God Has Got Us Covered R’’H, 5781

Even as we are all getting used to speaking to each other and listening to each other while wearing masks, I still find it disconcerting to do so. There are limitations of communication through a face unseen that are not only obvious – but that were also noted in a recent page of the Daf-Yomi cycle. The Gemara on Eruvin *yud-gimel* [13:] recounts that Rebbi – Rav Yehuda HaNasi – said: “*Hai d’m’chadedena m’chaverai* – The fact that I am sharper than my colleagues – *d’chazitei L’R’ Meir* *m’achurei* – is due to the fact that I saw Rabbi Meir from behind, i.e., I was fortunate enough to attend the classes of the scholarly Rav Meir, but I was only able to get a seat behind him – vi’ilu *chazitei m’kamaie*  – yet had I seen him from the front – *havv’e m’chadedena tfei* – I would be even sharper, – *d’ctiv* – as it is written in a pasuk in Yeshayahu, (30:20) , “*vi’hayu einecha ro’ot et-morecha* – and your eyes shall behold your teacher.” Seeing the face of one’s teacher increases one’s understanding and sharpens one’s mind. Rav Mesharshiyaa used the same pasuk to specifically instruct his son “*chazu l’pumeih d’rabchon* – see your teacher’s *mouth* [Keritot 6.]. And relevant to our every communication in today’s world, the Maharsha explains that a speaker’s facial expressions convey meaning that is not found in the words alone.

When we cover our faces, we make it difficult for others to read our lips and to gauge our emotions – we make it difficult for others to understand us.

But that’s far from the worst of it. If this Rosh HaShanah would not have occurred on Shabbos, then last week we would not have had a double parsha, and instead on this Shabbos we would have read Parshat VaYelech, in which HaShem alerts Moshe to Moshe’s impending death. HaShem tells Moshe that after Moshe’s death Bnai Yisrael will “(31:16) rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land…” and HaShem lets Moshe know, “(31:17) My, [*God’s*] anger will flare against [Bnei Yisrael] on that day and I, [*God*], will forsake them – *vi’histartani panai me’hem* – and I will conceal my face from them.” Rashi explains [Chagiga, 5:], that God will hear Israel crying-out because of the troubles that befall them, yet God will ignore their pleas. God’s fury is evidenced – by God’s hiding His face, as we’re told again in the next pasuk, “*Va’Anochi hasteir astir panai ba’yom ha’hu al kol-ha’ra’ah asher asah* – But I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that [Bnai Yisrael] did…” Yet we’re standing on Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance, physically embodying God’s very indicator of fury and discontent.

And in fact the possibility that God will hide His face from us is a prominent, seasonal concern. Since the beginning of Rosh Chodesh through the end of Sukkot we add into our daily service twice a day, “L’Dovid,” a Psalm [27] of David, “*HaShem Ori v’yishi* – God is my light and my salvation…” in which we attest, “…*et pane’Cha, HaShem, avakesh* – Your face, God, I seek – *al tas’teir pane’Cha mi’meni* – [we beg,] do not conceal Your face from me…”

The famous lesson of the Tanna Abba Shaul as taught in the Gemara in Shabbos [133b] is that when the Torah tells us “*Zeh K-Li v’anve’Hu* – this is my God and I will glorify Him [Shmot, 15:3],” that the word “*anvehu*,” should be understood as “*ani – v’Hu*,” me and God. “*Havei domeh lo*,” we are directed to behave like God, “*mah Hu chanun v’rachum, af attah heyeh chanun v’rachum* – just as God is compassionate and merciful, so too should you be compassionate and merciful.” Imitatio Dei – we are to imitate God. And yet we stand here in *hester panim*, in covered faces, concealing our faces from each other on Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement. If this is how *we* behave, in a year of death and poverty, a year of injustice, civil unrest and crime, a year of storms and of fire, what gives us the right to beseech any more than the same from God?

The Gemara in Chagigah [5.] provides some room for optimism. Regarding the *pasuk* “…I, [*God*], will forsake them – *v’histartani panai me’hem* – and I will conceal my face from them,” we are told there by Rav Bardela bar Tavyomi in the name of Rav, “*Kol she’eino b’hester panim, eino mei’hem* – anyone who is not subject to ‘concealment of [God’s] face,’ is not part of “them.” Who are “them,” and what advantage is there to be among them?” The Maharsha explains that Rav means that when God ‘conceals His face,’ it is gesture with a silver lining. God hides His face in anger only from Bnai Yisrael to who God lifts His face in favor, as our Kohanim will remind us today in their *Brachah* [Devarim 6:26], “*Yisa HaShem Panav Eilecha v’Yasem licha Shalom* – May HaShem lift His face to you and establish peace for you.” The hidden face is a sign of love, even in a less than ideal situation. God only employs the hidden face when dealing with His children when we misbehave, but that fact allows hope of God’s again beaming his countenance at us in better times to come.

I dare not be so trite as to suggest that all the bad that has occurred recently is a punishment out of love, if for no other reason than the philosophical impossibility of divine retribution that suggestion would create. And it would be just as obtuse to pretend that we the Jews, or that any one group or people are the cause, recipients or targets of all the world’s ills.

But the Rosh HaShanah message the Gemara is telling us is that even when God does hide His face from us, whatever that may mean, it does not mean that God has abandoned us. Rather God’s covering His face from us imparts a Piagetian message of Object Permanence; anger imbued with love may lead to God covering His face, but so too can He re-reveal it.

And we, too, of course, are only hiding our faces out of love for and in the best interest of those around us. It was during the weekly Shabbat announcements that I realized the positivity of our covering our faces. The Rav, the gabbai, the president, whoever speaks ends his message with a ‘thank you’ for wearing a mask. Yes, it’s uncomfortable, impersonal, unpleasant, but it is also kind, considerate and prophylactic. While the psukim clearly indicate that God covers His face in anger, and the Gemara clearly says that a covered face decreases the interpersonal level of communication, there is clearly room to see the message of hope in God’s covered face and in our own. We can see that a covered face can imply a deep caring. In these troubled times on this beginning of a New Year, we have great reason to daven – but we also have reason to look at each other’s covered faces as a precursor to a cure, and as a message of hope.