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This week's parashah is Bamidbar, *Numbers*, 1-4 which opens with God's order to Moses to take a census of, to count, "the whole Israelite community." These chapters list the number of males in the various clans within each tribe who are capable of bearing arms: 46,500 from the tribe of Reuben, 59,300 from the tribe of Simeon and so on for a grand total of 603,550. Israelites are counted and recounted in the opening chapters of the book of *Numbers*. So, it's with not a little irony, perhaps, that the ancient rabbis decided to pair this week's parashah with a haftorah from the second chapter of *Hosea* which begins with the words, "The number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea [shore], which can be neither measured nor counted" (*Hosea* 2:1).

Emphasizing that the once countable Israelites are destined to become uncountable is an auspicious beginning for the chapter, but things go south rather quickly. *Hosea* chapter 2 contains some blistering condemnations of the Israelites for their faithlessness. The metaphor used throughout this chapter is the metaphor of marriage. God speaks as a betrayed husband in this chapter, appalled at the adulterous behavior of his wife Israel. In v. 4, God announces their divorce: "She is not my wife, and I am not her husband"; and in v. 6, he says through the prophet "I will also disown her children." Despite the increasingly harsh language and the sense of utter alienation, the chapter ends with a moving reconciliation, when God says in v. 16 "Assuredly, I will speak coaxingly to her and lead her through the wilderness and speak to her tenderly" and then declares "I will espouse you forever; I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy, and I will espouse you with faithfulness; then you shall be devoted to the Lord" (vv 21-22).

In *Hosea* 2, God is a jealous husband and then a reconciled husband. This is not the only passage in the Bible to present God in strikingly anthropomorphic terms—which is to say, to attribute to God human attributes and qualities. Biblical passages liken God to a human by depicting him engaging in a variety of ordinary human activities: He strolls through the garden of Eden, he walks before the Israelites in the wilderness, he savors the smell of sacrifices, and he requires rest after the exertion of creation. The biblical god also experiences a range of human emotions—he is said to love, to hate, to detest, to abominate, to experience jealousy, and he even delights in ridiculing the wicked. He is regularly roused to anger or to mercy and compassion. He feels pleasure and joy as well as sorrow and even regret, changing his mind on more than one occasion. Other verses refer to God's form or body, and while his body may not be composed of flesh and blood, he is said to have hands, a face, a form in whose image humans are created, a form which He can make visible to humans when He wishes and in a fashion He chooses. If one views God's face without permission, the consequences can be fatal, but several biblical characters are granted the privilege of seeing God's form and face. To Ezekiel, God reveals himself as a resplendent human likeness (*kemar'eh adam*) of fiery amber, to Daniel as an old man with snow white hair, to Isaiah as a majestic king in a fulsome roble. Moses, we are told, speaks to God face-to-face.

What are we to make of the Bible's anthropomorphisms? It's natural to ask whether the biblical writers believed in the literal truth of these passages. Did they believe that God had a body or that God experiences emotions of jealousy, anger, love? But I think these questions miss the point. The biblical writers were not Greek philosophers, for whom God was an abstract and immutable first cause whose existence was arrived at through logical deduction. For the biblical writers, God was a living dynamic presence encountered and experienced in the course of every human life. They wanted to understand this god, how he operates, what he wants, expects, and needs from humans, and what it is to live in relationship with him through good times and bad. Storytelling, not rational proof, is their preferred medium; and anthropomorphism is their preferred tool for exploring and articulating the character of God and his multifaceted and dynamic relationship with Israel.

God's relationship with Israel has its ups and downs—times of intimacy and times of alienation—or to use *Hosea*'s terms, times of divorce and reconciliation. And the Bible uses anthropomorphic references to God's face to express these ups and downs. Those with whom God is intimate speak to him face-to-face. When he wants to bless the Israelites, he makes his face shine upon them. But when his people displease him, he withdraws and hides his face

from them. In fact, *Deuteronomy* 31 explains that God hides his face as a response to sin. There, God tell Moses that after his death the people will be faithless. They will "go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land that they are about to enter; they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them" (v 16). And what will God do in response? "(*veḥarah api bahem*—Then My anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them, and I will hide My face from them (*vehistarti panay mehem*); …many evils and troubles shall befall them…Yet I will hide My face (*haster astir panay*) on that day because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods." God hides his face when he is angry at the Israelites. This hiding of the face, this *hester panim*, is a punishment; for when God withdraws, Israel is left alone and unprotected from a variety of evils.

