

Hiding and Seeking

Rabbi Caryn Broitman

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A story is told of the Rebbe Baruch of Medzibozh whose grandson Yechiel was playing hide and seek with another child. He hid himself for some time until he realized the other child was not looking for him. Yechiel ran to his grandfather and cried. I was hiding but no one was looking for me. "That is exactly how God must feel," his grandfather said. God hides but no one seeks Him."

Last spring I thought a lot about the high stakes game of hide and seek as a metaphor for our spiritual journeys, and as a metaphor for faith. The opportunity for this reflection arose from a seminar I was privileged to take at Harvard Divinity School called "Faith" taught by the insightful theologian Ron Thiemann. I chose to read and think about faith because I think the experience of faith is at the core of religious experience--a core shared by people of different traditions as well as by people who profess no religion at all. The desire for, or experience of faith distinguishes our human journey. For whether or not we believe in God, or observe rituals, we all face illness, death and the fragility of life; we all find moments of transcendence that evoke feelings of awe; and we all need to draw on courage to take risks--whether it is the risk to love, to create, to attach or to let go. All these crossroads in our lives, big or small, require something we call faith or in Hebrew, *Emunah*. The word *Emunah* in Hebrew comes from the root that means to trust, and is the same root of the word, *amen*. Faith or *emunah* is a kind of gift that opens to us resources we didn't know we had--resources of courage, passion, trust and connection to something larger than ourselves. This understanding of faith is different from the

use of the word as a synonym for a religion (“what is your faith”) or a belief in a set of dogmas. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “Faith is not the same as belief, not the same as the attitude of regarding something as true Faith is an act of the whole person, of mind, will, and heart. Faith is *sensitivity, understanding, engagement, and attachment*; not something achieved once and for all, but an attitude one may gain and lose.”¹

In our tradition, *Emunah*, the word for faith or trust, is first used in the Torah about Abraham, who is Judaism’s model of faith. The first thing we learn about Abraham is that he left everything he knew to go on a journey with an unknown conclusion. Sounds like all of our lives. A few chapters later, the actual word for faith is used. God says to Abraham, “Fear not, Avram/I am a shield to you:/Your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1). But Avram looked around and didn’t see any observable indications of God’s promise or presence in his life. He said something like: “You talk of protection and reward, but I don’t see it. I don’t even have a single heir. So let me be practical here. No hard feelings. But I have to call ‘em as I see ‘em. I will name my servant Eliezer my heir.” But God said something like: “No, don’t limit yourself to what you see. Look up, rather, into the sky and see the stars--‘so shall your offspring be.” In other words, if you only look around for what is visible, your vision will be limited. Rather, look *beyond* you. And Abraham did. He looked beyond the visible, and the Torah says, “because Abram put his trust in God”, because he had faith in God, God reckoned it to his righteousness *v’he’emin b’h v’yachshevena lo tzedakah*. (Gen. 15:6)

Abraham’s experiences of faith, whether it was the courage to journey into the unknown, or the trust that he would indeed be a father, or the openness to the voice of the invisible Source of all, were made possible by a sensitivity and an openness to the hidden and concealed. For many of

us in our culture, we focus on what is immediately observable. Ironically, while science emphasizes the observable, it itself discovers more and more layers of what was previously hidden--particles infinitely smaller and universes infinitely larger in number and in size than previously imagined. Among the most profound teachings of ancient religious traditions has been that life at its most meaningful, truthful, and faithful, goes beyond what is immediately observable; and the task of the person of faith is to seek what is hidden, to be sensitive to what is concealed, and to be open to what may be revealed.

