

Parashah One Hundred Forty-Eight

Deuteronomy 31:14–30; 1Kings 2:1–12; 1Timothy 4:6–16

notes by Tim Hegg

HaShem's Presence

The remarkable text which is before us today is, in many ways, a contrast to last Shabbat's section. Twice in that section the promise is given regarding HaShem: "He will not release you nor will He forsake you." (31:6, 8) The result of such divine presence is "do not be afraid; do not be dismayed." The presence of HaShem dispels both fear and dismay! What more could the nation desire than to know that God was in her midst? Such a reality is spoken of by the prophets as the ideal situation: "Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; You will fear disaster no more." (Zeph 3:14-15).

Indeed, the presence of God with His people is one of the primary characteristics dividing Israel's God from all other gods—Adonai was pleased to dwell in the midst of His people (Num 35:34) while the pagan gods found their dwellings in remote places, far from the people who worshiped them.

It is stunning, then, that in our *parashah* this Shabbat God not only gives a prophetic message outlining Israel's rebellion and sin, but also promises to *remove His presence from them*. Because Israel would forsake the covenant which God was making with her, His anger would flare against her and He would "forsake her." What a terrible reality! God, holy three times over, will not dwell with those who persist in rebellion. Idolatry is a sure way to experience "Ichabod" (אִי-כָבוֹד 1Sam 4:21), the departure of God's glorious presence.

What exactly is meant by the phrase the "presence of God," [literally, "the face of Adonai" (פְּנֵי (יהוה)]? It will be helpful to consider what God's presence *is* and what it *is not*.

1. The "presence of God" is not to be equated with God's omnipresence.
2. The "presence of God" is not necessarily to be equated with the indwelling Spirit of God.
3. The "presence of God" describes a RELATIONSHIP between God and His worshipers.
 - covenant loyalty: obedience, confession, humility
 - friendship: peace, concern, commitment
 - communion: common interests/priorities
4. The "presence of God" describes a condition where God is PLEASED TO DWELL = REVEAL HIMSELF
 - holy = set apart; separate
 - requires preparation by the worshiper
5. The "presence of God" describes His BLESSING
 - forgiveness, protection, joy, contentment, wisdom
6. The "presence of God" is a FORETASTE OF ETERNITY with God.

What is particularly important from our section this Shabbat, however, is a problem which the Sages identified in our text, namely, that it appears that even when Israel repents, God is not willing to renew His presence among her (vv. 17-18). Even when Israel admits that her troubles are the result of God's having left her alone, He still is not willing to make His presence known. Because of this, Rashi has called these verses the harshest of all prophecies! The Sages offered several solutions or interpretations.

Ramban (Nachmanides) suggests that Israel's admission that her troubles are the result of God's concealment falls short of true repentance, because even though they acknowledged their guilt, they were not yet ready to confess and repent wholeheartedly. Sforino teaches that Israel, in v. 17, despairs over the depth of her sin, and in her despair reasons that her sin is too great for God to ever forgive. Thus, she does not pursue genuine repentance. Still another Rabbi (Bunam) suggests that Israel's sin is the belief that God had actually abandoned her. While He had concealed His presence, Israel should have believed that He would keep His promise to Moses, that He would go with the nation wherever she went.

But if the presence of God is, as I have suggested above, a relationship wherein God reveals Himself more and more to those He loves, then the concealment of His presence is nothing less than a *lack of revelation of God's own character and actions*. God's presence is hidden from us when He no longer reveals to us who He is and what He is doing. In such a state, we are unable to grow in our knowledge of God, and therefore our relationship with Him ceases to be one of continuing communion and friendship, and becomes a distant, historical fact without any present reality. In the same way that we may remember eating, unless we continue to eat in the present, our bodies will die from lack of nutrition. So it is with the presence of God—the need for constant fellowship and growth in knowing Him is essential to our spiritual well-being—to life itself.

What is the remedy for Israel in our text—a remedy also for us? The answer is two-fold: repentance and revelation. Repentance toward God for the sin of idolatry, and a receiving of the revelation which He so graciously gives of Himself.

