



הסתר פנים When G-d Turns Away

■ Forging a Covenant

The once-in-history Stand at Mount Sinai, at which Bnei Yisrael received the Torah in an event of epic proportions, also marked the forging of a historic and Divine covenant between Hashem and Israel. As we read in Parashat Mishpatim:

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַדָּם וַיִּזְרֹק עַל הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר,
הִנֵּה דַם הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת ה' עִמָּכֶם עַל כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה.

*Moshe took the blood and threw it on the people,
and said, "Here is the blood of the covenant that G-d has
forged with you concerning all these words."* (Sh'mot 24,8)

What are "*all these words*"? They are the Ten Commandments, which can be summed up in the first two of them: אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, "*I am the Lord your G-d*" (Sh'mot 20,2), and לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, "*You shall not have any other gods beside Me*" (20,3). If we put the two of them together, the result is this:

1. Hashem is G-d, and
2. He is the only G-d.

That is to say, the first is a *positive* instruction, and the second one *negates* any other possibility. Idol worship is thus absolutely forbidden - even if Israel worships Hashem at the same time. This duality was precisely the state of affairs that Eliyahu HaNavi encountered on Mount Carmel, leading him to conduct the great showdown with the idolatrous prophets of Baal and Asherah and then rebuke the nation: "*How long will you straddle both sides? If Hashem is G-d, go after Him, and if the Baal, then go after him...*" (Kings I 18,21)



After Eliyahu orchestrated the great wonder in which he prayed to G-d and fire dropped miraculously from the sky to consume the offered sacrifice, the nation burst out with the proclamation that we recite repeatedly in our High Holiday prayers:

ה' הוא האֱלֹהִים, ה' הוא האֱלֹהִים!
Hashem is the G-d! Hashem is the G-d! (verse 39)

They said it precisely twice, indicating what we stated above: Hashem is the G-d, and *only* Hashem is the G-d! If we were to punctuate it, it would read like this: “Hashem, He is the G-d; Hashem [alone] is the G-d.”

In one chapter in the Book of D'varim, Moshe Rabbeinu plainly emphasizes this insight - not once, but twice:

אַתָּה הָרֵאָתָ לָדַעַת כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְבָּדוֹ.
*You have been shown to know that Hashem is the G-d;
 there is none other but Him.* (D'varim 4,35)

This verse tells us first that *Hashem is the G-d*, and then the flip-side: *there is none other but Him*. A few verses later we read both points again:

וַיִּדְעֶתָ הַיּוֹם וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל לִבְבְּךָ כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים
 בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת אֵין עוֹד.
*You shall know today, and acknowledge in your heart,
 that Hashem is the G-d,
 in the heavens above and in the earth below;
 there is none other.* (verse 39)

In both verses we are taught:

1. Hashem is G-d, and
2. He is the only G-d.

This is also the meaning of the first verse of Kriat Sh'ma, known as the Verse of *Yichud*, Unification, where again we emphasize:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד.
Hear O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One. (D'varim 6,4)

That is, Hashem is our G-d, and *only* He is our G-d – the One and only.

This principle will help us understand the third passage of Kriat Sh'ma, that of Tzitzit. Within the space of five verses, there appear to be three unnecessary repetitions. The first example is the following pair of verses:



וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל כַּנְּפֵי בְּגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם
וְנָתַנּוּ עַל צִיצִית הַכֹּנֶף פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת. וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית...

*They shall make fringes on the corners
of their garments throughout their generations,
and they shall place a blue thread on the fringes of each corner.*

This shall be fringes for you... (Bamidbar 15,38-39)

The last phrase appears to be redundant – but not according to the principle we set down above. The Torah simply wishes to emphasize both *this* and *only this*. The first verse tells us how to make tzitzit: there must be a blue thread on each corner; the next verse – *this shall be fringes for you* – means that *only* with this blue thread shall you fulfill the mitzvah of fringes, and nothing else.

The second repetition in this passage is this:

וְרָאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת ה' וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם...
לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי...

*And you shall see it,
and remember all of Hashem's commandments
and fulfill them... So that you will remember
and fulfill all My commandments...* (verses 39-40)

Twice in a row the Torah tells us to remember and fulfill – why? Again, based on the above, the answer is clear: The emphasis in the second verse is that, in addition to remembering and fulfilling the mitzvot, we must know that *only* G-d's commandments are to be remembered and performed! We must not stray after the inclinations of our heart or eyes regarding idol worship, forbidden relationships, and the like – as verse 39 continues: *“Do not stray after your hearts and after your eyes.”* This is why the Torah then adds, in verse 40, the words: *“you shall be holy unto your G-d,”* meaning you must be solely dedicated to the service of G-d, and not to other things that are forbidden.

And finally, this next verse in the Tzitzit passage follows the same pattern:

אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם... אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

I am Hashem your G-d Who took you out of Egypt...

