

The Hidden Face and the Witnessed Song: Hester Panim, Shiviti, and Non-Domination in the Days of Return

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I. The Season After the Field

The King is no longer in the field. The month of Elul, with its pastoral image of maximal accessibility and free approach, has closed. Rosh Hashanah has already inscribed the year. The Fast of Gedaliah has already placed, inside the Ten Days of Return, the memory of a Jewish governor murdered by a Jewish hand and of a remnant polity that collapsed not only under empire but under intra-communal betrayal. What remains is the narrower, more demanding interval named by the Sages from the verse “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near” (Yeshayahu 55:6): the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah.

The parasha that now governs the week is Ha'azinu. Heaven and earth are summoned as witnesses. The Song does not flatter. It recounts gift, satiety, forgetting, and then the most politically charged clause in the Torah's theology of history: “And He said: I will hide My face from them; I will see what their end shall be” (Devarim 32:20). On this Wednesday the fourth weekday reading reaches precisely that stanza—the hiding of the Face, the generation of reversals, the people void of counsel. The Hayom Yom for 5 Tishrei answers the same hour from another direction. The second method of teshuvah is *Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid*: “I have set Havayah before me always.” Havayah names the continuous bringing of being from *ayin* to *yesh*. Teshuvah, in this register, is not only regret for a deed. It is restored awareness that existence itself is held across an infinite gap, and that no earthly power occupies that gap.

The claim of this essay is therefore simple and severe. Hester panim is not the cancellation of covenant. It is the mode in which covenant tests whether a people can refuse domination when the Face is not visible. Orthodox theology and republican political theory both possess languages for this test. They do not say the same thing. Torah remains the foundational and corrective frame. The present hour—contested passage through the Strait of Hormuz, an Israeli election set for 27 October 2026 amid bloc deadlock, and the liturgical approach to Shabbat Shuva—makes the test concrete rather than academic.

II. The Fourth Stanza: Close Reading of Devarim 32:19–28

The Song has already described the people's satiety: honey from the rock, oil from flint, the fat of lambs, the blood of grapes. Then comes the reversal that Rashi and the inner midrash of the peshat both mark as moral, not merely military:

The Lord saw and was provoked by the anger of His sons and His daughters. He said: I will hide My face from them; I will see what their end shall be. For they are a generation of reversals, children in whom there is no faithfulness. They have provoked Me with a no-god; I will provoke them with a no-people... For a fire has been kindled in My anger, and it shall

burn to the depths of Sheol... I would have said: I will wipe them out, I will make their memory cease from among men— except that I feared the taunt of the enemy, lest their adversaries misjudge, lest they say: Our hand is exalted, and it is not the Lord who has done all this. For they are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them. If they were wise, they would understand this; they would discern their latter end.

Several structural facts must be held at once.

First, the hiding of the Face is a Divine speech-act inside the covenant, not an exit from it. The same Speaker who hid the Face remains the Speaker who will not permit the enemy the last interpretive word. Hester is therefore neither deism nor abandonment. It is a withheld visibility that still judges.

Second, the motive clause is double. On the human side: provocation by sons and daughters, a generation of *tahpukhot*—reversals, inversions, a politics of turning the given order inside out. On the Divine side: “I will see what their end shall be.” The hiding is experimental in the moral sense. It reveals what a people does when the immediate Presence is not available as spectacle or as guarantee.

Third, the restraint on annihilation is not sentimental. It is a concern for the sanctification of the Name among the nations. The enemy must not be allowed to narrate Jewish catastrophe as the triumph of a rival hand. This is already a political theology of interpretation: history is a contested text, and Israel’s survival is bound to the correct ascription of agency.

Fourth, the indictment “void of counsel” (*ovad etzot*) is constitutional as well as spiritual. Counsel is the capacity to deliberate under law. A people without counsel is a people that cannot convert suffering into understanding, or understanding into limited, accountable power.

Classical readers diverge on the emphasis. Rashi reads the hiding as a measured withdrawal of providence in response to idolatry and ingratitude, still leaving room for the later turning of the Song. Ramban, more historical, hears in Ha’azinu a map of exile and return that will be fulfilled in stages, with hester as the long middle. The Netziv in *Ha’amek Davar* stresses the educational severity of the Song: it is given in advance so that later generations cannot claim they were not warned. Hasidic readers, especially in the school of the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe, refuse to treat hester as simple absence. Concealment is a mode of Presence—thicker, more demanding, addressed to the inner point that does not require spectacle.

