

Moshe talks to the Bnei Yisrael on his last day. Interestingly, from Passuk beis until yud zayin (2 to 17, or sixteen verses) every passuk mentions HaShem except one, which talks about coming to the Beis Hamikdash during the holidays. Then Moshe warns that if there is an exile HaShem will hide His face.

וְאֲנֹכִי הַסְתֵּיר אֶסְתִּיר פְּנֵי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כָּל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי  
פָּנָה אֶל־אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים:

“And I will surely hide my face on that fateful day, on account of all the evil that it (the People) did; because it (the People) faced toward other lords/gods.” (Deuteronomy 31:18).

We note that the next seven verses do not mention HaShem, until Moshe charges the Levites in regards to safeguarding the Torah (ibid 31:25). Our verse (18) does not mention HaShem because it is Hashem talking. HaShem will hide His face, but will He be there? Will He return to us or us to Him? Additionally, how does leaving us to rot, so to speak, in exile work to our benefit?

The Gemara explains our verse. Chagigah 5b, says, “With regard to the verse: “And I will hide my face on that day” (Deuteronomy 31:18), Rava said that the Holy One, Blessed be He, said, “Even though I hid my face from them’ and My Divine Presence is not revealed, nevertheless, “I speak with him in a dream”” (Numbers 12:6). Rav Yosef said that “His hand is outstretched, guarding over us, as it is stated: “And I have covered you in the shadow of my hand” (Isaiah 51:16).” Thus, HaShem will be hidden, but ever present.

Homiletically or parabolically (or both), the Gemara in Chullin uses this as a foreshadowing to one of the last books of Tanach. The Gemara Chullin says on 139b, “They also

asked Rav Mattana: From where in the Torah can one find an allusion to the events involving Esther? He replied to them that the verse states: “Then My anger shall be kindled against them on 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: Have not these evils come upon us because our Lord is not among us? And I will hide [haster astir] My face on that day for all the evil which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned to other gods” (Deuteronomy 31:17–18).” Why does the Gemara bring a source for Esther (and following that, Mordechai), in the Torah when it does not bring one for King David, Shlomo, or other biblical personalities? Something is special about Esther, her saving the Jews when they were far from Zion and when HaShem was hidden. This foreshadowing is important enough for the Gemara to mention.

Ibin Ezra points out that “HaShem will turn like a man who turns and does not want to listen to the other anymore.” Our prayers will seem to fall on deaf ears. He adds, “it is only idol worship that will cause HaShem to hide Himself. No other sin compares or will cause this reaction of HaShem.”

There was no idol worship, per se, in the second Beis Hamikdash. Yet, through our 1,950 years of galus HaShem still hides His face.

Ramban says, “The meaning thereof is that [He will hide His face] on a different occasion [for it was already stated in Verse 17, and I will hide My face from them]. Since the Israelites already reflected in their hearts that they sinned against the Lord, and that these evils came upon them because their Lord was not among them, it would have been fitting — according to the exceeding mercies of HaShem— that He help them and rescue them because they had already denied the idols. This is similar to what is stated, Behold, I will enter into

judgment with you, because you have said ‘I have not sinned,’(Jeremiah 2:35). , which indicates that the very denial of wrongdoing (in Jeremiah) is a grievous sin, but here (Deuteronomy) the admission of sin should have caused HaShem to help them. Therefore Moshe states that, because of the great evil that they did in trusting idols, He will again hide His face from them — not like the first hiding of His face when He hid the face of His mercies ”and many evils and troubles came upon them.” (Verse 17). — but that only the face of redemption will be hidden and they will abide by the promise of the face of His mercies. [This is the promise of] “And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them.” (Leviticus 26:44). They will not be shown the face of redemption until they add to the aforementioned regret real confession and perfect repentance, as is stated above, “and thou shalt return unto the Eternal thy G-d.” These are the words of Ramban.

Thus he explains how even if idol worship has been eradicated, HaShem remains hidden. A complete teshuva and repentance is needed. Additionally, apparently the sin still lingers, perhaps in the form of turning away from HaShem. The verse says “turn away to others.” Perhaps it is not literal worshiping of idols but other powers, other influence (money, main stream media, western ideals over Torah ideals); or perhaps because we are still blaming HaShem for our problems and not ourselves.

If the Israelites realize the source of their exile, their sin, as they say in verse 17 “surely it is because our Lord is not in our midst that these troubles befall us,” then how does HaShem remain hidden, as in verse 18? Oh HaChaim explains. “But I will surely hide My face on that day.” The difficulty in this verse is that the Lord is portrayed as hiding His face after the Israelites have already confessed their sins, and have acknowledged that their troubles were due to the Lord having turned His back on them. If all our verse wanted to do was to provide us with

the reason why what happened so far had occurred, there is no need for this. We already know that HaShem turned His face away as a result of the Israelites flirting with local deities!

Moreover, why did Moses repeat the mention of the Lord hiding His face, “הסתר אסתיר?”

Another thing which is puzzling is why Moshe used such a long-winded expression as

“על כל הרעה,” followed by “כי פנה אל אלו - הים אחרים.” (“on account of all the evil....because it

turned away toward other lords.”) The fact is that our verse does want to provide a reason for the

Lord turning away His face. Someone might say that the Lord had not judged the Israelites fairly,

Heaven forbid, for the prophet Isaiah said "assailing them with unchained fury." (Isaiah 27,8). As

the Gemara Sanhedrin 100 states that "man will be measured by the yardstick he himself applied

in measuring others." This is the Ohr HaChaim. He is pointing out that we have to

acknowledge we did this to ourselves.