We see this principle in action in *Exodus* 33. At this point in the biblical story, the Israelites have just committed the terrible sin of worshipping a golden calf precisely as Moses was receiving the Torah and preparing to seal the marriage between God and Israel. When the Israelites sin with the calf, God responds—as we saw in *Hosea*—like an enraged husband betrayed on the very day of his wedding. He threatens to revoke his offer of a covenant, annihilate the people, and begin all over again with just Moses. But Moses stands firm in his defense of Israel, and with extraordinary effort urges God not to abandon his people. Somewhat grudgingly, God agrees but the whole experience leads him to propose a greater distance between himself and the people. He tells Moses in *Exodus* 33 that he will no longer guide the people himself. Instead, he will send an angel to guide them in the wilderness. The people mourn this news, and Moses pleads with God. "Now, if I have truly gained Your favor*, hodieni na et derakhekha*—please let me know Your ways...Consider, too, that this nation is Your people…how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us…?" (v 13; 16). God concedes, saying "I will do also this thing that you have asked..." (v 17). But then Moses pushes his luck. Wanting to return to the intimacy of old, before the rupture caused by the Israelites' betrayal, he adds, *"hareni na et kevodekha*—Oh, show me/let me see your glory/your presence!" (v 18). But God responds, "I will make all My goodness pass before you…But you cannot see My face…See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen" (vv 19-23).

God here describes himself as having a face, a hand, and a back. But at this moment, of residual hurt and alienation, he turns his face away. Yes, he allows Moses a vision of his goodness, but he cannot bring himself to resume the old intimacy, to show Moses his face and so Moses sees only his back.

Just like the biblical writers, the Talmudic rabbis harnessed anthropomorphism to explore and express the character of Israel's god and his relationship with Israel. But there are important differences between the anthropomorphisms of the Bible and the anthropomorphisms deployed by the rabbis. The Bible's anthropomorphisms are strong, powerful, and even dignified. God is a king, a warrior, a wise elder, a protector, a merciful overlord, a devoted if somewhat over-zealous husband, a just judge, and a redeemer. The rabbis continue to use these figures, but they also introduce other anthropomorphisms, some of which are downright funny. God is an overworked bureaucrat bossed around by his angels and chastised by the moon indignant about being made the lesser of the two great lights. Unlike biblical anthropomorphisms, many rabbinic anthropomorphisms place God in a subservient or even undignified position. For example, commenting on *Exodus* 13:21 "The Lord went before them [in a pillar of cloud[ by day" (*Ex.* 13:21), R. Yosi ha-Galili says: "Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say it! It was like a father carrying a torch before his son or a ploughman carrying a torch before his servant" (MRSY to *Ex.* 13:21). Here God is depicted as doing something incongruously beneath his dignity; an employer should not be carrying the torch for his employee, or a father for his son! Elsewhere, God is said to provide physical service to Jacob, to braid Eve's hair in preparation for her marriage to Adam, and to serve as Adam's best man. In other rabbinic texts, God is said to don a prayer shawl to teach Moses the order of the prayer service, roll up his sleeves to demonstrate how a ritual slaughter is to be carried out, or act as a tradesman showing Israel how to construct the menorah. In all these cases, God is willing to waive his dignity to prove his love for his people.

Even bolder anthropomorphisms drive home God's devotion to Israel. The biblical prophet Ezekiel had already described God accompanying Israel into exile, but the rabbis develop this idea further: the Shekhinah, or divine presence, was with Israel during the enslavement in Egypt, during the exile to Babylon, during the destruction and exile by Rome. When Israel suffers, God's head and arm ache, the rabbis tell us. And when Israel returns from exile, the Shekhinah will return, too. Employing a play on words, the rabbis read a verse in *Deuteronomy* as teaching not only that God is in exile, but that he is held captive alongside Israel and needs redemption, too. This is a remarkable role reversal—we expect God to be the *agent* of redemption, not its object.