The metaphor of God's hiding and our seeking runs throughout Judaism and can be found in the Torah portion we will read this coming Shabbat in Deuteronomy where God declares, "I will surely hide my face on that day (*V'anochi haster astir panai*) because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods" (31:18). From this verse derives the Jewish concept of *Hester Panim*, God's hiding, which is used to describe the experience of a world where it *seems* God is absent. When evil and loss are experienced, it is taught, it is not that God is *absent* but that God is "in hiding." *Hester Panim* teaches that God's perceived absence is actually a presence, though a hidden one, and brings home the paradox that runs across many religions, of absence and presence. Within the experience of God's absence, we are encouraged to seek a presence. If God hides, we humans must seek. In Psalm 27, the psalm that is recited every day of the month of Elul through Yom Kippur, God says, *bakshi panai* (Ps. 27:8), "seek my face/presence. In this way, the idea of *hester panim* moves from a consequence of sin to an existential condition. Experienced differently at different times of our lives, sometimes it is experienced with anguish, as in the verse from Psalms, "Why do you hide Your face, ignoring our afflictions and distress" (Psalm 44); or "How long O Lord, will you hide yourself perpetually". Other times

it is experienced with longing such as described in Isaiah who says, “As long as my spirit is within me I seek you out” (Is. 26:9). King David advises his son Solomon, “If you seek [God], He will let Himself be found by you.” And the Torah in Deuteronomy advises all of us, “if you search there for the Lord your God, you will find Him, if only you seek him with all your heart and soul.” (Deut. 4:29)

The image of God’s hiding in the Bible is expanded in Jewish mysticism, where God’s hiding and human seeking is not just an existential condition but also a cosmic one. Jewish mystics teach that for the divine, revealing and concealing are paradoxically one and the same act, for creation is the garb or clothing, so to speak, of the divine.

When powerful light is concealed and clothed in a garment, it is revealed. Though concealed, the light is actually revealed, for were it not concealed, it could not be revealed. This is like wishing to gaze at the dazzling sun. Its dazzle conceals it, for you cannot look at its overwhelming brilliance. Yet when you conceal it—you can see and not be harmed. So it is with emanation: by concealing and clothing itself, it reveals itself.²

In this understanding, historian of Jewish Mysticism Arthur Green explains, “The ‘lower’ world is in fact a ‘vessel’ or a ‘garment’ to contain that radiating energy. The divine Self emanates through the universe and is revealed, paradoxically, as it is ‘garbed’ in each of the many creatures that inhabit it.”³ In other words, the divine is revealed through all of nature including each of us, even as it is hidden within us. As the Hasidic rebbe of Ger said, In everything there is a living point from the Life of Life. But that inwardness lies hidden in the world. The [task is] to arouse and reveal this inwardness that lies within all things . . .” (Sefat Emet 301)

So far I have talked about hiding and seeking in the

Bible and in Jewish mysticism. But I want to come back to the Hasidic story I opened with, for it is in Hasidism and its commentaries on Deuteronomy 31:18, that hiding becomes a central metaphor for the life of faith. In the biblical verse, (*haster astir panai*), the word for “hiding” is doubled (*haster astir*) in a common biblical construction that is often translated as an emphatic—“I will surely hide.” Hasidic commentators, however, use the double word construction as an opportunity for deeper spiritual meaning. Rather than translating the verse as “I shall surely hide,” they understand it to mean, “I will hide the fact that I am hiding.” That double hiding, they believe, is the challenge of faith—that is, we are challenged to know that God is in hiding so that we can seek God. The challenge is not to *find* God but to know (and desire) to *look* for Him.

If one knows and feels that there is hiddenness, then it is not hiddenness, and the catastrophe is not insurmountable, for then comes the longing for the presence of God, and that breaks through the fences, curtains and divisions, and there is no greater repentance (return) than this. The problem is that the hiddenness is itself hidden, so that one does not feel the desire for God’s love and illumination. That is the meaning of “hiding, I will hide”.⁴

In other words, while for some of us God’s seeming absence is the end of the journey, Judaism teaches that it is the beginning. We may feel God’s absence because we do not see or feel God’s presence or, more darkly, because tragedy or loss seem to argue emphatically against it. Yet as it is written in the Torah, “out of the darkness comes the voice of God.” The darkness, the hiding, the seeming absence of God is not the end of the spiritual journey of faith but an integral part of it. Spiritual awareness involves knowing that there is hiddenness and fully experiencing what the anonymous

medieval Christian mystic calls the “cloud of unknowing.” When we can experience and acknowledge this unknowing as a part of the spiritual journey, we can be more open and receptive to those times when what has been hidden is revealed.

