

He will say on that day, “Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?” And I will surely conceal My face on that day. (31:17,18)

Hashem warns that if *Klal Yisrael* does not put a halt to their sinful behavior, He will have no recourse but to conceal His Countenance from them. *Rashi* explains *hester panim*, Divine concealment, as if Hashem does not see our pain. *Targum Onkeles* adds, “I will distance them, and remove My *Shechinah* from them.” Apparently, the Torah has a concept of sinful behavior which incurs punishment. If we do not sin, we will, of course, not receive any affliction or hardship which we do not deserve. It seems, however, that if one sins continuously, almost as if ignoring Hashem’s Presence, it indicates that he does not care or he has been so victimized by his *yetzer hora* that he has relegated himself to a state of rebellion. It would appear that *hester panim* adds to the punishment. What is added to the actual pain of the punishment?

The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains that as long as the *Shechinah* is present and actively involved in the punishment, it can arouse Heavenly mercy. For example, when a child acts up and deserves punishment which he duly receives, he still has the capacity to arouse his father’s compassion to refrain from carrying the punishment through in its fullest form. Likewise, in our relationship with the Almighty. Even when we deserve the punishment, we can always plead, cry and do whatever it takes to arouse Heavenly mercy. We are Hashem’s children, and He will listen. Once the punishment goes into *hester panim* mode, this all changes.

Continuous sin is a sin without pause. At no time do we take a break to mull over our actions, realize our mistakes, express our remorse and halt our sinful behavior until the next time that the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, takes hold of our senses. Continuous sin indicates that one simply does not care, has no need to reconsider his actions, and is not concerned about their ramifications. Such action does not beget a merciful response.

Hester panim is a terrible decree. *Horav Aharon Kotler, zl*, explains that when *Klal Yisrael* experiences *hester panim*, some of our people begin to have spiritual doubts about Hashem. When they do not experience His Presence, they begin to wonder where He is. (Veritably, He is there – but concealed. The question that was on the mouths of some Jews during and following the Holocaust was: “Where was G-d during the Holocaust?” The answer is: “Where was He not?” Anyone who “opened” his eyes saw Him.) As a result of this doubting, serious deficiencies in their faith begin to emerge through the cracks. These lacunae in faith are the precursor of yet greater *hester panim*. The cycle continues until someone wakes up, realizes what is happening, and acts to prevent even greater damage.

How does one stop the decline and put an end to the *hester panim*? *Horav Levi Dicker, zl*, observes that while warning us of the possibility of *hester panim*, the Torah introduces a positive note: *ki lo sishkach mi pi Zaro*, “The Torah will not be forgotten by future generations.” The

antidote to *hester panim* is Torah study. Even when Hashem conceals His Presence from among us, we can alleviate the situation by immersing ourselves in Torah study.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains why this is so. *Chazal* teach that from the time of the destruction of the *Bais HaMikdash*, it is as if Hashem has no “place” in this world other than the *daled amos shel halachah*, four cubits of Torah study. Hashem can be found wherever Torah is studied. *Hester Panim* is not manifest where Torah is studied.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* notes that this phenomenon was evident with regard to the *Mirrer Yeshivah*. The cataclysmic destruction of European Jewry was continuing unabated in Europe, while the *yeshivah*, having safely escaped to Kobe, Japan, and then to Shanghai, China, was able to relocate and re-establish the institution for the duration of the war. It was no vacation. They suffered physical deprivation and never lost sight of their brethren in Europe, but, amidst their Torah learning, they did not experience *hester panim*.

Horav Yitzchak Menachem Dancyger, zl (Akeidas Yitzchak), was the leader of thousands of *Alexander chassidim*. He was murdered by the Nazis in Treblinka. Concerning the *pasuk*, “Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?” he asked, “Why should this person be punished with *hastoras panim*? Why should Hashem conceal Himself from him?” He responded, “A Jew should believe that in the thick of every *tzarah*, trouble, affliction, illness, Hashem is with him experiencing his pain. Because he claims that Hashem is not with him – Hashem in turn conceals himself from him.” If we would only realize this. We are never alone – especially during those moments of serious travail when we think Hashem has forsaken us, He is right there with us!

We do not despair. We do not give up hope. A Viennese physician who endured three years of purgatory in Auschwitz was asked why among the Jewish inmates who served as *kapos* (prison functionaries who were themselves prisoners, assigned by the Nazis SS guards to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks), there were no *rabbanim*. What was the secret of their invulnerability to this opportunity for making life easier for themselves? The *kapos* were, for the most part, men of great intellect who saw an opportunity to save themselves from forced labor (at times at the expense of their brothers and sisters). This would have been a perfect opportunity for the rabbis, who certainly were not lacking in acumen. They, too, could have taken advantage and ameliorated their imprisonment, so that they could live.

