

Ki Tissa 5770 Hide and Seek
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Shabbat Shalom.

The great late 18th century Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Barukh of **Medzhybizh** (near where my paternal grandfather was born) told his followers a story.

Once his grandson, Yehiel was playing hide and seek with his friend Shlomo at the end of the winter. They went off into the woods and Yehiel went to hide amidst the melting snow. He found the perfect place, in the trunk of a hollowed out portion of a large oak tree. He laughed with glee for this perfect find and waited with eager anticipation for Shlomo to find him.

[You all know that special feeling when you hide and you are waiting, wanting to be found.]

At first, Yehiel heard some footsteps and was awaiting the moment when he would be found. But then the sound faded and he heard nothing. No Shlomo, nothing at all. But Yehiel stayed in his hiding place a long time, assuming that Shlomo would eventually find him. After a long time, he went out and could not find his friend. There was no trace of his friend, no footprints or broken branches – Shlomo had apparently not looked for him at all; Yehiel's hiding had been in vain.

Disappointed and abandoned, Yehiel ran back and sought his grandfather, Rabbi Barukh who was in his study learning Talmud. Since he knew his grandfather was not to be disturbed during his learning, he sat outside the study and cried. Rabbi Barukh heard his tears and opened the door.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

His grandson told him what had happened and that he felt abandoned and alone.

Now, at this point in the story, you would expect Rabbi Barukh to console his grandson and tell him that he was sure Shlomo did not mean to leave him. But he did not.

Instead, tears brimmed in Rabbi Barukh's eyes and he said: “God says the same thing: ‘I hide, but no one comes to seek Me.’”

(Adapted from Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*, page 97 also quoted by Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *Man Is Not Alone*, page 54).

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This theme of God's yearning to be found appears in the reverse in this morning's *parashah: Parashat Ki Tissa*. First, the reading takes us through the intense narrative of the Golden Calf as Benjamin described in his *d'var Torah*.

After the tumult of the Golden Calf, Moses seeks to restore God's Presence within the camp of the Israelites. The Torah then described how Moshe conversed with God "*panim el panim* – face to face." Perhaps needing some reassurance after the rancor that had developed between God and the people, Moses asks to know God better: "*Hodee'eini na et-d'rakhekha* – please let me know Your ways that I may know You and continue in Your favor. Consider, too, that this nation in Your people." God replies to Moses' personal needs: "I will go in the lead and lighten your burden." But God does not mention the people so Moses once again asks for God's leadership of the Israelites.

"And Adonai said to Moses: "I will also do this thing that you have asked for you have truly gained My favor and I have singled you out by Name." Moses replies, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence." The Holy One replies: "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Adonai, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. [...] But, you cannot see My face, for a person cannot see Me and live. [...] See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen." (Exodus 33:13-23)

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Here we find Moses yearning for God – he wants to find God and in order to do so, is hidden in the cleft of the rock. Hiding and Seeking – our yearning for God's Presence and God's yearning for us to find the divine, this is one of the basic human drives and theological themes of the Torah. It even hints at the most fundamental question: why did God create the universe? It seems that God wants beings to evolve who will be so subtly attuned to each other and the universe that they will be able to sense God's Presence, that they will find God.

Like Yehiel in the Hasidic story, God wants to be found, wants us to find the Holy One, in the most hidden of places. And we, what do we want? The same. We want to find God, to know God, to understand the deepest mysteries of our existence, to know why we are here, why there is a universe and what our role in it is.

The Torah paints a beautiful picture of Moses' relationship with God. While the text states that they spoke to each other "*panim el panim* – face to face," this does not imply a literal face to face experience, but rather that Moses' experience was *sui generis*, unlike anyone else's and not impeded by any other medium.

That said, is it clearly not face to face, since when Moses asks to be shown God's *kavod*, God's Presence, God replies that the divine "*goodness – kol toovi*" will be brought

over Moses face. What could this mean? It seems to me to be a feeling, a feeling of closeness, goodness and intimacy – an overwhelming feeling of calm and bliss.

But Moses cannot see God's face, he cannot fully know God. So Moses is hidden in the cleft of the rock, shielded by God's metaphoric hand, seeing only God's "*ahorai* – God's back" or perhaps, more literally, the aftershocks of God. Our Humash cites the Hatam Sofer, the nineteenth century rabbi and scholar, who taught that we cannot see God directly. "We can only see the difference that has made after the fact. We can recognize God's reality by seeing the difference God has made in people's lives." (Etz Hayim Humash, pp. 539-540)

Like Moses, we are left with footprints of the Holy One, the traces of God's Presence. We can sense God's impact on the world, though since we are limited by space-time, we cannot come close to truly understanding or seeing Adonai.

We are seeking the Divine, hoping to catch of a glimpse of God's shadow, knowing that just to be in God's wake can be thrilling and overwhelming.

It is interesting to look into Moshe's emotions – after seeing the people commit the grave sin of idolatry at Mount Sinai, the covenant broken and then rebuilt, he yearns for more. Moses wants the ultimate knowledge of God, but even he – our greatest prophet and teacher – cannot have it. He can only look at God's back. Perhaps the Torah includes this to encourage us – even our greatest leader was not given the deepest level of access to the Holy One.

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While this idea of our yearning for God and God's yearning to be found is a rich theological topic, a topic within our prayers, poetry and song, it is also a reflection on our relationships with each other. We all yearn to hide and be found – we long for closeness with each other, we move away from others and yearn to have them close. Cosmic hiding and seeking becomes the paradigm for our most basic human interactions. All relationships have moments of closeness and distance, of hiding and finding.

I remember once when I was about four years old, I went to visit my paternal grandparents who lived a few blocks away from our home in Manhattan. I hid under their sofa hoping not to be found, but also to be found. Unfortunately, after a while I fell asleep and they called the police since they thought I had escaped from their apartment and was lost in the City. But I will never forget the excitement of watching them search for me.

Human beings want to hide and want to be found and according to Rabbi Barukh's story so does God. God is sad when we give up and do not search for the Divine. God feels abandoned and alone, which, ironically, is how we as human beings often feel when searching for God.

We live our lives in this realm in a state of constant yearning – yearning to come close to God, yet aware of our fundamental inability to find God fully.

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Perhaps the two searches are related: searching for God may bring us closer to other humans and searching for others, may yield the Divine. And of course, both bring us closer to ourselves.

Dan Pagis, a 20th century Israeli poet wove these two themes together in his Poem: *Mahavo'im* – Hide and Seek [translation written by my mother, Dr. Anne Lapidus Lerner]

Hide and Seek
In a back yard in the Universe
We played, he and I.
I covered my eyes, he hid:
One two three,
Not before me, not behind me
Not within me.

Since then I have been looking
So many years.
So what if I don't find you.
Come out, already, come out,
You see that I have surrendered.

Our deepest fears are to hide and not to be found or to give up on seeking. Moses yearns for his elusive God and sets the model for us. Perhaps God is longing for us as well.

May God's Presence be illuminated for us all, filling our lives with both a seeking and a finding that brings us closer to our deepest selves, others and the Holy One and let us say: Amen.