

"THE VEIL OF GOD"

Tisha B'av is more than the commemoration of the five specific historic events mentioned in the Talmud, foremost among them the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem six centuries apart. It is even more than the national threnody for a string of tragedies, beginning from the earliest times and extending through the ninth of Av, 1492 -- the expulsion of Jews from Spain -- and the same date in 1942: the signing of the extermination order against Polish Jewry by the unmentionable leader of Nazi Germany. More than these alone, Tisha B'av is a condition of the divine-human dialogue, it is a quality of the relations of God and the people of Israel.

Man does not always perceive God uniformly. Sometimes He appears close to us, nearby, concerned, sympathetic, involved in our destiny, a loving and forgiving Father. "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him" (Ps. 145:18). It is a source of joy and comfort to man when he perceives God in this fashion. But sometimes God appears infinitely remote, distant, faraway. It seems almost as if He has vanished from the world, without leaving a trace. God appears aloof, unapproachable, forbidding, uninterested, and ready to abandon man to eternal solitude. There is no greater agony for man than when God thus veils His presence, when He performs hester panim, the "hiding of His face" from mankind. When God, as

it were, withdraws from the world and leaves man to his own resources, forsaken and at the mercy of the impersonal and brutal forces of nature and history, man's life is worse than meaningless.

It is this latter condition that is described in Tisha B'av. That black day was the beginning of the long, ages-old epoch in which God and Israel disengaged from each other, when a seemingly impenetrable veil cruelly separated them. The culmination of Jeremiah's Lamentations sound this very note: *למה שכחתינו לעולם ועד* -- why do You forget us for an eternity, forsake us for so long a time?

But if so many generations were born and died under the heavy cloud of this veil, this hester panim, since that disaster 1,895 years ago initiated this agonizingly long separation, then we are faced with two questions: First, how is it that we have not disappeared as a people? According to all laws of historical determinism we should have disappeared long ago. If there is no longer any relation between God and Israel, how can we account for the mystery and miracle of Israel's persistence? And second, how can we pray? Is it not futile to try to arouse One who in advance resists any communication? Moreover, how can we speak of such matters as *אהבה רבה אלהינו*, of God's great love for Israel?

For an answer to these questions, and a solution to the whole problem of hester panim and Tisha B'av, we may turn to a remarkable

insight offered by two of the earliest giants of the Hasidic movement. The Hasidic classic, the "דברי יצחק", records two questions asked of R. Pinhas of Koretz, the disciple-colleague of the Baal Shem Tov, and the one answer that both gave to the two questions.

The first question concerns the well known tradition, recorded in the Talmud, that the Messiah was born on Tisha B'av. Is it not unreasonable to assert that the purest of all souls, the exalted agent of the Almighty in the long awaited redemption of Israel, would come into this world on the very day distinguished for infamy and grief? Is not this the single most inappropriate day for such an historic event? Second, the Talmud records a most marvelous tale. It relates that when the enemy broke into the sacred precincts of the Temple and laid low its walls, they entered the inner sanctum wherein there stood the two Cherubim, the statuettes resembling the faces of young, innocent children, and from between which the voice of God would issue forth. When the enemy beheld these Cherubim, the Talmud relates, they found that the two figurines were facing each other. Now this is most unexpected, because according to Jewish tradition, the Cherubim faced each other only when Israel was obedient to God ( *כי פניו כפני ישראל* ); when Jews did not perform the will of God, the Cherubim turned away from each other. The destruction of the Temple was certainly the result of Israel's disobedience and rebellion. One would expect, therefore, that they turn their faces away from each other. Why, then, were they facing one another, the sign of mutual love between God and His people?

The answer is a profound insight into the nature of love and friendship. The attachment between two people is always strongest just before they part from each other. Two friends may continue their friendship with each other on an even keel for many years. Their loyalty requires of them no outward expression, even if they do not take each other for granted. Then, one of the two prepares to leave on a long, long journey. How poignant does their friendship suddenly become! With what longing do they view each other! Similarly, husband and wife are involved in the daily struggles and trivialities that cloud their true feelings for each other. But when one is about to leave for a protracted vacation or sick leave or business trip, and they know they will not be near and with each other for a painfully long period, then they suddenly rise to the very heights of mutual love and dedication, and they behold each other with new warmth and yearning and sweet sorrow. Indeed the Halakhah declares this as a mandatory expression of the right relationship between husband and wife: *אדם רגיל עמוס עמוס* -- when one is about to take leave for a long journey, he must be especially tender and loving towards his wife.