There is a common theme across these anthropomorphisms. They all stress God's extraordinary love and empathy for Israel, a love that upsets hierarchies. This is a powerful message for a people living under the shadow of the devastating events of the first few centuries of the Common Era—the destruction of Jerusalem, the failed Bar Kochba revolt, the Hadrianic persecutions, the conversion of the empire to Christianity, and the increasingly harsh conditions of the Byzantine empire. How were these terrible defeats and continuing subjugation to be understood? As punishment for sin? What sin could possibly justify such suffering? And wasn't it true that many Jews had died for remaining loyal to God under torture and torment? What kind of God would allow these atrocities and how was it possible to remain in relationship with a God who seemed callously indifferent to his people's suffering and pain? How long would he hide his face? For many Jews today, these questions have a renewed significance.

The rabbis grappled with all these questions, and the tools they reached for, to make sense of the Jewish people's experience, were the tools of storytelling and anthropomorphism. But the *Bible's* anthropomorphisms were inadequate. They didn't speak to the later Jewish community's experience. If God was warrior and king, why hadn't he defended Israel? If God was Israel's protector, redeemer and just judge, why hadn't he executed justice and rescued his people? For the relationship with God to survive these shocks, new understandings of God were needed, understandings forged in the crucible of history and expressed through new anthropomorphisms which, as we have seen, highlighted God's undying love and empathy for Israel, his willingness to waive his dignity in service to Israel, to subject himself to the humility of exile and captivity, so that his people would know that despite appearances to the contrary, they are not alone.

It is in this light that we can understand the emergence of new interpretations of the biblical concept of *hester hapanim*—the hiding of God's face. One radical reinterpretation appears in the Talmudic tractate Hagigah. This unit of Talmud contains what may be the world's first set of trigger warnings; it lists 13 verses that reduce various rabbis to tears because they trigger the disturbing image of God's alienation from and cruel treatment of his people. The first two of these verses do not in themselves seem upsetting. They are *Ex.* 23:17, which requires all Israelite males to come to the Temple in festival celebration three times a year to see and be seen by God, and *Deut.* 27:7 which invites the Israelites to offer sacrifices of well-being and to celebrate before God in the Temple. And yet, when Rav Huna reads these verses, he cries. Why should verses that affirm God's desire for intimacy with Israel be an occasion for tears? Because they remind Rav Huna of what Israel will soon lose. They remind him of a time when God will say through the prophet Isaiah, "What good is your multitude of sacrifices to Me? …Who has required this at your hand, to trample my courts?" (1:11-12). Reading these verses, Rav Huna compares God to a master who first invites his slave to sit with him at his table only to then distance himself from him, and he weeps at the cruel withdrawal, the rejection, the lost intimacy.

But Rav Huna is not our only weeping rabbi. Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi are triggered by verses that question our ability to reconcile with God. A verse in *Lamentations* says, "Let him [the sinner] put his mouth in the dust [humble and afflict himself] and perhaps, there may be hope"; a verse in *Zephaniah* says, "Seek righteousness, seek humility, and perhaps you shall be hidden on the day of the Lord's anger." A verse in Amos says, "Hate the evil and love the good and establish justice in the gate, and perhaps the Lord…will be gracious?" Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi read these verses and weep. Shall we undergo affliction, seek righteousness, establish justice, and then only *perhaps* have a hope of avoiding God's wrath and enjoying his grace?

