

Erasure

Rabbi Ari Kahn

There may be no more frightening possibility in the religious imagination than *hester panim*, the hiding of God's face. Not punishment in its ordinary sense. Not even suffering. Absence. The sense that the One who once accompanied us has withdrawn beyond sight, and that the silence itself cannot be interpreted. In this week's portion the Torah introduces that possibility for the first time in language that is stark and unsettling.

דברים פרק לא (פרשת וילך)

(יז) וְתָרָה אַפִּי בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם-הַהוּא וְעֹזְבוֹתַי פָּנַי מֵהֶם וְהָיָה לָאֵל לְמַצָּאֵהוּ רָעוֹת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְאָמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא הֲלֹא עָלַי כִּי-אֵין אֱלֹהֵי בְּקִרְבִּי מִצָּאוֹנִי הָרָעוֹת הָאֵלֶּה:
My anger will burn against them on that day, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them. They shall be as prey, and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day: Is it not because my God is not in my midst that these evils have found me?
(Devarim 31:17)

The people will interpret their suffering correctly and still find no relief. They will know that God is not among them. That knowledge is part of the punishment.

The next verse does not soften the first. It intensifies it.

(יח) וְאֲנֹכִי הִסְתֵּר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כָּל-הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי פָנָה אֶל-אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים:

And I will surely hide My face on that day because of all the evil that it has done, for it turned to other gods. (Devarim 31:18)

Haster astir — I will hide, I will hide. Concealment itself deepens. The Face is hidden, and then hidden again. The distance grows so great that even the memory of intimacy begins to fade.

The offense is not described first as a legal violation. Israel *turns* to other gods. The language is relational before it is juridical. A covenant that demands exclusivity encounters betrayal, and the hiding of the Face is the covenantal response.

These verses are often read as a continuation of the *tochacha*. The formal *tochacha*, however, belongs to the previous portion. Only a few verses earlier Moshe is told:

(יד) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֵן קָרְבוּ יָמַיךָ לָמוּת קְרָא אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְהִתִּיצְבוּ בְּאֶהָל מוֹעֵד וְאַצְוֶנּוּ בִּילְךָ מֹשֶׁה וְיִהְיֶשׁע וְיִתִּיצְבוּ בְּאֶהָל מוֹעֵד

Behold, your days approach to die.
(Devarim 31:14)

Moshe will disappear. The Torah then predicts what will follow: the people will rise and go astray after the gods of the land. Then the Face is hidden.

The prediction is not abstract. The people have already lived this trauma. When Moshe delayed on the mountain—

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הָהָר

The people saw that Moshe delayed in coming down from the mountain.
(Shemot 32:1)

—they concluded he was gone, and the calf followed at once. In Vayelech the Torah does not merely announce that Moshe will die. It declares in advance that the original crisis will be replayed.

Yet before the announcement of death stands another commandment.

(יא) בְּבוֹא כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִרְאוֹת אֶת־פָּנַי ה' אֶלְהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחָר תִּקְרָא אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּגֹד כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם:

When all Israel comes to appear before the face of the Lord your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Torah before all Israel in their hearing.
(Devarim 31:11)

Hakhel. At the end of the sabbatical year, on Sukkot, the entire nation is to gather and hear the Torah. They are commanded to see the **Face of God**. The same word that will shortly be hidden is here the object of pilgrimage.

In the absence of Moshe, the experience of standing before God must somehow endure. Hakhel transforms a singular revelation into a recurring national encounter. Before hiddenness is announced, the Torah provides a way for future generations to place themselves once again before the Divine Face. The children who never stood at Sinai will hear. The stranger at the gate will hear. The people will still be able to stand before God when the man who first brought them there is no longer among them.

The two phrases stand only a few verses apart. One commands the people to come and see the Face. The other warns that the Face will be hidden.

The same turning appears a chapter earlier, not as a national fate but as a private one. In Nitzavim the Torah imagines a man who hears the curse and tells himself that he will be at peace. The language that follows is no longer only the language of hiddenness.

