

WHEN G-D HIDES

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Faiga Reva bat Yoel Aharon a"h (Fay Lerner)

This week's parashah describes Moshe Rabbeinu's final day, when he took his leave of the Jewish people and warned them of the consequences of straying from G-d and the Torah. He quotes G-d as saying (31:17-18), "My anger will flare up against [the nation] on that day and I will forsake them; and I will conceal My face from them and they will become prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter [the nation]. It will say on that day, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?' But I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that [the nation] did, for it turned to the gods of others."

Many commentaries ask: The verses appear out of order! Why, after Bnei Yisrael will acknowledge that "it is because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me," will Hashem continue to hide His face? R' Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel z"l (Hungarian rabbi; killed in the Holocaust) wrote in 1943: Pharaoh, too, repented and said, "Hashem is the tzaddik and I and my people are the wicked ones," but his repentance lasted only as long as each plague. As soon as he received a reprieve, he returned to his evil ways.

The repentance described in our verse is similar. The nation "will say on that day, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?'" When our repentance is not sincere, it does not bring us a reprieve from our suffering. To the contrary, it makes G-d angrier and causes Him to hide Himself even more. (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot.)

"Hashem, your Elokim -- He will cross before you; He will destroy these nations from before you . . ."
(31:3)

In light of this promise, why did Bnei Yisrael carry weapons in their war against the Seven Canaanite Nations? R' Dov Berish Gottlieb z"l (Sieniawa, Poland; died 1801) explains:

Sometimes there is a state of "hester panim" (literally, "concealing of the face") in which, because of a sin, man is abandoned to the forces of nature and chance. Therefore, one who goes to battle without weapons is endangering his life and is called a fool. We find similarly that Yaakov Avinu was afraid lest a sin cause him to fall into the hands of Esav (see Rashi to Bereishit 32:10). Accordingly, one must guard himself against accidental injury lest at that moment G-d chooses to hide Himself from him because of some sin. Even the smallest sin can cause Hashem to hide Himself and, if at the moment that a person is distant from G-d, some misfortune occurs, a person can be in danger. The remedy is that in every time of trouble, a person should repent to remove the hester panim from himself. (Quoted in Shomer Ha'pardes: Yesodei Ha'Torah V'ikarei Ha'dat p.113)

"Gather together the people: the men, the women and the small children . . ." (31:12)

The Gemara (Chagigah 3a) says that the reason for bringing small children to the Bet Hamikdash for hakhel (the king's Torah reading once every seven years on the Sukkot after the shemittah) is to reward those who bring them. [The children do not understand the Torah portion which the king reads, so why else would they be brought?] R' Moshe Shick z"l (Hungary; 1805-1879) understands that the reward referred to is given in this world, and he asks: Is this a good thing? Are we not concerned that (in the words of Devarim 32:15), "Yeshurun – Israel – will become fat and kick"?

He answers: If a person has a complete faith in G-d, he will not be hurt by achieving the "good life" in this world. And, the best sign of a person's inner feelings is his children's upbringing. We read (Devarim 29:28), "The hidden [things] are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed are for us and our children . . ." This may be interpreted: "How can one know whether man's hidden feelings are for G-d? The answer is revealed by looking at him and, especially, his children." Therefore, a person who brings his children to hakhel may be rewarded, for this itself is a sign that he can handle that reward. (Maharam Shick Al Ha'Torah)

Teshuvah in the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah

"Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah--one of the completely wicked, one of the completely righteous, and one of beinonim [defined below]. The completely righteous are inscribed and sealed immediately for life. The completely wicked are inscribed immediately for death. 'Beinonim' are left hanging from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed for life. If not, they are inscribed for death." (Rosh Hashanah 16b)

Rambam z"l (1135-1204) writes: "Just as a person's sins and merits are weighed at the time of his death, so the sins of every human being and his merits are weighed every single year on the yom

tov of Rosh Hashanah. Whoever is found to be a tzaddik is sealed for life. Whoever is found to be a rasha is sealed for death. The beinoni is given time until Yom Kippur. If he repents, he is sealed for life, and if not, he is sealed for death. (Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Teshuvah 3:3)

R' Yitzchak Blazer z"l (1837-1907; one of the three primary students of R' Yisrael Salanter, founder of the mussar movement; rabbi of St. Petersburg, Russia, because of which he is known as R' Itzele Peterburger) writes: Rambam appears to understand the term "tzaddik" to refer to a person who has done more mitzvot than aveirot / sins and a "rasha" to be a person who has done more aveirot than mitzvot. Thus, a beinoni must be someone whose mitzvot and aveirot are exactly balanced. If so, asks R' Itzele, why is his judgment dependent on teshuvah? Why can't he just perform another mitzvah or two and thereby be judged a tzaddik?

He explains: When Hashem makes Himself "accessible" to accept man's repentance, as He does during the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah / Ten Days of Repentance, yet a person does not avail himself of that opportunity, that sin is so great that it outweighs any extra mitzvot that a person might do. Thus, only teshuvah can get the beinoni sealed in the Book of the Living.

R' Itzele continues: The work Reishit Chochmah [R' Eliyahu de Vidas (1518-1592; Eretz Yisrael)] explains this with a parable. A band of thieves was caught and thrown in prison. Over time, they dug a tunnel and escaped. However, one member of their group chose to stay behind in their cell. When the king discovered the escape, he said to that one prisoner, "You fool! You could have escaped!" So, too, Hashem exclaims, "Teshuvah is before you, yet you are not returning!" [In another version of this parable, the king punishes the thief who did not escape because, by remaining behind, the thief showed that he did not fear the king's ability to punish him. So, too, when people do not repent, they show a lack of awe of Hashem.] (Kochvei Ohr: ma'amar 5)

R' Yitzchak Hutner z"l (1906-1980; rosh yeshiva of Yeshiva Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn, N.Y.) offers a different explanation: The terms tzaddik, rasha and beinoni do not refer to the quantity, or even the gravity, of a person's mitzvot and aveirot. That would not be logical, for it would mean that a person could be a tzaddik one moment, a rasha the next moment, and, just as suddenly, a tzaddik again. Rather, these terms refer to a person's attitude toward good and evil. A tzaddik is a person who consciously chooses to live a life that is "mostly merits." Even if he performs mostly sins one day, he will remain a tzaddik if he has not changed his overall attitude. He may be compared to someone whom the world views as a calm person; even if that person sometimes loses his temper, that doesn't change the fact that his nature is to be calm. [A rasha, then, is a person who chooses to live a life that is "mostly sins."] A beinoni is a person who does not identify with either good or bad. He performs good deeds and bad deeds, but does not identify either category with his "self." This explains why he cannot get into the Book of the Living just by performing a few mitzvot. Performing mitzvot won't change his nature as a beinoni. Rather, in order to "merit," a beinoni must repent, meaning that he must abandon his beinoni nature and consciously adopt the philosophy of "mostly merits."

R' Hutner continues: With this understanding, R' Itzele's question (Why is teshuvah necessary for the beinoni rather than just performing more mitzvot?) is not a question. Also, we now understand why Rambam replaces the Gemara's phrase, "if they merit," with the phrase, "if he repents." Repentance is the only way a beinoni can merit to be inscribed in the Book of the Living, for only teshuvah alters the beinoni's worldview and turns him into a tzaddik. (Pachad Yitzchak: Rosh Hashanah, ma'amar 18)