



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayelech 5768

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We read *Parshat Vayelech* this year on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Fittingly, this *parshah* deals with sin and repentance, with becoming lost on our way and returning to our true selves.

In the *parshah*, God foretells Israel's future sins and their consequences, how they will turn to other gods and then be overtaken by suffering, leading God to say, “*anochi haster astir panai*—I will surely hide my face.”¹ The hidden face of God, the classic theological expression of the presence of suffering and evil in the world, here seems to be a response by God to the sins of Israel, a punishment for their misdeeds.

The Chasidic master, Rebbe Ephraim of Sudylkow, understands this passage differently. Carefully re-reading the Hebrew, Rebbe Ephraim separates the phrase into two sections and reinterprets the implications of God's actions. When *anochi haster*—the I-ness of God—is hidden through our entering the slumber of self-deception and idolatry, then *astir panai*—[God's] face will be hidden. When we forget our values and our humanity, we obscure God's holiness from the world; then God's face, God's true presence, is hidden from us.² When we pervert what is just and right through the pursuit of that which is not the true center, we cause God's presence to disappear, not as punishment, but as consequence.

The Torah explains that this turning away will occur when the people of Israel “eat their fill and grow fat and turn to other gods.”³ It is through complacency and an absorption in wealth that Israel will lose sight of the locus of divinity and the genuine values that flow from it. And this prophesy has come true.

Our modern consumer society affords us wealth that often engenders precisely the indifference and false pursuits that our *parshah* describes. Caught up as we are in material gain and upward mobility, we often lose sight of our true values. As we spend money on clothes, cars, coffee and all the other goods we consume, do we take the time to see how our lifestyle conforms to our deepest values? Do we check the source of the products we consume, where they are made and how? Do we consider the nature of our work and whether it brings healing or suffering to the world? Do we consider our investments and whether they meet our ethical standards? Do we give away the ten percent of our income that Judaism expects? Can we genuinely ask ourselves how we earn and spend money, not in the sense of self-denying guilt-ridden asceticism, but with a gentle and wise questioning of how we are living out our core ideals and whether we are hiding or revealing God's face?

How then do we transform ourselves to reveal God's face, God's self, in the world? What enables us to lead a life where our actions are manifestations of our core values?

¹ Dvarim 31:16-18

² Degel Mahaneh Ephraim p. 38, *Parshat Vayetzei* d'h Vayikatz, Hotza'at Mir, Jerusalem 5755. Here *anokhi*, (I) the subject of the sentence, is read as the object of the verb *haster* (to hide) and each one of us, in our own delusion, is the subject which causes the hiding.

³ Dvarim 31:20

Our *parshah*'s answer, remarkably, is song. God instructs "therefore, write down this song and teach it to the people of Israel, put it in their mouths so that this song will be a witness for Me before the people of Israel."⁴ Song here is meant to awaken the people of Israel, to help them reconnect to their essentially pure nature, the fundamental meaning of *tshuvah*, and so enable them to live out their true commitments. The true song enables the people of Israel to once again find God's face; to turn away from the subtle idols of wealth and greed and to bring God's holiness into their midst.

In Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav's terms, it is only through this song of faith, this assertion of meaning, hope and possibility, that one leaps over the abyss of God's hiddenness to encounter the truth of *anochi*—I-ness, that is both God's true face and our own.⁵

It is easy to get lost, to find ourselves unwittingly acting in ways estranged from our fundamental principles. Yet we can find our way to a life that embodies those core beliefs by manifesting our true self through the hope, confidence and power, which is the nature of song. Song, that fundamental assertion of joy and meaning, can remind us of our authentic self and our genuine power. Through it, we can transform the way we live and fully embrace our true nature—our potential to transform ourselves and the world. In so doing, the deep *anochi*, the true faces of both ourselves and God, will be revealed.



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⁴ Dvarim 31:19

⁵ Likutei Moharan, I, 64

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