

Hester Panim: Between Exile and Redemption

Rabbi Yehuda Turetsky

Beren Kollel Elyon

“Where is God? Wherever you let Him in” (R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk)

Identifying the Problem

The Purim story recounts how the Jewish people were saved from murder and spared from persecution. Haman may have tried to eradicate the Jewish people, but he did not prevail; an impending tragedy was transformed into a triumphant victory, and the Jewish people have celebrated this occasion ever since. Yet, in finding reference to Esther’s name in the Torah, Chazal (Talmud Chulin 139b) point to a particularly troubling verse, one associated with pain and punishment. Esther’s name, say Chazal, is hinted to in God’s description to Moshe of a time when Hashem will “hide” from the Jewish people as a result of their sins, and terrible calamities will follow.

Why specifically in this verse do Chazal find a hint to Esther? Purim represents joy and celebration, while *hester panim* is associated with agony and suffering. Why link the two, and what message can be gleaned from their connection? To better understand the relationship between *hester panim* and the Purim miracle, we will outline several general perspectives as to how to understand and relate to *hester panim*, particularly what motivates God to “hide” and what its precise purpose and nature is.

Approach # 1 - *Hester Panim* and Punishment

According to the simple reading of the verses describing God’s “hiding” (Devarim 31:16-18), there appears to be a connection between *hester panim* and the terrible punishment that immediately follows. What is less clear, though, is what this connection is and how exactly *hester panim* relates to the Jewish people’s punishment.¹⁹⁰ Three possible understandings appear to exist.

One perspective is to view *hester panim* as necessary in order to allow the punishment to occur. Rashi (ibid:17) writes that God will make it “as if” He does not see their pain. According to

¹⁹⁰ It should be noted that Ramban (ibid) understands that the verses refer to two separate types of *hester panim*. The first is connected to punishment and occurs when the Jewish people are particularly distant. The second type occurs after the Jewish people begin to repent, when they are no longer punished severely. It relates to a lack of redemption. Complete repentance has not yet been performed, so the true redemption cannot yet come.

Rashi, God is less distant than “oblivious”, pretending as if he does not see what is happening. Possibly working with this general orientation, Ohr HaChaim (ibid) explains that if God were to make Himself aware of the pains of the Jewish people, His mercy would prevail and He would not allow these events to occur. Apparently, *hester panim* allows tragedies, for God would stop them if He were “aware” of them.

Chizkuni (ibid) notes the relationship between God’s *hester panim* and the atrocities that follow, but views *hester panim* as a function of God’s love for the Jewish people, not as a facilitator for the punishment to occur. Though the Jewish people need to be punished, God does not wish to witness it. Instead, He instructs others to carry it out away from His presence.

A third view may emerge from Rashba (Responsa 1:19). He argues that it is through the act of *hester panim* that God removes His special providence over the Jewish people, thereby leaving them susceptible to the hands of other forces. For Rashba, it appears that *hester panim* is what allows this unique form of punishment, for so long as God’s providence is present and protecting the Jewish people, such an intense form of punishment is not possible.¹⁹¹

Approach # 2: *Hester Panim* and Lack of Hashgacha

Rambam appears to maintain a different approach based on his general perspective on hashgach pratit, individual providence. Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:51) argues that the amount of divine protection one merits corresponds to his intellectual connection to Hashem. As such, one who is not sufficiently connected remains at risk of negative events occurring. In this context, Rambam understands *hester panim* as the absence of individualized divine providence. Unlike the perspectives mentioned above, *hester panim* is not in place in order to allow punishment to occur, but is instead the natural consequence of a distance between oneself and the divine. True, even according to Rambam tragedies occur during a state of *hester panim*, but the need to punish is not what motivated God to “hide”.¹⁹²

Approach # 3: Finding Hashem While He’s Distant

Many Hassidic thinkers develop a slightly different understanding of *hester panim*. Commenting on the double wording of the verse “הסתתר אסתיר”, R. Nachman of Breslov (Likkutei Moharan 1:56:3), Sefat Emet (Vayalech 5639) and others argue that it connotes a deeper sense of *hester*

¹⁹¹ It appears that even within those that explicitly link *hester panim* with punishment, it does not refer to a regular punishment, but rather a more intense form of it. R. Soloveitchik (The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways pg. 167) invoked *hester panim* in relating to the Holocaust, “There is no doubt that the Holocaust, the *hurban* in Eastern Europe, can be classified under *hester panim*. It was not just onesh or punishment; it was *hester panim*. It was the worst kind of punishment. It was silluk hashgacha, when HaKadosh Baruch Hu turned His back, as it were, on the Jewish people. He looked away from them.”