A further tension, noted by modern *parshanim* and by academic students of Deuteronomy alike, is that Ha’azinu’s redemption stanza later in the chapter does not explicitly condition rescue on prior teshuvah in the same way Nitzavim does. Redemption for the sake of the Name can precede, or even outrun, the people’s return. That observation is true to the Song. It must not be cheapened into quietism. The liturgical placement of Ha’azinu inside the Ten Days, and the pairing this year with Shabbat Shuva’s haftarah of “Return, O Israel,” forces the two logics into one week: rescue for the Name, and the command to return with the whole heart.

III. Orthodox Architectures of Teshuvah and Hiddenness

Rambam: Free Will, Confession, and the Near Days

Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuvah* remains the baseline. Chapters 5 and 6 insist that free will is real, that Divine knowledge does not coerce, and that the entire structure of commandment, reward, and punishment collapses if the agent cannot choose. Chapter 2 defines complete teshuvah as the encounter with the same circumstance and the refusal of the old act. Chapter 2:6, citing Yeshayahu 55:6, isolates the Ten Days as the time when the Lord is near and teshuvah is accepted at once. Chapter 7:5 states that Israel is redeemed only through teshuvah, and that the Torah has already promised that at the end of exile the people will return and be immediately redeemed.

These chapters do not cancel one another. They describe different altitudes of the same mountain. Free will is the metaphysical floor. Confession and change of act are the halakhic stairs. The Ten Days are a season of intensified nearness. National redemption is pledged, yet the pledge does not abolish the work.

Rambam's *Hilchot Melachim* supplies the political counterpart. Kingship is a commandment, but it is fenced: the king writes a Torah scroll and reads in it all his days; he does not multiply horses, wives, or silver; he is not lifted in his heart above his brothers. Limited kingship is not a modern import. It is Mishneh Torah.

Tanya and the Hayom Yom of 5 Tishrei

Iggeret HaTeshuvah in Tanya distinguishes lower teshuvah (the turning from sin, the sweetening of *gevurot*) from higher teshuvah (the return of the *yechidah*, the restoration of attachment). The daily Hayom Yom for this date, drawn from the Frierdiker Rebbe and arranged by the Rebbe, isolates a second method: *Shiviti*. The Name Havayah is the Name of continuous creation. To set that Name before the eyes always is to remember that the interval between nothing and something is never closed by a human regime. Teshuvah here is ontological before it is moral. A person who lives *Shiviti* cannot, without self-contradiction, treat another person—or a strait, or an electorate—as raw material for arbitrary will.

The Rebbe's Elul discourses on the King in the Field described accessibility. The Ten Days describe nearness of a different kind: not the open pasture but the court in which the books are open and the subject is still invited to speak. Chassidus does not dissolve law into mood. It insists that the inner point can turn even when the outer Face is hidden, and that this turning is itself a form of revelation.

Other Orthodox Vectors

Some streams, especially those formed under prolonged persecution or under the pressure of state-building, emphasize strong authority as the only reliable shelter when the Face is hidden. The argument is not frivolous. A remnant that will not concentrate power can be murdered in its governor's house, as Gedaliah was. Other streams, drawing on the covenantal federalism implicit in the *edah*, on the limits of Devarim 17, and on the prophetic office as a standing critique of the crown, insist that hiddenness is precisely the condition in which concentrated power becomes most dangerous. Both are Torah voices. The constructive criticism Torah itself supplies is that authority without higher law becomes domination, and that higher law without institutions becomes a sermon that cannot protect a child.

IV. Republican and Academic Languages—and Their Limits

Philip Pettit's neo-republican account of freedom as non-domination holds that a person is unfree not only when interfered with, but when another agent stands in a position to interfere at will and with impunity. The slave of a kindly master is still a slave. The structural condition of arbitrary power is already unfreedom. This is the most useful secular analogue to the Torah's suspicion of unaccountable kingship.