The Sages have instructed us well regarding Israel's repentance—that it is here characterized as less than genuine. True repentance *deals with one's own heart* and does not busy itself with what others have or have not done. When Israel declares (v. 17) “Is it not because God is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me,” she speaks to the *result*, not the *cause*. The evils which Israel would experience were not because God had concealed His face from her, but *because she had rebelled against God in her idolatry*. The cause of her problems were her own sins. The lack of God's presence in her midst is the result of her sin. Thus, in her “confession” she actually engages in the great counterfeit for repentance—*blame-shifting*. “It's God's fault that I'm in trouble!” How blinding idolatry is. For since in its essence idolatry is nothing short of self-worship, it is understandable that idolatry makes self-abasement an impossibility. Once man has declared himself independent from God, and relied instead upon his own self-made gods (which he can control), it goes without saying that he will not be able to rightly declare what Paul does when he confessed “in me, that is, in my flesh, there dwells no good thing.” (Rom 7:18) Only the gracious revelation of God Himself is able to humble the prideful heart and bring it to true repentance. Thus, repentance is a gift of God and surely not something which sinful man can muster on his own (cf. Acts 5:31; 2 Tim 2:25).

How wonderful it is in our text today that God does not stop with the terrible prophecy of Israel's rebellion but goes on to instruct Moses regarding the Torah. He was to write a song to teach Israel so that she would never forget—and, he was to place the words of the Torah which he had written into the Ark of the Covenant for a continual witness to Israel of God's enduring covenant. There, in close proximity to the nation wherever she would go, carried on the shoulders the priests, would be the eternal revelation of God to His people—the revelation of His person and works, the manner in which He would forgive sin and cleanse from unrighteousness, and the path of life for them to follow. There, in the Torah, was the “Door” to His presence, the revelation of Yeshua Himself, the place where He would make Himself known to all of His chosen ones, in whom He would instill the desire to worship Him in spirit and truth.

Thus, the presence of God is concealed only to those who refuse to “see” Him in the revelation of His word, and who follow their own desires rather than submitting to His ways. Even when Israel

had sinned, His Torah was ever present—

It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’
Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. (Deut 30:12-14).

And so it is with us today. God is pleased to dwell among us, to grace us with His presence. Mashiach has promised to “be with us always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). And we too, like Israel of old, can cause His presence to be concealed through our willful disobedience, which, if considered fully, flows out of rebellion and constitutes the beginning of idolatry. It is a terrifying thought to consider that idolatry is its own anesthesia, and causes a person to drop into a sleep in which objective evaluation becomes impossible. How then can we evaluate our own situation? How is it possible to scrutinize our relationship with God and determine if His presence is with us or not? What will be the inevitable outcome of His presence? Consider this question as you prepare for the festivals! God longs to dwell with His people, and He has appointed a time of special meeting in which the plan of redemption is unfolded. The *mo’edim* are special times to reflect on the reality of God’s presence with us.

Perhaps nothing is more evident, as we seek answers to this central question of God’s presence, than this: the dwelling of God with man finds its greatest expression in the incarnation of the Son of God. As we celebrate the festivals, we are reminded that the eternal God came to dwell with us in Immanuel. Though we cannot prove the exact time of the year in which Yeshua was born, the season of Sukkot is surely a valid candidate. But regardless of the exact timing of His birth in Bethlehem, the manner and character of His coming is clearly reflected in our festival celebrations. His coming emphasized that the dwelling of God with man would be a mystery—even an apparent contradiction. How could the Holy God dwell with sinful man? Again, His coming reminds us that His dwelling does not depend upon our “religion,” for He comes, not to a palace prepared for Him by His followers, but to a hut—a sukkah, if you will, in which the glory of His royal stature is shrouded in the common elements of the fallen world. Moreover, His coming reminds us that God’s presence among His people could never be permanent without a radical change in the whole arena of sin. HaShem’s presence with Israel as she traveled to the Promised Land was clearly predicated upon the sacrificial system, itself a portend of the ultimate sacrifice in the Messiah’s death. The payment of sin for His people is Yeshua’s guarantee that we will forever dwell in the presence of the Almighty.

What is your relationship with the One Who made you? How do you relate to the Almighty before Whom you will one day stand and give account? How have you responded to the gift of His Son, Yeshua? Do you know for certain that your sins have been forgiven and that one day you will hear the words which the soul longs to hear: “enter into your rest?” The Word of the Gospel is near you, in your mouth and in your heart: will you believe it and claim as your own the unspeakable gift of forgiveness and life?