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With A Song in My Heart
By Rabbi Joshua (musically known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

Towards the end of parshas Vayeilech, God tells Moshe, " Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the land. And it will forsake Me and annul My covenant. My anger will flare against it on that day. And I will conceal My face from them and many evils and distresses will encounter it. It will say on that day, 'Is it not because God is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me? But I shall surely conceal my face on that day for all the evil that it did...' " (Devorim, 31,16-18). The Ramban asks why, after the nation has expressed its regret over its misdeeds by saying that the evils befalling it are due to their having followed other gods, does God continue to conceal His face from them? He answers that this expression of regret does not constitute complete repentance for having trusted in strange gods. Still, because they did have these initial thoughts of repentance, He will begin the process of redemption, in a concealed way, and complete it after the people have made a complete confession of their sins. In essence, then, Ramban is telling us that there is a stage in the process of redemption, which God brings about at the very time that His face, meaning His presence, is hidden from us.

The Ramban's notion of concealed divine redemption can help us understand the Talmudic passage, which asks the question, "How do we know of Esther from the Torah? From the verse "And I will surely conceal ('hasteir astir') My face on that day." The allusion to Esther found in this verse is derived not merely from the play on words between Esther and 'astir' but also from the phenomenon of the concealed redemption that occurred in the time of Esther. God's name does not appear in the book of Esther as an indication that His presence was not immediately apparent in the events that transpired in Shushan. Still, we rejoice each year in celebration of the divine redemption we enjoyed at that time, and read the book of Esther publicly in order to publicize that miracle. Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, in fact, writes in his commentary to the book of Esther, Yoseif Lekach, that the reason we read that book publicly, and must be careful to read every word, not leaving anything out, is that only through examining all the events that occurred, from beginning to end, are we able to see the divine hand behind the unfolding of those events.

Rabbi Ashkenazi's explanation of the halacha bidding us to read the book of Esther publicly from beginning to end as a means to discern the divine hand behind those events, can help us understand the verse in our parsha that follows the ones that we quoted. After God says "and I will surely conceal my face on that day," He continues "And now, write this song (shira) for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel, place it in their mouth, so that this song will be a witness for me with the children of Israel." What song is it that is supposed to be written? The Ramban explains that it refers to the following parsha, Haazinu, which sets forth the divine punishment that will befall Israel when it forsakes God. Although the Talmud derives the

obligation to write a Torah scroll from this verse, that is because one is not allowed to write an isolated section of the Torah. In order to write the song, or poem, contained in parshas Haazinu, one needs, therefore, to write the entire Torah. The meaning of the verse, then, according to the Rambam, is that we are told to write a Torah scroll which contains within it the song that is found in parshas Haazinu. Rabbi Naphtali Tzevi Yehudah Berlin, however, in his commentary Ha'amek Davar, explains that the song referred to is the entire Torah, which is characterized as a song, or as poetry, because of its literary style of hiding more than it reveals, as he explains more fully in the introduction to his commentary to the Torah. Following this explanation of the word shira (song), we can explain the sequence of verses as telling us that by looking at events through the eyes of the Torah, we will be able to discern the divine hand behind everything, and be able to see the seeds of redemption in seemingly bleak events. The Sefas Emes, in fact, cites a similar explanation, in the name of R. Bunim of Peshischa to a verse a little further on: "It shall be when any evils and distresses come upon you that this song shall speak as a witness" (Devorim, 31,21). He explains that it is wrong to think that God has abandoned the Jewish people, even if things ostensibly seem dark. God is with us in our distress, and we can find His presence if we use the Torah and its hidden light as our guide.

While R. Bunim of Peshischa's remarks refer to events confronting the Jewish people on a national level, I believe that they are equally applicable to each Jew on an individual level. The Talmud tells us that if someone is present at the time that a decent Jew dies, he should tear his clothing, just as he must tear his clothing if he witnesses the burning of a Torah scroll. Rashi explains that the Jew's soul is likened to the parchment of a Torah scroll, and the mitzvos that he performs are the letters. Perhaps we can explain, on a different level, that the Torah is imprinted upon the soul of every Jew, so that if he examines his life properly, he can see the hand of God behind the events of his life, and understand that what outwardly appears to be bad is ultimately for the good. As we approach Rosh Hashanah and review the events of the past year, both on an individual and a national level, we would do well to keep this perspective in mind so that we can better appreciate what God has done for us, and understand what we have to do for Him.

Note-Please address all correspondence to the author (Rabbi Hoffman) to JoshHoff @ AOL.com.

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