דברים פרק כט (פרשת נצבים)

(יז) פֶּן־יֵיטֵשׁ בְּכֶם אִישׁ אוֹ־אִשָּׁה אוֹ מִשְׁפָּחָה אוֹ־שִׁבְט אֲשֶׁר לָבְבוּ פְנֵה הַיּוֹם מֵעַם ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְלַכֵּת לַעֲבֹד אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי הַגּוֹיִם הָהֵם פֶּן־יֵיטֵשׁ בְּכֶם שָׂרֵשׁ פְּרָה וְלַעֲנָה: (יח) וְהָיָה בְּשִׁמְעוֹ אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֵּאת וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבָּבוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁלֹום יִהְיֶה־לִּי כִּי בִשְׁרָרוֹת לִבִּי אֶלְדָּ לְמַעַן סְפוֹת הַרְוָה אֶת־הַצִּמְאָה: (יט) לֹא־יֵאָבֶה ה' סִלָּח לֹא כִּי אֲזַיְעֹשֶׁן אֶפְיָה' וְקִנְאָתוֹ בְּאִישׁ הַהוּא וְנִרְבְּצָה בּוֹ כָּל־הָאֱלֹהִים הַפְּתוּכָה בְּסֹפֶר הַגִּזָּה וּמִתָּה ה' אֶת־שְׁמוֹ מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם:

The Lord will not be willing to forgive him, for then the anger of the Lord and His jealousy will smoke against that man, and every curse written in this book will lie upon him, and the Lord will erase his name from under heaven.

(Devarim 29:19)

The person who hears the words of the curse and blesses himself in his heart, saying he shall have peace though he walks in the stubbornness of his heart, receives no forgiveness. The anger of God and His jealousy will rest upon him. His name will be erased.

The verb is striking: *umachah* — erase. It will appear again and again in the texts that follow.

Bitterness. A curse written in a book. Jealousy. Erasure.

These are the terms of the woman suspected of betrayal.

The rite begins with concealment. She has secluded herself. Visibility has broken down. The husband no longer knows. The wife is no longer transparent. Trust has become hiddenness. The Torah then does something astonishing. It takes that hiddenness and answers it with erasure.

במדבר פרק ה (פרשת נשא)

(יז) וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מַיִם קְדוּשִׁים בְּכֵל־חָרָשׁ וּמִן־הָעֹפָר אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּקִרְקַע הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִקַּח הַכֹּהֵן וַנָּתַן אֶל־הַמַּיִם:

The priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and from the dust that is on the floor of the Tabernacle the priest shall take and put it into the water. (Bamidbar 5:17)

(כג) וְכָתַב אֶת־הָאֱלֹת הָאֵלֶּה הַכֹּהֵן בְּסֵפֶר וּמָחָה אֶל־מֵי הַמָּרִים:

The priest shall write these curses in the book and wipe them into the bitter waters. (Bamidbar 5:23)

God's own name is dissolved into those waters. The erasure is not first an act of condemnation. If she is innocent, the waters vindicate her. The Name is wiped so that she may be cleared, so that the marriage may continue. A husband who no longer cares does not initiate such a process. The ordeal exists because the marriage is still worth saving.

The rite of the suspected wife is therefore itself a response to hiddenness. It is the legal mechanism created for a relationship that can no longer see.

The two tablets face one another. Rashi, following the Midrash on the Song of Songs, reads them as twins: five words against five words.

לא יהיה לך כנגד לא תנאף - שהזונה אחר עבודה זרה דרך אשה המנאפת תחת אישה תקח את זרים

“You shall have no other gods” corresponds to “you shall not commit adultery,” for one who goes after idolatry is like a woman who commits

adultery against her husband and takes strangers.
(Rashi, Shir HaShirim 4:5)

Lo yihyeh lekha faces lo tinaf. Idolatry is not a second religion. It is a second lover. The worship of other gods is not only the violation of a commandment. It is adultery against the relationship. Once that is seen, the ordeal of suspected betrayal becomes the language in which national unfaithfulness can be spoken.

The last time Moshe disappeared, the people made a calf. What he did when he came down now reads differently.

Moshe descends with the tablets, the writing of God. He sees the calf and the dancing and shatters the tablets. He burns the calf, grinds it thoroughly, scatters it on the water, and makes the people drink. Rashi states the intention without ambiguity:

רש"י שמות פרק לב פסוק כ (פרשת כי תשא)
וישק את בני ישראל - נתכוין לבדקן כסוּטוֹת.

He intended to test them as one tests a suspected wife.

Rashbam agrees.

