

Shemot 5781

I prayed and prayed, and he ignored my cries. Where was God when I needed him and why does he ignore us in our time of need?

This week's Torah portion, Shemot, the beginning of the book of Exodus, contains one of the most dramatic lines in the Torah:

וַיִּקַּם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יוֹסֵף:

A new king arose over Egypt who knew not Joseph.

We can read that line, and tremble, knowing it means bad things are coming for the Jewish people. It's what novelists or screenwriters call foreshadowing.

And indeed, bad things happened. Pharaoh said to his people, "Let us deal shrewdly with them, so they don't multiply and join our enemies in a fight against us." Jews, the perpetual outsiders, have forever struggled to be fully accepted into other societies.

Pharaoh set taskmasters over our people, oppressed them with forced labor, but the Israelites continued to multiply. The Egyptians made life bitter for the enslaved people and ordered the midwives to kill the male babies.

But God came to the rescue! God may have been hidden for a little while, but the Israelites cried out to God; in chapter 2 verse 24, we're told *vayishma Elohim*, God heard their moaning, took notice of them – and sent help.

He appeared to Moses in a burning bush and sent him back to Egypt to be his representative to Pharaoh. God smites the Egyptians with ten plagues. God hardens Pharaoh's heart, just so the signs and wonders needed would be even more wondrous, and everyone, Egyptian and Jew alike, would get the message that God is the one in charge.

If God rescued our ancestors when they were Egypt, why has God seemingly quit rescuing us? Where was God in the Shoah? If God could stop Pharaoh,

why didn't God stop Hitler? Why wasn't God listening to the millions crying out to Him in those awful days?

If we look at God in scripture, we see that there's an evolution in the way God interacts with the world. In the books of Genesis and Exodus, God is a very hands-on God. Creating the world. Destroying it in a flood. Raining fire and brimstone down on Sodom and Gomorrah. Talking directly to people. Rescuing the Israelites in Egypt.

But all of that changes after God gives us the Torah. God gradually has less involvement in the affairs of humanity, until in the book of Esther God seems to be completely absent – not mentioned at all.

What we see is an evolution that is similar to what a parent has with a child – the parent has to do everything for a baby, has to do a lot of things for a child, but once the child has gotten their education and moved out, the parent can't do much but cheer from the sidelines as the young adult has those "learning experiences" which are painful for a parent to watch.

God is still present, but God is letting us work things out on our own. God gets God's work done through us.

During Chanukah and Purim we say the *al hanisim* prayer, praising God for the miracles and wonders and mighty deeds that He did for our ancestors in their days – and in THESE days.

As I mentioned, God is totally absent from the Book of Esther, yet we still praise God for the miracles during Purim. God is equally absent from the Chanukah story – yes, there's the miracle of the oil lasting 8 days, but nowhere does it say that God made that happen. The real miracle is that the small group of Maccabees were able to defeat far more powerful Seleucids – and that happens without any miraculous plagues or earthquakes striking the Seleucids.

We can see signs of God working through people in the Torah, even in this week's Torah portion, if we but look closely enough. Why did the midwives, Shifra and Puah, refuse to kill the male babies? The Torah tells us it was because they were "God-fearing." Not because God told them too – rather because they felt the presence of God. They knew God didn't want them

killing those babies. God was working through them. And God was equally present in the heart of Moses' mother Yocheved when she hid her baby, and then sent him down the river to save his life, and in the compassion shown by Pharaoh's daughter when she rescued the infant. We see God's sense of justice present when Moses strikes down the Egyptian slave master beating a Hebrew slave.

It can be hard to feel God's presence when it's more subtle than plagues and parting seas described in the Torah. In times of darkness, we often feel like it's a time of *hester panim*, God hiding God's face. In Psalm 44, the author cries out, "Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our affliction and distress?"

There are those who say the Shoah was a time of *hester panim*, God's presence was hidden. Yet God's presence has been hidden for a long time. Now that humanity has matured, we've been given the Torah, our instruction manual, God has to hide God's presence if free will is to mean anything.

Even in the dark days of the Shoah, God's presence was manifest, for those who were able to look closely enough. God's presence is felt when we act in Godly ways. God's presence was manifest in the Van Pels family that hid Anne Frank's family for over two years. God's presence was felt in people such as Oskar Schindler who rescued over 1,000 Jews. God's presence gave strength to the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and God's presence was with the millions of Allied soldiers who joined together to defeat the Nazis.

Just as we say the *al nisim* prayer for the miracle of the Maccabees' victory over the forces of Antiochus, even though God's presence was not visible, we can see God's presence in the miraculous victories of Israel over superior forces again in 1948, 1967, and 1973.

If we open our hearts to God's presence, God can provide us support, comfort and strength, just as with the God-fearing midwives in this week's parsha. Rabbi Harold Kushner said, "It's not God's job to make sick people feel better — that's the doctor's job. It's God's job to make sick people brave, and in my experience, he does that wonderfully."

The Torah commands us to "walk in God's ways," and the Talmud explains what that means – it means to "walk" after the attributes of God; as God

clothes the naked, we should clothe the naked; as God visits the sick, we should visit the sick; as God comforts mourners, we should comfort mourners; as God buried the dead, we too should bury the dead.

But more than walking in God's ways, when we do those things, when we act with compassion toward our fellow human, we are making the transcendent, hidden God immanent in our world. We are literally bringing God's presence into the world, bringing God's light into dark and difficult places.

May we all remember that if God seems hidden, it means we're not doing our job of bringing God's presence into our world.