I am Hashem your G-d. (verse 41)

Why tell us twice that Hashem is our G-d? Because it is following the same pattern: After G-d promises to be Israel's G-d, He wishes to emphasize that



only the People of Israel, and no other nation, will merit this lofty level. *I am Hashem your G-d* – and not of any other people. The first verse emphasizes that your G-d is none other than Hashem, and the second one tells us that Hashem is *your G-d* and that no other nation can claim this privilege.

All this returns us to the covenant that G-d made with Yitzchak Avinu. Hashem told Avraham:

– אַבְרָם שָׂרָה אֶשְׂתְּךָ יֵלֶדְתְּ לָךְ בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ אֶת שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק...

*But your wife Sarah will in fact bear you a son,
and you will call his name Yitzchak -*

וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְזַרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו.

*and I will establish My covenant with him,
for an eternal covenant with his seed after him.* (B'reshit 17,19)

But Avraham has another son, Yishmael. Will G-d also forge a covenant with him, just like with Yitzchak? Here is G-d's answer:

וְלִישְׁמַעֲאֵל שָׁמַעְתִּיהָ הִנֵּה בִּרְכָתִי אִתּוֹ וְהִפְרִיתִי אֹתוֹ
וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֹתוֹ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד

שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר נְשִׂאִים יוֹלִיד וְנִתְּתִיו לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל.

And regarding Yishmael, I have heard you.

Behold I have blessed him and made him exceedingly great.

He will father twelve princes,

and I will make him a great nation. (verse 20)

Yishmael receives many blessings – but not the covenant! And the Torah makes sure, in the very next verse, that there is absolutely no misunderstanding: *“But My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak, whom Sarah shall bear for you next year at this time”* (verse 21). In short, G-d is saying:

1. I am forging a covenant with Yitzchak,
2. and only with Yitzchak – no one else.

■ Violation of the Covenant

Let us return to the *brit* between G-d and Israel. Towards the end of the Torah, we read of a harsh, Divine warning of what is liable to happen to Am Yisrael after Moshe's death. The warning details the heavy sins that are liable to occur, and the consequent punishments. On the face of it, these



seem to be fair, in that they are commensurate with the crime. But upon deeper reflection, we see that this is actually not the case.

Hashem tells Moshe that the expected sin is as follows:

הִנֵּה שׁוֹכְבִים עִם אֲבוֹתֵיךָ וְקָם הָעָם הַזֶּה וְזָנָה אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵי גֵזֶר הָאָרֶץ... וְעָזְבוּנִי...

*Behold, you will lie with your fathers,
and this nation will arise and stray after
the alien gods of this land...
and they will abandon Me...* (D'varim 31,16)

The sin is comprised of two parts: Straying after alien gods, and abandoning G-d. With both of these elements present in Israel's sin, it is viewed as a full-fledged violation of the covenant between G-d and the People of Israel, as the verse itself concludes:

וְהִפְּרוּ אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אִתָּם.

and they will have abrogated the covenant that I forged with them.

We also see these two parts of the sin in the words of the Prophet Yirmiyahu:

כִּי שְׁתִּימִים רָעוֹת עָשָׂה עַמִּי. אֶתִּי עָזְבוּ מְקוֹר מַיִם חַיִּים
לְחַצְבֵי לָהֶם בְּאֵרוֹת בְּאֵרֹת נִשְׁבְּרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִכְלוּ הַמַּיִם.

*For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me, the spring of living waters,
to dig for themselves cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.* (Jeremiah 2,13)

They have both abandoned G-d *and* strayed in foreign pastures.

From the above, we see that if Israel commits only one part of the sin, this does not yet nullify the covenantal agreement with Hashem. In other words, leaving G-d yet not turning to idol worship, or worshipping both G-d and idols at the same time, should not be considered a nullification of the covenant. Only if they commit both parts of the sin – turning away from G-d and worship false gods – would this be considered an actual violation of their covenant with Hashem.

■ No Replacement

Hashem describes to Moshe the expected punishment for Israel's violation of the *brit*:



וְחָרָה אַפַּי בּוֹ בַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְעִזְבֹתֵימָם וְהִסְתַּרְתִּי פְנֵי מֵהֶם...
*I will be very angered at [the nation] on that day,
 and I will leave them and hide My face from them...* (D'varim 31,17)

In other words, just as the sin was two-pronged, so too will be the punishment: Hashem will both “*leave them*,” corresponding to the sin of “*they will abandon Me*” (D'varim 31,16), and will also “*hide [His] face*” - *Hester Panim* - corresponding to “*they will stray after the alien gods of this land*” (in the same verse).

It is perhaps surprising that the punishment is only that Hashem will “hide His face,” and will not simply replace Israel in His covenant with another nation, Heaven forbid. It appears that no matter what Israel does, and even if it seeks out foreign gods, Hashem will not repay them in kind and will not violate His covenant with them. This inference is perfectly clear and unambiguous, and will be declared outright as the prophecy unfolds, as we will see.