We can make the distinction between “surely it is because the Lord is not in our midst”

(verse 17) and actual repentance. Verse 17 is mere excuse. The Israelites do acknowledge that

trouble befalls them because HaShem turned away. However, they do not acknowledge they

*caused* HaShem to turn away. Verse 18 makes it clear. Yes, faith in HaShem is acknowledging

that bad will befall the People if HaShem does not protect it. However, repentance is only

correcting the sin by acknowledging it *was the People* that drove HaShem away.

Sforno also points out why hidden is in both verse 17 and our verse, 18. “It is not as they

thought that I was no longer in their midst; wherever they are My presence is with them, as our

sages said in Gemara Megillah 29 “wherever the Jewish people have been exiled the Lord’s

presence accompanies them. However, it does not manifest itself by saving them from their

oppressor. This is just because the verse says ‘on account of the evil the People did.’ Israel did

harm to itself. ‘Because they turned to other lords.’ Instead of turning to HaShem they turned away, thus, I will turn from them.”

Clearly, there is a quid pro quo here. HaShem does not want to turn away. However, when we turn away, and do not turn completely back, then HaShem—lehavdil like a guest at a party who is being ignored by the host so he turns to talk to others—turns away. However, unlike the guest at the party, HaShem does not trade us in for other nations. We may have traded in HaShem for other idols and other ideals. However, HaShem will never trade us in.

Our verse says “on that day.” It actually says “on that day” three times between verses 17 and 18. The Mizrachi Chacham Avraham Azulai writes in his Ba’alei Bris Avraham, “Here Moshe hinted at what was done in Israel during all the days of exile because it is known that the day of HaShem is a thousand years (Psalms 90:4). It is also known that the six millennium the current physical world will exist correspond to, or derived from, the six days of Creation and one slice against the Sabbath for the time of Redemption. Thus by count we see that in the fourth millennium (3,000s from Creation) the destruction took place of the first and second Batai Hamikdash. The three “on that day” symbolize the 3,000 years that will pass before these destructions. In the fourth millennium the prophesy of destructions occurred.”

Rabbeinu Bachya says “HaShem had already mentioned earlier (verse 17) that He would hide His face. On that occasion it referred to the exile in Babylon. Now, when He describes this “hiding” of His face in even stronger terms, it refers to the present exile under the Romans. The repetition of the word “hiding” is a warning that this second exile will be much longer than the first. On the other hand, what the Torah writes also contains a message of consolation in as it says “that HaShem will not forsake us even when we are in “the land of their enemies (exile).” (Leviticus 26:44).”

How hidden is HaShem in exile? Daas Zekeinim says “and I will hide Myself even further;” our sages derive from this line that the Purim story, the scroll of Esther and Mordechai are of Biblical authority, that even during periods of exile when we do not feel the presence of HaShem around us, He nonetheless watches over us and intervenes in our fates decisively when we are under attack.” He is not hidden. He is right here for us to look toward Him.

HaShem turns His face once and brings us back but then we turn away again, this time the message to us has to be stronger. So, the exile is longer and harder. We just finished the Fast of Gedaliah. Gedaliah was the last Judean leader of Jerusalem after the First Temple was destroyed. In fact, he was the last Judean leader—from the House of Yehuda and Dovid—of Jerusalem, period, thus far. He was governor and there was a dispute between him and remaining Israelites living there, including another descendant of the House of Dovid who wanted the honor of kingship. They betrayed Gedaliah and killed him, thus ending Jewish rule over Jerusalem until Ezra returned—and ending Davidic rule over Jerusalem until the Redeemer is anointed.

It is not hard to see how we, as a people, have not turned back toward HaShem. There are still so many other motivations that guide us. Through a turbulent Second Temple era, through the split of the Judean Rabbis and the Babylonian Rabbis, the further fracture of Jews living in Asia and Europe, thereby being influence under different rulers and adopting different customs, through the return to Israel but having it governed by secular law with a dose of appeasing the U.N. We are a fractured people. Yet, it is known, Jews come together during tragedy. When there is a tragedy that befalls the Jewish people, other Jews, no matter what background, run to help.

If we look around we see that the world we live in is full of tragedy: Jews fleeing Asia to live in Israel, but then Israel is constantly under attack by its enemies; and Jews in Europe and America being attacked with anti-Semitism and still losing myriads to assimilation. We look around when there is a shooting in a shul, rockets on Tel-Aviv, fires in Jerusalem, persecution in Iran, genocide in Germany, inquisitions in Portugal and Spain, and we say, “tragedy has befallen us because HaShem is not in our midst.”

Moshe teaches us: Wrong! These verses teach us just the opposite. *Lehafach*. HaShem is in our midst. HaShem is in exile with us. Tragedy befalls us because we have turned away. We have not completely repented for turning away and being influenced by foreign enticements. When we say that tragedy is because HaShem is not in our midst it leads to HaShem turning away further until we realize “it is on account of the evil that the People did.” We have an example. The Purim story is here in our verse because HaShem was hidden but waiting to save us. When we accepted upon ourselves our sins (we tore sackcloth, we fasted, we did not blame Mordechai) and we accepted the Torah (Esther 9:27) then HaShem saved us. Thus, the Gemara points out that Esther is referenced in our verse.

We are now in the thick of the ten days of repentance and Yom Kippur—our Yom HaDin, Judgement Day (per year)—is approaching. Let us start by looking at our own sin(s) and blame ourselves for a change. Let us admit we did wrong and it is not because HaShem is not with us or because of this or that enticement. It is because we slipped. Let us acknowledge it, even a single small sin. It is on us. We turned away. We can turn back and HaShem will turn back to us because He is here. Let us all see the face of HaShem, so to speak, His grace and kindness, and may He seal us in the Book of Good Life, Good Ample Sustenance and Livelihood, Good decrees, salvations, and comforts. Amen.