רשב"ם שמות פרק לב פסוק כ (פרשת כי תשא)
וישק את בני ישראל - בדקן כסוּטוֹת:

Ibn Ezra (Shemot 32:20) notes that the water mixed with the dust of the calf corresponds to the water mixed with dust taken from the floor of the Mishkan. In Devarim Moshe himself uses the decisive word when he retells the event:

דברים פרק ט פסוק כא (פרשת עקב)
וְאֶת-חַטַּאתְכֶּם אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתֶם אֶת-הָעֵגֶל לְקַחְתִּי וְאֲשַׁרְף אֹתוֹ בָּאֵשׁ וְאָפֹת אֶתוֹ טָחוֹן הֵיטֵב עַד אֲשֶׁר-
דָּק לְעֶפֶר וְאֲשַׁלְּךָ אֶת-עֶפְרוֹ אֶל-הַנָּחַל הַיָּרֵד מִן-הָהָר:

And I took your sin, the calf which you had made, and I burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it thoroughly until it was as fine as dust, and I cast its dust into the brook that descends from the mountain.
(Devarim 9:21)

The calf becomes *afar* — the same substance the priest takes from the sanctuary floor. Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam adds that Moshe acted in order to erase the memory of the calf.

The Midrash in Bamidbar Rabbah does not treat this as a passing analogy. It reads the entire rite of the suspected wife as a commentary on the calf.

וּכְתַב הָאֱלֹתִים הָאֵלֶּה הַכֹּהֵן — זֶה מֹשֶׁה
בְּסֵפֶר — זֶה הַלּוּחַ
וּמָחָה אֶל מֵי הַמָּרִים — לְפִי שֶׁבָּעוֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁיבַר אֶת הַלּוּחוֹת וּפְרַח הַכֹּתֵב מֵעֲלֵיהֶם
וּבִאוּתָּהּ מִחֵיִת הַכֹּתֵב שֶׁתּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹנֶשֶׁם בְּמֵי
וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת הָאִשָּׁה — כִּמָּה דֹּתִימָא וַיִּשָּׁק אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדִקְוֹן כְּסוּטוֹת

“The priest shall write these curses” — this is Moshe.

“In the book” — this is the tablet.

“And wipe them into the bitter waters” — because through Israel’s sin he broke the tablets and the writing flew off them, and in that wiping of the writing Israel drank their punishment in the water.

“And he shall give the woman to drink” — as it is said, “He made the children of Israel drink,” testing them as suspected wives.

(Bamidbar Rabbah 9:48)

The writing leaves the stone. The people drink that disappearance. Those who were guilty die. Those who were not involved are spared. The drinking of the water at Sinai was not theater. It was an attempt to save the people — to distinguish, to exonerate the uninvolved, to keep the covenant from ending in a single undifferentiated judgment.

The breaking of the tablets belongs to the same attempt. The writing of God flies off the stone. The Divine Name, in the language of the Midrash, is wiped. Moshe does to the tablets what the priest later does to the scroll: he dissolves the sacred writing so that the relationship might still be tested rather than simply destroyed.

The Midrash is careful about the order. God first seeks to consume them all:

וְעָתָה הַנִּיחָה לִי וַיִּסַּר אֶפִּי בָהֶם וְאָכְלָם

And now leave Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and I may consume them. (Shemot 32:10)

או עבר עליו רוח קנאה וקנא את אשתו והיא לא נטמאה שהרבה פשרים היו בהם וקנא הקדוש ברוך הוא לכלם שבקש להם לכלות הטובים עם הרעים

“Or a spirit of jealousy came upon him and he was jealous of his wife, and she had not been defiled” — for there were many who were worthy among them, and the Holy One was jealous for all of them, seeking to destroy the good together with the wicked.
(Bamidbar Rabbah 9:48)

Moshe's first act is not the water. It is advocacy. Only after the face of wrath is turned aside does the drinking begin:

ואחר ישקה — אחר שנתחלה עליהם והעביר פניו של זעם
כמה דתימא ויפן ויירד משה, אחר כן בדקן פסוטות

“And afterward he shall give her to drink” — after He was entreated for them and He removed the face of wrath, as it is said, “He turned and Moshe went down”; afterward he tested them as suspected wives.
(Bamidbar Rabbah 9:48)

The waters are not the decision to destroy. They are the means of saving those who were never concealed.