Daniel J. Elazar's work on covenantal federalism and the Jewish political tradition describes Israel not as a sacral autocracy but as a matrix of covenants: between G-d and people, among tribes, between king and congregation, between generations. Yoram Hazony's recovery of biblical particularism refuses the Enlightenment temptation to dissolve peoples into abstract individuals and then reconstruct politics as a universal machine. Eric Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic* documents how early modern republicans read the Hebrew Bible as a source for anti-monarchical or limited-monarchical constitutionalism.

These accounts illuminate. They do not found. Pettit's non-domination can be stated without a commanding Voice at Sinai; it then lacks an answer to why the strong should accept limits when the Face is hidden. Hazony's particularism can harden into a nationalism that forgets the king's Torah scroll. Elazar's federalism can be romanticized into a process that never decides. Classical republican virtue can become an aesthetic of toughness without teshuvah.

The corrective is not to baptize the academic literature. It is to keep Torah as the frame that judges it. Non-domination is a genuine translation of "he shall not lift his heart above his brothers" and of "justice, justice shall you pursue." It is not a replacement for "I am the Lord your G-d." Covenant is older than contract and thicker than consent. The *edah* is a people under oath, not a club of rights-bearers. When academic republicanism forgets those facts, it becomes another no-god—an explanatory idol that cannot bind a hand in the dark.

V. Tzom Gedaliah as the Political Face of Hester

The Fast of the Seventh Month, observed two days ago, is placed by design inside the Ten Days. Rambam in *Hilchot Ta'anivot* teaches that public fasts exist to awaken hearts to teshuvah and to remind us that our deeds resemble the deeds that brought the original catastrophe. Gedaliah ben Ahikam was the Babylonian-appointed Jewish governor of the remnant in the land. Yishmael ben Netanyah, of royal blood, murdered him at table. The remnant fled toward Egypt against the word of Yirmiyahu. The last spark of Jewish administration in the land after the Hurban was extinguished by a Jew who could not bear a limited, non-Davidic, imperial-shadowed authority.

The Sages' shock—that the death of one righteous man is weighed with the burning of the Temple—is a constitutional teaching. Institutions of remnant life are themselves a sanctuary. To destroy them from within is a form of hester that human beings inflict on one another. The Face is hidden; therefore the temptation is to seize the nearest visible throne, even if the throne is only a governor's chair at Mitzpah.

The lesson for a sovereign generation is not nostalgia for weakness. It is the opposite. Sovereignty that cannot tolerate limited office, loyal opposition, or the unwelcome fact of a rival's legitimacy will reproduce Yishmael's table in modern dress. The Fast is a mirror held up to the Ten Days: teshuvah that does not include the ethics of power is incomplete.

VI. Hormuz: Domination of a Commons Under a Hidden Face

The Strait of Hormuz remains, in September 2026, a textbook contest between domination and non-domination. Across the year Iranian forces have sought to convert a global maritime commons into an administered corridor: preferred traffic schemes, demands that vessels coordinate with Iranian authorities, rejection of alternative Omani and IMO routing, intermittent closures, and the use of drones and projectiles against shipping that will not accept Tehran's terms. Gulf and Western responses have oscillated among naval escort, strikes on coastal sensors and storage, diplomatic tracks that stall, and public claims of restored control. Meetings planned between Iran and Gulf states have been postponed for lack of consensus. Iranian officials have spoken of changed "stakes around oil and the straits" and of conditions that must be met before talks. Traffic has risen and fallen with the latest incident.

Torah does not issue a naval manual. It does supply a criterion. A regime that treats a chokepoint upon which many peoples depend as an instrument of arbitrary will—tolls, forced routing, punishment of non-compliant hulls—is practicing domination in Pettit's sense and *tahpukhot* in Ha'azinu's sense: the inversion of a given order of passage into a private lever. A counter-effort that seeks passage under rules no single coastal power can rewrite at will is, however imperfect its motives, an attempt to keep a commons from becoming a master's house.

Two errors must be refused. The first is to baptize any Western or Israeli use of force as covenantal by definition. Power can dominate from more than one shore. The second is to treat Iranian claims of injured sovereignty as morally symmetric with the defense of open passage. A revolutionary-theocratic structure that hides its own face behind proxies, mines, and radio threats is not the functional equivalent of a coalition trying to keep oil and grain moving. Ha'azinu's concern for the Name among the nations is relevant here: the world will narrate this strait. A people of counsel must be able to say, without embarrassment, that arbitrary control of a commons is a species of injustice.

