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When God hides His Face

RECENTLY MY WIFE, ROBBIE, AND I stopped to order takeaway on our way home one evening. While we were waiting for our burgers, the young rabbi working at the counter engaged us in conversation. He asked us where we were from and we told him we lived in the neighborhood. "How long do you plan to stay in Jerusalem?" We responded, "God willing, a long time!" His immediate response was, "Well, *Mashiach* (Messiah) is coming, you know, and it is going to be soon!" A sparkle of hope and anticipation filled his eyes.

We regularly have such interactions with Israelis or overhear similar conversations as people talk among themselves on the bus or in cafes. Jewish people in Israel today are openly, regularly talking about the imminent arrival of the Messiah. After centuries of difficult waiting, the Jewish

people are reading the signs. As God prophesied long ago through the prophets, and Jewish sages have confirmed, God seems to have hidden His face from the Jewish people for a time, but now He is making Himself known for the sake of His name. God also promised a great restoration for His people, and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through them. How can we, as Christians, participate with God as He restores His people?

Hester Panim

When God hides His face it is referred to as *hester panim* (הסתיר פנים). The root of *hester* is *satar*, which means “hidden.” It is used both literally and figuratively in Scripture. *Panim* means face. David Nekrutman, an Orthodox Jew and Executive Director of the Center for Jewish Christian Understanding and Cooperation, teaches that “hiddenness” is an important theological concept in the *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.). We see numerous instances when God hides His face from His people, and it’s important to explore why.

God hides His face for two reasons. Nekrutman says the most common reason is sin (both personal and communal). God desires relationship, but He is also holy and cannot tolerate sin among His people. In Deuteronomy 31:17–18, He says, *“Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured. And many evils and troubles shall befall them, so that they will say in that day, ‘Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?’ And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they have done, in that they have turned to other gods.”*

“For the LORD...is
gracious and merciful,
and will not turn His
face from you...

...IF you return to Him.”
2 Chronicles 30:9

Because God wants relationship He will relent and turn His face back to His people. 2 Chronicles 30:9 states, *“For if you return to the LORD, your brethren and your children will be treated with compassion by those who lead them captive, so that they may come back to this land; for the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn His face from you IF you return to Him.”*

According to Nekrutman, the second reason God hides His face is to bring about His purposes. Often when God hides His face from an individual or a nation, it is to make them aware of their need for Him once again—to draw them back to Himself. During times of *hester panim*, God is still immanent and working among His people. His light and His voice may seem obscured, but they are never completely absent. A repentant heart is required in order to join into relationship with Him again. Nekrutman adds, “It is the hope and promise of restoration that once repentance is begun, God will turn His face back to His people” (2 Chron. 30:9). God can be induced, so to speak, to resume His active engagement with the world of man.

The Jewish sage Rava (c. AD 280–352) taught that, “The time comes, however, when God withdraws; when His hand in the world is no longer open and He

orchestrates events from behind a screen.” Orthodox Rabbi Shmuel Goldin gives a historical example. “Both the patriarchal era and the national era of Jewish history opened with clear, direct communication between God and man. A point is reached, however, in each of these eras, when prophecy is silenced and God pulls back to allow us to find our own way. Just as a parent must let go of the child’s hand if a child is to learn to walk on his own, so too God withdraws and challenges us to determine our path.” Goldin goes on to make a personal application. “To live in a time when God is ‘hidden’ is to face a trial that transcends the test of Sinai. When the thunder, lightning and shofar of the book of Shmot (Exodus) fall silent; when we are forced to find and appreciate God’s existence in the quiet miracles that surround us each day, that is when the mature challenge truly begins.”

Despite times of *hester panim*, when God hides His face for various reasons, He never abandons His people Israel; indeed He cannot. Jeremiah 33:25–26 states, “Thus says the LORD: ‘If My covenant is not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth, then I will cast away the descendants of Jacob and David My servant... For I will cause their captives to return, and will have mercy on them!’” (see also Jer. 31:35, 36). This reminds me of the Apostle Paul’s words in Romans 11:1–2 when he states, “I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew...”

Many Christians teach that there has been an extended *hester panim* between God and His chosen people since the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70. This was to bring about God’s purposes for the other nations of the world. As a result some still teach that God rejected the Jewish people and replaced them with the church; but this doctrine of replacement theology is a false teaching based on anti-Semitism. With eyes of faith we can see that God is still fulfilling His prophetic promises regarding the people of Israel—and the Jewish people are taking note of the signs. Their expectation of redemption is palpable.

hester panim



In Our Generation

What are the signs that the Jewish people are pointing to? What prophecies have been fulfilled during our lifetime? And what does God say about why He is fulfilling His word? In Ezekiel 36:22–23 God tells us that He is acting for the sake of His own reputation; to vindicate the holiness of His great name—so that all the nations will know that He is the LORD.

Israel being made a nation again in a day

“Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Can a land be born in one day? Can a nation be brought forth all at once? As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth her sons” (Isa. 66:8 NASB).

Winning wars against huge odds

In all of its major wars since independence, Israel has faced overwhelming odds. Time and again, those who attacked the tiny nation believed that they would overrun and do away with Israel. However, God promised to fight for His people. Isaiah 49:25 says, *“But thus says the LORD: ‘Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible be delivered; for I will contend with him who contends with you, and I will save your children.’”*



The Jewish people returning to the Land from all over the world

“For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land” (Ezek. 36:24) [See also Isa. 43:5, 6; Ezek. 34:13]. Since 1948, a total of 3.6 million Jewish people have made *aliyah* (immigrated) to Israel from over 90 countries. Indeed the prophecy of Jeremiah is being fulfilled daily, *“Therefore, behold, the days are coming,”* says the LORD, *“that they shall no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,’ but, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the north country and from all the countries where I had driven them.’ And they shall dwell in their own land”* (Jer. 23:7–8).

