Attributes" or "Emanations" that enable the absolutely infinite Ein Sof to "transform" to Shechina, the Divine Presence that we experience.

But whichever way we try to look at it, as Maimonides says, we simply cannot describe God in human terms. So "God hiding His face" should not be taken as theology. Rather it is an analogy, just as the "Hand of God" implies no dirty fingernails or the "Anger of God" implies no rise in blood pressure.

To hide one's face can also be understood as an act of despair, of God's "pain" at not wanting to see what stupid things we humans are capable of doing.