VII. The Election of 27 October 2026: Counsel or Reversal

Israel will elect a new Knesset on 27 October 2026. Mid-September polling continues to show deadlock. The bloc associated with the sitting prime minister and the bloc associated with his principal rivals both hover near, and usually short of, 61 seats. Lists have closed. New parties test the threshold. The Central Elections Committee has voted to permit parties to track turnout in real time at polling stations, reversing a privacy-based ban. American-backed arrangements for a post-war Gaza "Board of Peace" have, by multiple reports, stalled in part because the campaign has begun in earnest.

An election is not teshuvah. It can be the public form of counsel, or it can be the public form of *tahpukhot*. The Torah's measure is not which banner is more familiar. It is whether the contest remains under higher law: whether speakers tell the truth about security and about the stranger, whether institutions that restrain the winner are treated as holy rather than as obstacles, whether turnout is an act of responsibility rather than a managed harvest of the already-enrolled.

Real-time turnout tracking is a revealing artifact. In republican terms it is a technology of mobilization that can serve non-domination (helping citizens who wish to vote actually vote) or domination (turning the secret of participation into a campaign instrument). In Torah terms it is a test of *etzah*: will the tool be used to enlarge responsible agency or to treat the public as a herd? The permission to use it does not decide the ethics of its use.

High, deliberate turnout remains the civic analogue of the Ten Days. A people that stays home because the Face is hidden, or because every slate is disappointing, collaborates with hester. A people that votes as if the books were open—without pretending that any list is the Rock that begot them—practices a modest, adult form of return.

VIII. Shiviti as Architecture When the Face Is Hidden

The Hayom Yom of this date is not a pious caption for geopolitics. It is the inner method that makes the outer argument livable.

To set Havayah before the eyes always is to remember that the world is held across a gap no cabinet, no Revolutionary Guard, no campaign headquarters, and no analyst can close. That memory has three political consequences.

It limits the victor. If being itself is gifted, office is rented.

It limits the despairing. If being itself is gifted, hiddenness is not proof that the covenant has ended. The Song still has later stanzas.

It limits the technician. Tools—turnout software, traffic-separation schemes, ceasefire frameworks—are not substitutes for counsel. They are instruments that counsel must judge.

Shiviti is therefore the spiritual name for what Pettit tries to describe as a structure rather than a mood, and what Elazar describes as covenant rather than contract. The difference is that Shiviti is addressed to a Someone. Non-domination without Address becomes a design problem. Non-domination under Address becomes *avodah*.

IX. Constructive Critiques, Held Together

Within Orthodoxy, the authoritarian temptation in a time of war is intelligible and must be answered without contempt. Survival is a *mitzvah*. But Ha'azinu's own warning is that satiety and victory produce forgetting, and forgetting produces a generation of reversals. Strength that will not read its own scroll becomes the fat that kicks.

Within republican thought, the procedural temptation is equally intelligible and must be answered without contempt. Rules that restrain the strong are precious. But procedures that cannot name a people, a land, or a commanding law become a no-god of process. Israel is not a seminar. It is an *edah* that must decide, fight, judge, and return.

Within the present discourse on Hormuz and on the coming election, the partisan temptation is to treat every incident as proof of one's prior camp. Torah's first demand is counsel: to understand "this," to discern the latter end, to refuse both the enemy's taunt and the flattering lie.

X. The Days That Remain

Shabbat Shuva is four days from this writing. The haftarah will open *Shuva Yisrael*. Yom Kippur follows. The Song will be read in the congregation as heaven and earth listen.

The work of 5 Tishrei is therefore not to recover the pasture of Elul. It is to practice nearness under hiddenness. The Face is hidden. The witnesses are not. The remnant's table at Mitzpah is a warning. The strait is a commons under pressure. The ballot of 27 October is a test of whether a sovereign people still possesses counsel.

Teshuvah, in the language of this day's Hayom Yom, is to place Havayah before the eyes while the Face is hidden—and then to build, vote, restrain, and defend as people who know that no human hand exalted itself into the gap between *ayin* and *yesh*.

The Song is not over. The latter end is still to be discerned. That discernment is the beginning of return.

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