The ruined cities being rebuilt and the fruitfulness returning to the Land

When Isaiah the prophet asked God how long He would hide His face, God replied, *“Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate, the LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land”* (Isa. 6:11–12). For centuries the Land lay desolate. When American author Mark Twain visited in 1867, this was his description: *“Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in*



shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent...It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land." The time of barrenness and travail was long and painful for both the people and the Land itself. However, through the prophets, God also promised a restoration.

"But you, O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel, for they are about to come. For indeed I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown. I will multiply men upon you, all the house of Israel, all of it; and the cities shall be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt. I will multiply upon you man and beast; and they shall increase and bear young; I will make you inhabited as in former times, and do better for you than at your beginnings. Then you shall know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 36:8–11). When the modern State of Israel began in 1948, there were 806,000 residents. By 2014 the population had increased to 8,300,000.

"The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, even with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the excellence of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the excellency of our God" (Isa. 35:1, 2).

"For the LORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in it, thanksgiving and voice of melody" (Isa. 51:3).

Israel is one of the only countries to enter the 21st century with a net increase in forestation. About 240 million trees have been planted in Israel since 1948. Today Israel produces 95% of its own food requirements. In 2013, exports of Israel's fresh fruit and vegetables totalled \$1.2 billion, about a 10 percent increase from the previous year.

The nations lending support

God has done a great work within His church in the past 20–30 years as He has revealed the Hebraic foundations of Christianity. Unprecedented numbers of Christians are realizing the Jewishness of Jesus, embracing their Hebraic roots and supporting Israel. Many Jewish people today are starting to take notice and see this as a fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy.

“Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Peoples shall yet come, inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, “Let us continue to go and pray before the LORD, and seek the LORD of hosts. I myself will go also.” Yes, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD.’ “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you””’ (Zech. 8:20–23).

Tourism to Israel continues to increase each year. According to an article in *The Times of Israel*, 3.5 million people visited Israel in 2013. Of that number, Christians were the most numerous group at 53%, followed by Jewish people at 28%. Christian support for Israel is being recognized and appreciated at all levels of Israeli society. When Christians come to visit Israel and stand in solidarity with the Jewish people, the act alone speaks volumes.

Isaiah 49:22 says, *“Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Behold, I will lift My hand in an oath to the nations, and set up My standard for the peoples; they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.’”*

Again Isaiah says: *“The sons of foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in My wrath I struck you, but in My favor I have had mercy on you” (Isa. 60:10).*

Last year 135 volunteers served with Bridges for Peace in Israel from 15 nations. Volunteers serve in various roles including packing food parcels, repairing homes and facilities, administration, publications and many other skilled positions. They come with one purpose—to bless Israel!



“The sons of foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you”

Isaiah 60:10

Yet To Be Fulfilled

While it is exciting to realize all of the biblical prophecies that are being fulfilled in our generation, there is much to look forward to as well...and we can take an active part in seeing it come to fruition. There is a spiritual principle that restoration will first take place in the physical realm, then the spiritual. 1 Corinthians 15:46 states, *“However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual.”*

We see this principle expressed clearly in Ezekiel 36:24–28: *“For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.”*

God said that first He would regather the Jewish people to the Land, then, in His time, He would restore them spiritually. The great ingathering prophesied so long ago is happening daily before our very eyes. God is doing this for the sake of His name (Ezek. 20:44) and to fulfill His promise to bless all the peoples of the earth through the Jewish people (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).





This great promise is reiterated in Jeremiah 31:31–34. *“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah — not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”*

The Jewish people have been, and are being, brought back physically, and the Land is being restored to abundant fruitfulness. Now we await the final redemption of the world that God promised. Many of the immigrants who are coming to Israel are from countries that deny God’s existence. For generations they were forbidden to study the Bible or practice their faith. As a result, they do not have a background experience of God’s Word and observance of His ways. They are coming back to their ancient homeland, called by the Spirit of God, because of persecution and lack of opportunities. As anti-Semitism increases rapidly around the globe, more Jewish people are physically returning to Israel as God sets the stage for His final restoration of the world.

Conclusion

So, how can we effectively partner with God in all that He is doing in these momentous days? **Pray** fervently that the spirit of the sons of Issachar would be poured out afresh on all who truly follow the One True God of Israel, both Jews and Christians. 1 Chronicles 12:32 says that in the days of King David’s mighty men, the sons of Issachar understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do. Pray for Israel and the Jewish people as the Lord fulfils His prophecies among them. And **Pray** that God will complete His work of final redemption for all the peoples of the earth.

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You can also **support** an immigrant family until they can learn Hebrew and get established in Israel. The first year is critical for most immigrants. Until they can get established and find work, it is very difficult for them to make ends meet. Sadly, some end up leaving Israel, often returning to places that are increasingly unsafe.

Another way to join God in what He is doing today is to **volunteer** in Israel. Be an example to the Jewish people as they see your presence among them bringing blessing and support on behalf of the church. The time is short. The church needs to read the signs properly, rise up and join God in what He is fulfilling for the sake of His name. Get involved and help to make His Name glorious among all the peoples of the earth.



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Scripture is taken from the New King James, unless otherwise noted.



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