After the tablets are broken and the calf reduced to dust, Moshe turns back to God and says:

(לב) ועתה אם תשחא חטאתם ואם לאו מחני נא מספרך אשר כתבת:

And now, if You will forgive their sin — and if not, erase me from Your book that You have written. (Shemot 32:32)

The tablets are shattered. The calf is ground to dust. Moshe offers his own name.

None of these acts are first punitive. All are attempts at rescue. Every act of erasure ordinarily signals destruction. Here each erasure serves the opposite purpose. Something sacred is sacrificed so that something more sacred may

survive. The tablets that bore the Divine Name are shattered — to save the people. The rival is ground to dust and drunk — to save the people. Moshe offers his own name — to save the people. The ordeal of the suspected wife exists for the same reason: to save the marriage. The Name is erased so that she may be vindicated.

He has already done to the Name what the Torah elsewhere forbids:

דברים פרק יב פסוק ב - ד (פרשת ראה)

(ב) אֲבָד תִּאָבְדוּן אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּקְדָּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ־שָׁם הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹרְשִׁים אִתָּם אֶת־אֱלֹהֵיהֶם עַל־הָהָרִים הָרָמִים וְעַל־הַגְּבָעוֹת וְתַחַת כָּל־עֵץ רַעֲנָן: (ג) וְנִמְצַתֶּם אֶת־מִזְבְּחֵיהֶם וְשִׁבְרַתֶּם אֶת־מִצְבֵּיהֶם וְאֲשִׁרִיהֶם תִּשְׂרְפוּן בָּאֵשׁ וּפְסִילֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם תִּגְדְּעוּן וְאֲבַדְתֶּם אֶת־שְׁמֵם מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: (ד) לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּן כֹּן לַה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

You shall utterly destroy all the places... and you shall erase their name from that place. You shall not do so to the Lord your God. (Devarim 12:2–4)

The names of other gods may be destroyed. The Name of God may not. Yet Moshe shatters the tablets on which that Name was written. He does so for the same reason the Divine Name is erased in the waters of the suspected wife: for the possibility that the marriage might still be saved.

After the crisis the Torah records that God spoke with Moshe *panim el panim*. Presence is restored to the mediator. The distance between God and the people, however, remains. The pattern first enacted at Sinai is projected forward in Devarim: the command to see the Face, the disappearance of the mediator, the prediction of betrayal, the hiding of the Face.

ישעיהו פרק כה פסוק ו - ח

(ו) וַעֲשֵׂה ה' צָבָאוֹת לְכָל־הָעַמִּים בְּהָר הַזֶּה מִשְׁתַּה שְׁמָנִים מִשְׁתַּה שְׁמָרִים שְׁמָנִים מִמַּחֲלִים שְׁמָרִים מִזְקָקִים: (ז) וּבִלְע בְּהָר הַזֶּה פָּנֵי־הַלֹּט | הַלֹּט עַל־כָּל־הָעַמִּים וְהַמַּסְכָּה הַנְּסוּכָה עַל־כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם: (ח) בָּלַע הַמָּוֶת לְנֶצַח וּמָתָה אֲדֹנֵי ה' דָּמָעָה מֵעַל כָּל־פָּנִים וְחָרַפְתָּ עִמּוֹ יִסִּיר מֵעַל כָּל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי ה' דִּבֶּר: פ

On this mountain He will destroy the covering that covers all the peoples and the veil that is spread over all the nations.
He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away

tears from upon all faces.
(Yeshayahu 25:7–8)

The covering — *massekhhah*, the same word used for the molten calf — is removed. The same root that threatened to erase a human name, that dissolved the Divine Name so that a wife might be vindicated, and that Moshe invoked against himself, now erases tears. The last act of erasure is not directed at Israel at all. God removes the veil itself. He erases the tears. He swallows death. The last thing destined to disappear is not the covenantal partner but everything that stood between the partners.

A husband who no longer cares does not initiate the ordeal of the suspected wife. The ordeal exists because the relationship still matters. Hiddenness here is not indifference. It belongs to the painful work of repair. The Face is withdrawn because the relationship remains worth restoring. God's concealment is not the dissolution of the covenant. It is what a covenant looks like when it is wounded but not abandoned.

Between the command to see the Face and the warning that the Face may be hidden stands the dangerous middle term: erasure. Names, texts, and even the Divine Name are placed at risk so that the covenant itself will not be erased. At the end of days God performs one final act of erasure, wiping away the tears that hiddenness left upon every face, and removing everything that stood between the partners, so that the Face may be seen once again.