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# Hidden-Faced Relationship

Hannah Kapnik Ashar | July 30, 2015 | Bronfman Torah

*Greetings from Jerusalem, where the 2015 Bronfman Fellows are discovering the community, learning, and experiences of a BYFI summer. Hannah Kapnik Ashar is the Rabbinic Intern at Congregation Bonai Shalom in Boulder, Colorado, and BYFI Community Educator and 2015 Faculty member. She was a fellow in 2004 and madricha in 2007 and 2008. Here she shares from the shiur she is teaching this summer on the Fellowship.*

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We are about to welcome a fabulous new crew to our alumni community! It has been such a joy to learn with and from the fellows this summer. I'm happy to share with you a taste of my shiur, and hope this reminds you of the feel of the Goldstein Chava early morning torah exploring.

During my year in the Bronfman Bayit, spent in Jerusalem between high school and college with other BYFI alumni, I had the privilege of learning with Rabbi Dan Smokler '96. We spent months with him preparing for the biggest holiday of the year: Purim. I had no idea before that that Purim might be a big deal, relevant, or meaningful. Ten years later, it's the theme of my shiur.

Let's start in a *midrash*, where the rabbis linguistically and thematically connect names of Purim characters to verses in the Torah:

## **Babylonian Talmud Chullin 139b**

Where is Esther found in the Torah? [In the verse,] “And I will surely hide (*hester astir*) my face” (Deuteronomy 31:18)

אסתר מן התורה מנין? ואנכי הסתר אסתיר... (דברים ל"א)

What might it mean for God to hide God's face? The rabbis are quoting a verse where God tells Moses that after his dying, the people will turn away from God to other gods, and God responds, “And I will surely hide my face”. God's gesture in response to the people turning away holds many emotional possibilities: shame, anger, sadness. What makes *you* hide your face?

The Book of Esther is the only canonized text where God is neither a character nor even mentioned, in stark contrast to the overt human-God relationship of the Torah and the Prophets. The rabbis read God's 'hidden face' in Esther as the onset of a long-lasting era, the hiddenness God forewarned in Deuteronomy. This hiddenness continues through to the time we live in, where God's word and will are not explicit. Purim, in all its childishness and ridiculous extremes, becomes the Tanach's clearest mirror of the world we live in.

What is the function of God hiding God's face? It seems like this hiddenness bespeaks a God who doesn't care, who has abandoned us, who's moved on from this relationship, or who, like when I pass a person who's begging without making eye contact, is deliberately ignoring our situation. And at the same time, I think of my own hiding my face from my nearly-two-year-old. We have a window in the wall between our kitchen and living room, and I often look out at her playing when I wash dishes. If I see her get frustrated (and recognize that she's not in a perilous situation), I will usually duck away from the window, hiding my face. I know that, on her own, she is resourceful in these moments. She will tweak what she's doing or change course completely, so long as she doesn't see that I am there to fix something and relieve her suffering.

In the Book of Esther, the Jews are threatened and vulnerable, and God lays low long enough for Mordechai and Esther to recognize that they in fact have the resources that may change their situation, and to take action, leading to their redemption.

The problem with imagining God as a parent exercising benign neglect is that not every situation stays benign. It is devastating to imagine God as a parent who peeks through the window in the perilous moments and still doesn't step in.

While it may seem that God's hidden face is neglectful and/or a teaching moment, the holiday of Purim lends itself to another question entirely -- one that our high-school-student-fellows revel in: Why do *we* wear masks on Purim?

We emulate this very hiddenness, and what happens? With my face hidden, I can step into the character of someone else, someone who doesn't feel social pressures I do feel. I may become louder, bolder, ruder. I've seen a lot of people dress as a different gender, taking the opportunity to move their bodies in new ways, to feel the fit of someone else's clothing, to speak in a higher or lower voice that is allowed to say different things. Two other customs, getting drunk and Purim shpiel, also both act as masks of sorts. These practices all allow a liberation from social norms and personal habits. They allow a freedom in our expression of aspects of self that otherwise hide.

Could it be that God is hiding God's face to allow qualities of God to burst forth that we wouldn't otherwise encounter? I think the divinity I experience in communal song, meditation, and mindful embodied experience is my perception of the hidden-faced version of God. Might God's hidden face allow greater intimacy than the holy of holies image of Face to Face encounter?

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Answers, and more questions, to come on the Goldstein Chava lawn after the day's last speaker...

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