The Divine “hiding of face” and the accompanying tribulations will lead the Jewish People to draw a despairing and mistaken conclusion, as the above verse continues:

וּמִצָּאָהוּ רַעוֹת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת, וְאָמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא:
 הֲלֹא עַל כִּי אֵין אֱלֹהֵי בְּקִרְבֵי מִצָּאוֹנִי הָרַעוֹת הָאֵלֶּה.
*Many evils and troubles will befall them,
 and they will say on that day:
 Is it not because our G-d is not in our midst that
 these evils have befallen us?*

They will believe that Hashem has totally abandoned them. What will be His response?

וְאֲנֹכִי הִסְתַּר אֶסְתִּיר פְּנֵי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כָּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
 כִּי פָנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים.
*I will certainly hide My face on that day,
 for all the evil that Israel did in turning to other gods.* (verse 18)

We have already heard about the Divine “hiding of the countenance” in the previous verse. What new point is the Torah making here?

The Torah is here telling us not what the “hiding” includes, but what it does *not* entail – namely, Divine detachment. In light of the terrible troubles that are to befall Israel as a result of their sins, they might despair that G-d



has decided to totally abandon them and even replace them with another nation. This is a very dangerous error; Israel might then be led to conclude that “not only has Hashem broken His bonds with us, but we, too, are now free to choose our own way and be like the other nations.”

Hashem therefore emphasizes that this thought is totally false, and that He has not detached His links with Israel. We must understand this verse as follows:

I will certainly hide My face – and not more than that, as you might have suspected – *on that day*, though I will still remain in your midst, *for all the evil that Israel did*, even *in turning to other gods*.

Though Israel has turned to other gods, Hashem does not turn to other nations. He is still amongst us. He will “hide His face,” but will not turn it totally away.

■ Detachment from the Land

But this question may still be asked: Why do we say that Israel will be mistaken in assuming that G-d has left them, if He actually said so straight out: וְעִזַּבְתִּים, *I will leave them* (verse 17)?

The answer is rooted in the correct understanding of the term *Hester Panim*, Hiding of the Divine Countenance. It means that G-d’s “face,” or His direct providence over Israel, is suspended; His providence will be only indirect – not via Eretz Yisrael. How so?

Of all the places in the world, it is the Land of Israel that merited to receive G-d’s perpetual supervision, as we read in the Torah:

אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָהּ. תָּמִיד עֵינֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּהּ,
מֵרֵשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרִית הַשָּׁנָה.

*The Land that Hashem your G-d cares about;
His eyes are always upon it, from the beginning of
the year until the end of the year.* (D'varim 11,12)

If G-d remains in control over the Land, yet hides His face from the Nation, this can mean only one thing: the exile of the Nation from the Land. When Hashem says וְעִזַּבְתִּים, *I will leave them*, He means that they will be detached from the Land of Israel.

This is precisely what the Torah warns us about in Bechukotai: וְהֶאֱרַץ תֵּעָזֵב: מֵהֶם, “*The Land will be detached/abandoned from them.*” (Vayikra 26,43)



At the same time, the following must also be made clear: When Hashem says He will not supervise Israel directly and will ignore them, this refers only to supervision involving miracles that bring life, blessing and peace. But a minimal form of Divine supervision over the nation will always continue, even when Israel is exiled to other lands. Hashem will always make sure that Israel will not be totally destroyed, even if He does not lead them with open miracles and special blessings. As we read at the end of the curses in Bechukotai:

וְאִם גַּם זֹאת בְּהִיּוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם, לֹא מֵאֲסִתִּים וְלֹא גְעֻלֹתִים
לְכַלְתָּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיהֶם.

*Even this: When they are in their enemies' land,
I will not become so disgusted with them that
I would destroy them and break My covenant with them,
for I am the Lord their G-d.* (Vayikra 26,44)

Note the emphasis: Israel's sins, no matter how severe, will not anger G-d to the point that He *would destroy them*; He still maintains His indirect providence over them.

Showing the amazing extent of Hashem's covenant with Israel, our Sages taught:

Wherever Israel is exiled, the Divine Presence is exiled with them.
(Megillah 29a)

This tells us that when Israel is exiled, Hashem removes His miracles-laden, Eretz Yisrael-style providence, replacing it with a reduced version of providence – one that merely ensures that they will not be destroyed. It can be compared to the minimal bodily functions in effect when a person is sleeping, as opposed to the “all systems go” that apply when he is awake and active. When he is asleep, only vital functions are operative, ensuring that the person remains alive; but when he is conscious, creative and proactive, his bodily systems use up much more “CPU,” as it were.

The period of *Hester Panim* ended when we returned to the Land of Israel. We can all see very clearly – “*eye to eye*,” as Isaiah says (52,8) – how the above-board and miraculous Divine Providence has gradually returned, continuing to accompany us every day.

Let us conclude with a beautiful Rabbinic saying that dramatizes very clearly that which is happening to our nation these very days:



R. Chiya Raba and R. Shimon bar Chalafta were walking in the Arbel Valley before dawn, and they saw the first signs of the sun's rays beginning to appear on the horizon. R. Chiya Raba turned to R. Shimon and said: "This depicts the Redemption of Israel: It begins little by little, and then gets increasingly greater." (Jerusalem Talmud, B'rachot 1,1)