In terms of whether *hester panim* leads to people being punished more than they deserve, see, amongst others, Talmud Bava Kamah (60) and Ohr HaChaim (ibid).

¹⁹² Rambam’s general perspective on hashgacha pratit is especially complex. A full discussion of his approach is beyond the scope of this article. In terms of the passage in Moreh Nevuchim quoted above, see R. Chaim Friedlander’s *Emunah ViHashgacha* (Vol 1 pg. 101-103). Possibly related to this approach is the Netziv’s comment (Haamek Davar, Devarim 31:17) that each person experiences a *hester panim* according to their own level.

panim. God does not just hide; He hides the fact that He is even hiding. For them, *hester panim* is a reality whereby God is so hidden that the Jewish people forget that He exists.¹⁹³

However, despite their emphasis on the intensity of this particular form of “hiding”, many continue to note the ability to find God even within that distance. This is developed explicitly from the writings of R. Nachman of Breslov,¹⁹⁴ but in truth appears to emerge from several statements of Chazal.

The Medrash (Tana DiBei Eliyahu Zuta 12), for example, appears to explicitly maintain that God can be found during periods of *hester panim* when it compares the state of *hester panim* to a king that sits behind an iron wall and announces to all his servants to climb over the wall and see him. Just as those that climb the wall are most cherished, so too are those that find Hashem in times of *hester panim*. Clearly, not only can God be found, but those that do find him are particularly cherished. The Talmud’s discussion of *hester panim* (Chagigah 5b) supports this general approach, citing several possible limitations of the impact of *hester panim*.¹⁹⁵

The Bialah Rebbe appears to explicitly accept this approach, albeit with a slightly different formulation and emphasis.¹⁹⁶ He writes that mitzvot performed during a time period of *hester panim* may lack a certain quality; the times are so challenging that it is difficult to have the ideal focus and direction required. Nevertheless, God values those mitzvot as if they were performed in previous generations with more ideal intentions. *Hester panim* may be a time when the obstacles are great and the environment does not appear conducive to worship of Hashem, but God attributes particular value to those that worship Him nonetheless.

What has emerged from the above discussion are several general perspectives on *hester panim*. Particularly relevant going forward is that while some view *hester panim* as intrinsically linked with tragedy and suffering, others highlight an additional element. *Hester panim* is a time when God can still be found and a time when one’s relationship with God can continue to improve and be valued. One who is able to overcome the challenges will be especially cherished by Hashem. With this background in mind, we will now explore Purim’s connection with *hester panim*.

Hester Panim and Purim: Tragedy or Hope?

As noted above, the Talmud links Esther with the Torah’s description of *hester panim*. What is the meaning of the link, and how does it manifest itself? Two perspectives appear to be found in the commentaries, reflecting the different approaches to *hester panim* outlined above.

¹⁹³ Interestingly, many attribute versions of this idea to the Ba’al Shem Tov. See Degel Machaneh Ephraim (Parshat Tzav), Toldot Yaakov Yosef (Parshat Breishit), and Pardes Yosef (Parshat Vaylech pg. 1288).

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, Likkutei Moharan ibid and 1: 115. R. Nachman may also be of the opinion that there is a particular form of growth that can emerge as a result of the distance. See Likutei Moharan Tinyana 12.

¹⁹⁵ There are two different statements of particular note. Rava states that even in a time of *hester panim*, God still communicates with us through dreams. Clearly, there remains some connection with Hashem even during a time of *hester panim*, though there is discussion regarding the precise meaning of this Talmudic statement. See Rashi and Maharsha (ibid). A second statement cited in the Talmud there argues that despite God’s *hester panim*, His outstretched hand is still present.

¹⁹⁶ See Mevaser Tov (Liyshuatcha Keviti Hashem pgs. 181 and 184).