The Talmud continues with more verses that cause other rabbis to weep. Rav Yosef cries at a verse from *Proverbs* about persons swept away without justice. Two verses from *Job* that complain of God's passivity in the face of the suffering of the righteous cause R. Yohanan to weep and cry out, "is there no remedy, no recourse?" as do two additional verses describing the harsh punishment God inflicts on the Israelites for even the most minor and unintentional infractions. The last verse to cause a rabbi to weep is our familiar verse from *Deuteronomy* 31 describing God's hiding of his face. "Yet I will hide My face *(haster astir panay)* on that day because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods." Reading this verse, R. Yohanan weeps and says, "A slave whose master brings upon him evil and troubles, is there any recourse for him?" The idea of such a god is unbearable.

And yet, the Talmud goes on to suggest, perhaps we have it all wrong. Perhaps, in our despair and suffering we have misjudged God. Perhaps when God hides his face, it isn't always because he is angry or indifferent to our suffering. Citing a verse from *Jeremiah* (13:17), the rabbis explore a different reason for God's hidden face. The verse says, "*But if you will not give heed, (bemistarim tivke nafshi)* My soul shall weep *bemistarim* in secret [or in hiding] for your pride; My eyes will surely weep and flow with tears, because the Lord's flock is taken captive"—words that resonate painfully today, by the way. Rav explains the phrase "my soul shall weep in *mistarim*": "God has a place"—a place where he cries—"and it is called *Mistarim*"—*mistarim* is from the same root as *hester* and means a place of hiding, a secret place, where God can turn aside to weep unseen. Suddenly we understand that God is not a cruel and imperious king who feels no compassion when his people suffer. On the contrary, God reacts to his people's suffering with such violent grief that he must hide himself to weep. In the rabbinic midrash on the book of *Lamentations* the single most persistent image is the image of God weeping. God does not distant himself from his people's suffering, he identifies with it. God is more than sympathetic, he is empathetic. Rather than a absent deity *controlling* Israel's fate, the god in these rabbinic texts is an ever-present deity who *shares* Israel's fate.

A second reinterpretation of the biblical concept of *hester hapanim*, appears in a Talmudic discussion of *Exodus* 33 which is the scene after the sin of the golden calf that I described earlier. You will recall that Moses asked God to show him his ways. The rabbis wonder what Moses meant by this. R. Yohanan explains that Moses was puzzled by the moral incoherence of the world—the suffering of the righteous the prosperity of the wicked? So, when Moses asked God to show him his ways he was asking God to explain and justify his governance of the world. But, as the Talmud tells it, God's attempts to explain the lack of justice fell flat. R. Meir concludes that God did not explain the moral chaos in the world to Moses, because he *could not*. What then DID God show Moses in *Exodus* 33? When God placed Moses in the cleft of the rock, covered his eyes, passed by, and then removed his hand, what did Moses actually see?

R. Shimon Hasida answers that God showed Moses the knot of God's *tefillin*, the knot on the back of his head! You may wonder: God wears tefillin—the boxes worn by Jewish men during prayer? Yes, the Talmud says, God engages in prayer, and he wears tefillin on his arm and on his head when he prays—a remarkable (and frankly funny!) anthropomorphism. Now, the tefillin worn by a Jewish male contain the Scriptural passages in which God commands the Israelites to bind His words as a sign on the hand and forehead. But God's *tefillin*, the rabbis tell us, contain verses reminding God of Israel's special and beloved status as the nation he has redeemed and elevated above all nations. If God showed Moses the knot of his head tefillin, it was perhaps his way of saying, don't despair. My face may be hidden but this knot that fastens to my forehead a reminder of my love for my people, is securely in place; as if to say that in the moral chaos of the universe, when God seems absent and we feel most alone, when it seems that God has divorced himself from us, as *Hosea* imagined, the connection is not severed and reconciliation is always possible, as *Hosea* also imagined. The relationship can survive the most brutal of shocks, which means there is always hope, hope that hangs on that little knot.

There are moments, there will always be moments, when the world is on fire, when "the Lord's flock is taken captive," when we cannot sense God's presence. But in those moments of alienation, when God hides his face, it is not because he is angry or indifferent to his people's suffering. It is because he has turned aside to weep. And in

the very act of turning his face away, he shows us the reassuring knot on the back of his head, the knot that holds his undying love for Israel in his memory forever.