



# Out Beyond the Sea.

**A Theology of Divine Absence**

**Akiva Mattenson**

The Ateret Tzvi Prize in Hiddushei Torah  
Innaugural Winner  
5779



## THE HADAR INSTITUTE

Hadar empowers Jews to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed.

## THE AUTHOR

Akiva Mattenson is a senior at DePaul University, where he studies philosophy, concentrating on twentieth century continental philosophy. He is an alumnus of the Frisch School and has spent time studying at Yeshivat Ma'ale Gilboa (2013–2014), Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (summer 2014) and Yeshivat Hadar (summer 2015 and 2017). Akiva is an aspiring teacher of torah, and has taught for the Orot Institute for New Jewish Learning's high school program.

## THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH

The Ateret Zvi Prize recognizes yearly a work of innovative and exceptional Torah scholarship. The prize is endowed in loving memory of Professor and Rabbi Zvi H. Szubin, a lifelong scholar and teacher who uncovered rich insights buried in traditional texts using legal, historical, and linguistic tools—an approach he termed “text archaeology.”

Professor Szubin studied at Yeshivat Chevron and received the *smicha* of *yoreh yoreh, yadin yadin* from Chief Rabbi Herzog. He served in the Israeli Army for three years, and was deployed to the Sinai during the 1956 Sinai campaign. After completing university and an LL.B. degree in Israel, he came to the United States and received his Ph.D. from Dropsie College. He taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the City College of New York and, ultimately, became the Chair of the Classical Languages and Hebrew Department at City College. Professor Szubin was a supporter of Hadar, in particular its fierce commitment to traditional Jewish values and texts, its unabashed egalitarianism, and its promising efforts to energize thoughtful Jews of all ages.



# Out Beyond the Sea

## God in Sea-Country: An Introduction

I offer what follows as a tentative and searching reflection, oriented toward recovering some old yet forgotten ways of thinking about God that may prove particularly powerful today. In this way, I am attempting to follow the path trod by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who at the outset of his work on prayer puts forward this striking disclaimer:

[In the provinces of religious inquiry o]ne can express only his own feelings. He cannot and should not lay down universal postulates and general rules. He may hope that by formulating his own experiences in clear language, others may benefit from this self-revelation and enrich their own religious life.... Of course, I try to corroborate my own convictions and feelings by coordinating them with the great disciplines of Halakhah and Aggadah. However, to say that my feeling of certitude carries universal significance would be sheer ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

Like Rabbi Soloveitchik, I aim to articulate my deepest feelings about our theological moment through a sustained engagement with the sages of our canonical tradition, but nothing guarantees that these feelings will resonate. I can only hope they do. What is the character of our theological present? We might discover the beginnings of an answer in a passage from Midrash Tehillim, concerned with describing the character of Israel in its present exile from the land:

**מדרש תהלים מזמור סח**  
"אבי יתומים ודיין אלמנות" (תהלים סח:ו). ישראל בגולה דומין לאלמנות ויתומים, שנאמר "יתומים היינו ואין אב אמותינו כאלמנות" (איכה ה:ג). ולא אלמנות ממש, אלא כאשה שהלך בעלה למדינת הים ודעתו לחזור אליה. ולא יתומים ממש, אלא כקטנים שהלך אביהם למדינת הים ואין מי שיפרנס אותם. וכן כתיב "כי לא אלמן ישראל ויהודה מאלהיו" (ירמיה נא:ה).

1 *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2003) pp.1-2

### Midrash Tehillim Psalm 68

“A father of orphans and champion of widows” (Psalm 68:6). Israel in exile are similar to widows and orphans, as it is said, “we have become orphans without a father, and our mothers are like widows” (Lamentations 5:3). Still, not [similar to] actual widows, but to a woman whose husband went off to sea-country and intends to return to her. And not to actual orphans, but to children whose father went off to sea-country and nobody is there to support them. As so it is written, “for Israel and Judah were not bereft of their God” (Jeremiah 51:5).

This *midrash* presents itself as a meditation on a verse from Psalms 68 in which God is characterized as a champion of the marginalized. In its context, this verse constitutes part of a

God is that  
very father  
who has  
caused his  
children to  
become  
orphans.

rousing exaltation of the majesty and righteous power of God, and is followed immediately with further signs of God’s overwhelming justice: “God restores the lonely to their homes, sets free the imprisoned, safe and sound, while the rebellious must live in a parched land” (Psalms 68:7). Here however, the declaration of divine care is brought into conversation with a tragic declaration of loss from the book of Lamentations: “...we have become orphans without a father, and our mothers are just like widows” (Lamentations 5:3). In juxtaposing these two texts, the sages transform what it means for God to be a father of orphans. Rather than a surrogate father of orphans—the one who cares for the orphans after the death of their father—God is that very father who has caused his children to become orphans. Importantly for the sages, this radical *interpretative* upheaval is the fitting reflection of a radical *historical* upheaval, for in the post-destruction exilic present, the palpable presence of divine care has been replaced by a situation of fatherlessness and widowhood.<sup>2</sup>