A. Tragedy and Evil Decrees

Rashi (chulin ibid) explains that Esther's time was one of *hester panim*; many terrible events occurred then, and it is therefore appropriate to find reference to Esther's name in the verses that describe God's "hiding". For Rashi, what unites Esther and *hester panim* are the sad elements of Purim, not the joyous triumph. Indeed, just as the Rishonim above focus on the connection between *hester panim* and punishment, Rashi chooses to emphasize the troubling elements of the Purim story in connecting it to *hester panim*.¹⁹⁷

B. Hope in *Hester panim*

An additional approach is suggested by the Vilna Gaon and appears to emerge from a variety of Hasidic sources. The Vilna Gaon (commentary to Megilat Esther 1:2) notes that Purim offers us insight into the nature of the hiding. Purim teaches us that despite the *hester panim* and the distance that comes with it, there is the capacity for miracles. God can still intervene, and His role remains critical. It is Esther who teaches us the true nature of the time of *hester panim*.¹⁹⁸

What emerges from this perspective is a powerful message. Purim teaches how to find hope despite the distance and light despite the darkness. In the face of evil decrees and terrible tragedies on their way, God still protected his people and was there for those that searched for him.

Based on the above, it appears possible to explain two additional elements of Purim's relationship to *hester panim*.

1. Esther's Role: Within this approach, it may be possible to explain why it is particularly Esther's name that is linked with *hester panim* and not the name of Mordechai or a different Purim character. The Talmud (Megilah 7a) states that it was Esther who wanted Purim to be established as a holiday for future generations. This may be because she recognized that this message of the Purim story, the capacity to find Hashem even in times of darkness and trouble, would be particularly relevant for future generations in exile.¹⁹⁹

The Maharal (introduction to Ohr Chadash) elaborates on why specifically Esther helped lead the redemption, viewing Esther as a uniquely suited character to redeem the Jewish people from this period of *hester panim*.²⁰⁰ R. Tzaddok HaKohain of Lublin (Resisai Laylah, paragraph 52) even writes that it is Esther that represents the notion that the Jewish people are still connected to God even in a time period of darkness.²⁰¹

2. The Method of Celebration: It is possible that this perspective also sheds light on the manner in which Purim is celebrated. Chazal (Talmud Megilah 14a) cite an opinion that there is no

¹⁹⁷ Maharal (Ohr Chadash chapter 2) argues that specifically Esther is associated with this verse because her era was one of a particularly intense form of *hester panim*.

¹⁹⁸ See Degel Machaneh Ephraim (ibid), where he quotes the Ba'al Shem relating this general idea to Esther.

¹⁹⁹ See Minchat Asher (Moadim, pg. 168) for a similar suggestion.

²⁰⁰ See inside for an elaboration of why exactly that is so and how it is linked to Esther's modesty. See, as well, where the Maharal (Ohr Chadash chapter 2) also argues similarly that the nature of the redemption that occurred on Purim was different than other redemptions specifically because it occurred in a time of *hester panim*.

²⁰¹ Along these lines, my father noted that it is specifically Esther who encouraged the Jewish people to fast and pray. She is the figure that inspired the masses to engage in religious activity during this time of *hester panim*.

recitation of hallel on Purim because the megilah itself serves as a hallel. R. Asher Weiss (Minchat Asher, Shemot pg. 502) explains that just as the Purim miracle shows that Hashem is always there, even when he's hiding, we praise Hashem in an indirect way. We use the Megilah to praise Hashem, a work that lacks Hashem name, to show that we understand the message of the day. It needn't be explicit for us to know God is there.²⁰²

Conclusion

The Talmud (Chulin ibid) explicitly links Esther to God's *hester panim*. In order to understand the nature of this relationship, we noted three different perspectives on the general topic of *hester panim*. Some emphasize the relationship between *hester panim* and the punishment that follows, others relate to *hester panim* as a lack of Divine individualized providence, and a third group highlight the ability to find Hashem and grow religiously even during a time of *hester panim*. We then suggested that just as there are different perspectives regarding *hester panim* generally, there are two different perspectives regarding how to understand Esther's relationship to *hester panim*. Rashi links it to the terrible decrees and tragedies that occurred surrounding Purim, while the Vilna Gaon emphasized an alternative approach that Esther taught us that God can be found even in *hester panim*.

May we merit a time where God's role is clear and where His light shines bright for His people.
אור חדש על ציון תאיר.

²⁰² For this reason, one could understand why hallel is not recited even if one is unable to read the Megilah. The only appropriate way to praise Hashem on Purim is through the Megilah, not through an explicit statement of praise like hallel. For a dissenting view, see Meiri (Megilah ibid) who rules that one who is unable to read the Megilah should recite hallel.