That we live in a dynamic tension of the hidden and revealed is alluded to in the Torah portion we just read this morning in the story of Hagar. Hagar is banished to the desert wilderness with her child and provisioned only with some bread and a skin of water. When the food and water run out it would seem to all our rational minds including Hagar’s, that this was the end. And so Hagar put her child under a bush and walked away, unable to watch him die. But something happened to open Hagar’s eyes, to enable her to see what was beyond the immediately observable, what was beyond her own legitimate fear and unbearable pain. What was previously hidden became revealed--a spring-- giving her and her child new life.

These themes of the hidden and revealed run throughout many of the Bible’s narratives. Aviva Zornberg, in her wonderful book called *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*, touches on themes of hiding in the story of Jacob and in the book of Esther. Let’s turn first to the story of Jacob at the point at which he is running from Esau, having stolen the blessing of the first born. Running away, he begins a journey away from home and into the unknown. On the way, the Torah says he “bumped into a certain place stopped there for the night, for the sun had set.” He went to sleep and had a dream of a stairway that was set on the ground and reached up to the sky with angels going up and down on it. He heard God’s voice saying “Remember, I am with you.” When he awoke he was shaken and then exclaimed, in one of the most moving verses in the Torah: “Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know . . .”

What is startling and ultimately transformative for Jacob is not only that he discovers that God is in this place, but that he discovers that God is in this place *and he did not know*. He realizes, in other words, that God's hiding, so to speak, was hidden from him. As Zornberg writes, "the revelation is the not-knowing; the sense of previous darkness itself intimates a dawning light. In a startled moment, Jacob recognizes the shape of his own ignorance."⁵

Before this profound experience, Jacob is a bit of a know-it-all. He is portrayed in the midrash as spending all day in the yeshiva studying. In the Torah it is his superior knowledge that enables him to be such an effective trickster. Yet his spiritual awakening comes from the newly discovered knowledge that he does not know, that there is hiddenness that was invisible to him. After his experience, hiddenness comes out of hiding and, as Zornberg writes, "[k]nowing now that he did not know, Jacob begins to know" (278).

In this sunset hour, upon the discovery of mystery and hiddenness, Jacob prays. Tradition teaches that Jacob establishes the evening prayer (*ma'ariv*), for Jacob's insight followed by his prayer, took place at night. In Zornberg's words, "The prayer in darkness is the essential prayer In such a prayer, conflict, terror, vulnerability—the knowledge that one is not master in one's own house—may strangely become a 'source of endless life.'

The last story of hiddenness I want to share is that of the book of Esther. There are many layers of hiddenness in this book beginning with its name, which sounds like *haster* or hiddenness. God is not mentioned anywhere in the book, and indeed, the reader experiences a world of *haster panim* or God's hiddenness as evil and chaos reign in the story.

In this context of hiddenness that Mordechai asks Esther to make a choice and risk her life to request a meeting with the King, so she can reveal her true identity and beg him to

save her people from Haman. Since it is against the King's laws for his wives to initiate a meeting, Mordechai is asking Esther to take a great risk to save her people. He does not know how it will end and cannot reassure her that her life will be spared. Nevertheless, he encourages her to act. "Who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." (4:14).

Perhaps -- but then again, who knows? In the book of Esther, like the book of Job, God and endings are hidden. There are no assurances. As Zornberg writes, "[t]he world where God hides His face is a world of chinks and cracks, of intimations, evocations. Esther responds to a hint--'Who knows'--that is invisible to the naked eye. Her soul is entirely her own at this point. Her act is the true miracle of Purim" (Zornberg, p. 129).