The physician replied that a person who understands that life has purpose and everything that occurs in his life has meaning – a goal and an objective – does not relinquish his *Tzelem Elokim*, Divine image (to collaborate with human vermin such as the Nazis). He cries, he is in pain; he will scream – but he will not give up hope. All this is for a reason. He is part of a Divine Masterplan.

Heretofore, we have adhered to *Rashi's* explanation of *hester panim*, which suggests that Hashem acts as if He does not see our distress during our periods of travail. This is due to our forsaking the

covenant when the relationship between us and Hashem becomes challenging as a result of our less than satisfactory behavior. Hashem's concealment causes – or at least facilitates – our travail.

The *Bechor Shor* offers an alternative interpretation. He writes that Hashem conceals His Presence, because He cannot bear to witness His children in pain. Thus, His concealment is an act of love and compassion – not punishment. It is no different from a loving father who must turn his eyes away when he sees his child suffering and in pain. According to this *p'shat*, explanation, Hashem's concealment is not the cause of our pain; rather, it is Hashem's "coping" mechanism. If we would only feel the same way about ourselves as Hashem feels about us, we would not have to experience the pain and grief which result from our misdeeds.

When bad things happen, we immediately pass judgment and blame Hashem. Why is He doing this to us? We never bother giving Him the benefit of the doubt and assume our personal responsibility for what takes place in our lives. We conveniently forget our shortcomings, but never seem to overlook Hashem's actions which do not coincide with our expectations. We claim that we do not see Him, but we simultaneously refuse to open up our eyes and look. At times we have a "fog" around us which might take years to dissipate. The following intriguing story, quoted by Rabbi Nachman Seltzer, is a classic example.

A distinguished *Rav*, a noted speaker, was flying to America for a lecture series. In the seat next to him was a Jew who was about to sink his teeth into his non-kosher meal. The man was clearly Jewish, the label on his dinner had his name, Mr. Weinstein (not a very gentile name). This troubled the *Rav*, because the airline gladly served kosher meals. In fact, one had to specifically order non-kosher. "Excuse me, sir, I see that you are Jewish," the *Rav* began. "May I ask why you ordered a non-kosher meal?" The man smugly replied, "I do not keep kosher." "Still, you could have ordered a kosher meal," the *Rav* countered. "What part of 'I do not keep kosher' do you not understand?" was the man's terse reply. This was the end of their conversation.

An hour later, the man said to the *Rav*, "Let me explain why I have nothing to do with religion. I was in the camps. I had already lost my wife and most of my children. I had one son left, Kasriel Menachem, a young, sweet boy. All we had was each other. Then the Nazis came and separated us. My son cried bitterly. I begged them to take me instead. They took my lovely Kasriel into a room. I never saw him after that. One of the other Jewish prisoners informed me that a Nazi had shot Kasriel. That was it. G-d had taken everything from me." Needless to say, the rest of the trip was traveled in silence. The plane landed in America, and the two travelers went to their individual destinations.

Fast forward four years. The *Rav* was in Yerushalayim for *Yom Kippur*, *davening* in one of the larger *shuls* in Meah Shearim. During a break, he went out to get some air. As he walked a bit, he noticed an older man sitting at a bus stop smoking a cigarette on *Yom Kippur*. He was disturbed by the sight: on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar year, in the Holy City of Yerushalayim, a Jew was publicly smoking with impunity. His revulsion turned to shock when he moved closer and saw

that the man was none other than Mr. Weinstein!

“Mr. Weinstein, *Gut Yom Tov*, do you remember me?” “Yes, yes. From the plane; the rabbi who insisted that I eat kosher,” was Mr. Weinstein’s reply. “Things have not changed. I am still not religious,” he added. “Well, you know that today is *Yom Kippur*. Our *shul* will recite *Yizkor*, the prayer for the dead, in a few moments. Why not join and have a prayer recited for your son.” Mr. Weinstein agreed. This was one thing to which he was willing to concede.

Tears rolled down Mr. Weinstein’s face as he recited the prayers. At the end of *Yizkor*, the *chazzan*, leading the service, motioned to Mr. Weinstein to come over, and he would recite a public *Keil Malei Rachamim* (special prayer for the departed). Mr. Weinstein came over and the *chazzan* began the prayer. When he reached the part where the name of the departed is inserted, he turned to Mr. Weinstein and motioned for the name of his son. “Kasriel Menachem *ben* Yechezkel Sargo.” Suddenly, the *chazzan* began to shake uncontrollably. Sweat poured down his face as he looked at Mr. Weinstein and cried out, “*Abba! Abba!*” and then he passed out.

Mr. Weinstein’s son somehow had lived through the terror, immigrated to *Eretz Yisrael*, grew up, married and raised a beautiful *Torahdik* family. Mr. Weinstein’s life changed. The *nachas* that had eluded him all of these years returned. He died an observant Jew, having witnessed Hashem’s Divine Plan in its “entirety.”