Now the love between God and Israel follows the same pattern as genuine human love. Tisha B'av was the beginning of the hester panim, the parting of the lovers. God and Israel turned away from each other, and the great, exciting, and immensely complicated relationship between the two companions, begun in the days of Abraham, was coming to an end. But before this tragic and heartbreaking

moment, there took place a last, long, lingering look, the fervent embrace of the two lovers as they were about to part. At the threshold of separation they both experienced a great outpouring of mutual love, an intense *אהבה* as they suddenly realized the long absence from each other that lay ahead of them; in so brief a time they tried to crowd all the affection the opportunities for which they ignored in the past, and all the love which would remain unrequited in the course of the future absence. That is why the Cherubim were facing each other. Certainly the Israelites were rebellious and in contempt of the will of God. But they were facing each other; God and Israel looked towards each other longingly and in lingering affection before they were pulled apart. And from this high spiritual union of God and Israel was created the soul of the Messiah! *היה* was conceived in intense and rapturous love!

From this exquisitely intensified relationship before the long separation, we may gain a new insight into the relationship of God and Israel during this prolonged period of hester panim initiated by the destruction of the Temple. True and devoted friends never forget each other -- even if anger and offense have caused them to separate from one another. Of genuine friends it may never be said that "out of sight, out of mind." Where there was once deep and profound love between husband and wife, some spark of it will always remain no matter how sorely their marriage has been tried. Absence, indeed, may make the heart grow fonder and the old love may well be reawakened. Those who deal with marital problems have

observed that often a couple will undergo legal separation, and that very absence from each other will make them realize how they need and yearn for each other -- and thus lead to reunion. A father may be angry with his son, so angry that they no longer speak with each other. But the father's heart aches, his sleep is disturbed, and his heart lies awake at night waiting for his son to call, to write, to make some small gesture towards reconciliation. All these are instances of separation tense with love striving for reunion.

Such indeed is the hester panim that separates us from our Father in heaven. We are exiled from Him -- but not alienated. We are so far -- yet so close. We are separated -- but not divorced. God's face is hidden -- but His heart is awake. Of course the divine **love for Israel** has not expired. It is that and that **alone** that accounts for our continued existence to this day. Certainly "with a great love hast Thou loved us" -- for though we are banished, we need but call to Him and He will answer. Like a wise parent, the Almighty may punish, even expel, but never ceases to love His child!

Have we any evidence of this phenomenon in the history of Israel in our own times? I believe we do, but I approach the subject *מבטא / מתיאבב*, with trepidation. If one were to ask: was it worth experiencing a holocaust which decimated one third of our people in order to attain a State of Israel?, then not only an affirmative answer but even the very question is a blasphemy. Only a cruel,

heartless jingoist could ever allow such thoughts to poison his mind. Yet the past is done and cannot be undone. History is irrevocable. We may protest it and bemoan it and regret it, but it is there despite us. A tremendous paradox emerged from the paroxysms of our times, and we must strive to understand it: during one lifetime we witnessed the nadir of Jewish history, the descent into the very pit -- and the rebirth of Jewish independence in pride and glory.

The holocaust was the most intense, the most dismal hester panim we have ever experienced. God abandoned us to the vilest scorpions that ever assumed the shape of man. From our agony and our dishonor we cried to heaven, but our cries could not pierce the metal veil, which only reflected our shrieking back upon us to mock us in our terrible loneliness and torment. Auschwitz was the device of human genius as God turned aside. Buchenwald was built by human toil and intellect as God closed His eye.

Yet we survived the experience: crippled, maimed, decimated, disgraced, we yet trudged back from the death camps and displaced persons camps, from the fury and the wrath, and from the shameful silence of the onlookers, to a land promised us 3500 years ago. Providence did not allow us to be utterly destroyed. The veil of God ensconced us in misery; but through it, mysteriously, there shone a vision of love. In retrospect, right before the hurban of European Jewry, the State of Israel was being providentially prepared so that the survivors might emerge into new dignity. God too followed the

Halakhah: *וְיָצֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת אֲרָם מִלְּפָנֵינוּ*. Before He "walked out on us," before He forsook us and turned away from us, He provided for our perpetuation, for a new generation and a new life and a new spirit.

Job taught us a long time ago that there are no easy answers to the mystery of suffering. Certainly the unspeakable agonies of a whole people cannot be easily explained, much less explained away. But from the hints left to us by our Sages in the folios of the Talmud about the birth of Messiah and the position of the Cherubim, we may begin to search for direction and understanding and meaning of the history of our times and the mysterious relationship between God and Israel.

Even while intoning the sorrowful lament of Jeremiah, *וְיָצֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת אֲרָם מִלְּפָנֵינוּ*, bemoaning God's aloofness and our forlornness, we recite the same Prophet's words in the same Book of Lamentations as he senses intuitively that *וְיָצֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת אֲרָם מִלְּפָנֵינוּ* -- the love of the Lord has not come to an end, His compassion has not ceased.