I am moved this Rosh Hashanah to speak about hiddenness because I think we are often in the position of Esther -- that is, on our own and facing the "who knows" of our lives. As Heschel writes, "What will happen in the next instant, what is beyond the scope of . . . direct experience, what lies ahead in time or remote in space is behind a veil, recondite and obscure Were [people] not in possession of courage, foresight, and trust, which are the general conditions of faith, there would be no activity."⁶

We are also often in the position of Jacob before his dream about the ladder--not yet aware of our unknowing. We think we know. We live in an age that is dominated by what Marilynne Robinson calls the "hermeneutics of condescension."⁷ Our culture tends to be condescending toward ancient literatures and traditions because we are taught to believe that we know much of what there is to know and certainly more than has ever been known. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: 43 "Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a

simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered. All enigmas can be solved, and all wonder is nothing but ‘the effect of novelty upon ignorance.’”⁸

This hubris is reflected both in the atheist writers like Dawkins and Harris on the one side of the spectrum, and by the religious fundamentalists of all religions on the other. We elevate the visible and the material and call that the “real”; or we insist that particular beliefs or dogmas are absolute and make idols of them.

I believe, however, that an important step in the life of the spirit is to acknowledge hiddenness, to acknowledge unknowing. As the Reverend Ames, a character in one of my favorite novels, *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, says:

see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can’t claim to understand that saying, as many times as I’ve heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension (7).

We are infinitely complex. Neurobiologists tell us that there are more neurons in our brains than stars in the Milky Way. If this complexity makes us incomprehensible to ourselves, how much more so do the mysteries of the universe. Faith is knowing there is mystery, knowing there is hiddenness. With faith, “[s]uddenly,” Heschel writes, “we become aware that our lips touch the veil that hangs before the Holy of Holies. Our face is lit up for a time with the light from behind the veil.”⁹

We must, however, acknowledge the veil, if we are to see the light behind it, and this is a challenge, because

sometimes the veil seems like a wall rather than a gate. Our unknowing is blocked either by the limitations we impose or by our experiences of pain and suffering. Our challenge, therefore, is to not end our journeys before they begin--nor to end them at the junctures when they are most painful and potentially most revealing. As Isaiah says, "Seek the Lord while he can be found/Call to Him while he is near" (Is. 55:6). The truth is, His nearness is often in darkness. The Torah describes the revelation at Sinai as a "voice out of the darkness" (Deut. 5:20). To live with both the darkness and the light, the knowing and the un-knowing, loss and the blessing, the seeking in the midst of the hiding is to live a life of faith.

During the seder, we are accustomed to thinking of Tzafun--the hiding and seeking of the afikoman--as a child's game. Yet hide and seek, in joy and in sadness, is for all of us. "*V'anochi haster astir panai, And I will surely hide my face . . .*" or, "I will hide the fact that I am hidden." The ability to experience and acknowledge God's hiding, so to speak, and yet feel God's presence, is an experience of faith. Faith is the ability to seek God when God is in hiding, and also to marvel at the way God is concealed, even as He is revealed. Faith is to live with the darkness and the light together, and to know that together they are paths toward blessing. As the Reverend Ames writes to his son in the novel *Gilead*, "There are pleasures to be found where you would never look for them. That's a bit of fatherly advice . . ."10

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Ferrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1991), p. 154.

² Moses Cordovero in Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995) p. 91.

³ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 105.

⁴ *Hidushei HaRim* in *Itturei HaTorah*, Vol. 6, ed. by Aharon Ya'akov Grenberg (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1987), p. 199.

⁵ Aviva Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken, 2009), p. 270.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. by Suzannah Heschel (New York: Ferrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), p. 338.

⁷ Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 14.

⁸ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 43.

⁹ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur*, p. 339.

¹⁰ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), p. 39.