

Parshat Vayeilech 5777

‘And My fury will rage against them on that day, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them, and they will be consumed, and many evils and troubles will befall them, and they will say on that day, ‘Is it not because our God is no longer among us, that these evils have befallen us? And I will hide My face on that day, because of all the evil they have committed, when they turned to other deities. And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it into their mouths, in order that this song will be for Me as a witness for the children of Israel.’ (Devarim 31:17/18/19)

The phrase ‘But I will surely conceal My face’ encapsulates the concept of Hester Panim. Hashem hides his face when K’lal Yisroel forsake Hashem's covenant which is a form of punishment such that God's hand in our destiny and everyday life would not be apparent. Other commentators add that the expression ‘הִסְתַּר אֶפְתָּיִם’ symbolizes a punishment different to the standard, active divine response to sin. It expresses a punishment of silence where by God’s presence is no longer felt by K’lal Yisroel. When God forgets His people, all kinds of suffering can befall them, and He will not intervene.

Since klal Yisrael accept that they have sinned in the above pesukim, the Ramban asks why Hashem nevertheless continues to conceal His face. The Ramban answers that their declaration of guilt was not a full confession. Ramban continues, pointing out that the hiding was different. Hashem no longer hid His face of mercy thus protecting them from evil, but He maintained his concealment of His “face of redemption”. Only when Klal Yisrael’s teshuva is complete will the ultimate redemption be revealed.

The Ramban explains that teshuva requires a full confession. The Yesod Ha-Avodah writes that complete teshuvah must come from the depths of one's heart, preparing one to withstand future temptation. This kind of teshuvah uproots sin from its source retroactively.

The Rambam states in his Mishneh Torah that anyone who verbalizes his confession without resolving in his heart to abandon sin can be compared to one who immerses himself while holding the carcass of a lizard (which is tamei) in his hand. His immersion will be of no avail until he casts away the carcass.

To understand these ideas more fully, we have to understand the purpose of a verbal confession and what a complete teshuva means. The Sefer Ha’Chinuch writes that articulating one’s repentance produces a feeling of conversing with a second party, which; sensitizes a person to the reality of Hashem’s awareness of his every action, and the need to render an account before Him. The greater a person’s knowledge that his sin was done in Hashem’s presence, the greater is his regret. Verbal expression

strengthens the process. Such repentance will be sincere and lasting. This means that his commitment not to repeat the sin, is genuine. The Rambam writes that the commitment must be so decisive that if the person were in the same position again he would not be tempted to commit that sin again.

Sefer Yereim says that the sinner must acknowledge and recognise the seriousness of the damage caused by the sin; in terms of the damage to one’s neshamah, one’s relationship to Hashem, and the effect on the world by closing the channel of blessings. One must entreat G-d to forgive, and repair the damage. Just as davening must be verbalized to establish a feeling of communication, so too, must one’s entreaty for atonement be verbalized.

Chazal say on the verse, “I am asleep but my heart is awake” (Shir ha’Shirim 5:2), ‘my heart’ refers to Hashem. Though the Jew sleeps and loses consciousness of Hashem, Hashem still occupies his heart. An incomplete confession results in Hashem continuing to be with us, but still hidden. Teshuvah then is the return of the Jew to his essence and the breakdown of the barriers that separate him from Hashem. Hashem does not leave the Jew when he sins; rather the Jew loses contact with Hashem, who still resides within the essence of his neshamah.

On Yom Kippur we will say Vidui. By articulating ones sins in “vidui”, we make the sin external to ourselves, enabling one to detach the layers of sin that have stained the neshamah. Therefore “Vidui” itself becomes an act of purification.

The Targum Yonatan translates the word “purify” in the verse “Before Hashem should you purify yourself” (Vayikra 16:30), as “confess”. The confession is itself the act of purification.

The Maharal states that sin cannot blemish the neshamah. Rather sins create layers of impurity that separate a person from his essence. Since the Jew’s connection to Hashem is through that untainted essence, when he becomes distant from his essence, he also becomes alienated from Hashem.

Teshuvah means redemption: “Return to Me for I have redeemed you” (Yeshayahu 4:22). One redeems his unblemished essence from the layers of sin and impurity that encrust it. The longer we fail to understand this aspect of the redemption Hashem will continue to conceal the redemption from us. It is only when we learn to appreciate the aspects of Vidui and recognize that Hashem remains where He always was, waiting for us to strip away the barriers, we can look forward to both personal and national redemption.