While the call to reckon with something like the loss of God is palpable in this first moment of the text, it is not the final word. For, capitalizing on the presence of the comparative particle in “*like* widows” [כאלמנות], the sages pull back from the harrowing and, perhaps, even blasphemous consequences of such a declaration and assure us that Israel is not *truly* orphaned or widowed of God [ולא אלמנות ממש ... ולא יתומים ממש]. This is because the situation is something other than one of irrevocable loss, though akin to such loss. Israel is like “a woman whose husband

---

2 It is worth pausing to seriously consider what is being said here. Israel in exile is orphaned and widowed *of God*—that is to say that, in an important and undeniable sense, God appears already lost and gone. This is a radical thought that we will return to below, but for the moment it is worth noting that the idea of God’s absence is not something to be triumphantly celebrated, nor is it simply a surrogate for the notion of God’s non-existence. Being orphaned and widowed of God is an event in the life of the people, an event in the history of their life together with God. Thus, whatever emotions are held in the thought of losing a loved one ought to be in play here.

went off to sea-country and intends to return to her,” or like “children whose father went off to sea-country and nobody is there to support them.” For the sages, this more ambivalent image is the one that more adequately captures the character of our theological moment. It is one of loss, though not irrevocable loss; one in which the presence of care is absent [ואין מי שיפרנס אותם], but the possibility of its return lingers on [ודעתו לחזור אליה]. Indeed, the text ends with a powerful overturning of the figure with which it began, quoting Jeremiah to the effect that Israel is never widowed of God, never bereft of the one they love, despite appearances to the contrary.

This metaphor of the loved one journeying off to sea-country captures something important about the experience of living in God’s absence. For, if our theological question is one of reflecting on how God is appearing now, it might be said that God is appearing *precisely as not-appearing*, that is, as absent. To *appear* as absent is something markedly different from simply being absent, for in its appearing such an absence makes itself palpable. God isn’t simply absent; we *feel* that absence pervading our world and are confronted by it persistently. What’s more, God is not only absent, or even palpably absent, but palpably absent *in a particular way*: namely, as a father or husband who has journeyed off to sea-country. We must, then, clarify a critical aspect of this image: what is the space of sea-country (*medinat ha-yam*)?



## Sea-Country and Its Perils

In their commentary to the first *mishnah* in Masekhet Gittin, the Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot and the Ramban (among others)<sup>3</sup> claim that *medinat ha-yam* refers to someplace distant and far away, not simply somewhere beyond the boundaries of Israel. The Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot support this view by quoting a passage from Masekhet Yevamot in which a woman's husband has set off for *medinat ha-yam*. They thus take for granted that, in the scene of interest to us, it is clear that traveling off to *medinat ha-yam* is not an unremarkable trip to some neighboring land that lasts only two or three days; instead, it is a sustained journey into the distance that might go on for some time.

What's more, the Ritva in his commentary highlights that *medinat ha-yam* only functions as term for distant lands because of its fundamental association with lands that lie beyond the sea.<sup>4</sup> What *medinat ha-yam* then means, first and foremost, is a space or region that is situated beyond the sea, and thus setting off for "sea-country" means setting off for a voyage across the sea. As such, in a lengthy story found in Vayikrah Rabbah, we read that "he went and set off in the Mediterranean Sea until he arrived at sea-country" [והלך ופירש בים הגדול עד שהגיע למדינת הים].<sup>5</sup>

In the rabbinic imagination, sea travel is bound up with perilous danger.<sup>6</sup> One might be beset by waves and dangerous storms precluding the possibility of safe passage.<sup>7</sup> One's ship might shatter, leaving one stranded on a lonely plank surrounded by a sinking wreckage.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, sea-travel may well be an enterprise in which life and death hang in the balance.<sup>9</sup> There can ultimately be no way of knowing what weather and conditions await one there. As such, departure from the harbor should be accompanied by trepidation and solemnity rather than joy and excitement.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, setting off into the sea is an act of setting off into a great unknown.

When we return to the passage from Midrash Tehillim, the picture offered there comes into greater focus. If God is appearing as a loved one who has set off for sea-country, then our theological situation is one characterized first and foremost by enduring, unbearable uncertainty. We find ourselves awaiting the return of a God whose life hangs in a kind of uncertain limbo and who we cannot say for sure will ever reappear at the shores of our world. This enduring uncertainty is a complicated existential and theological position that is home to a plurality of sometimes conflicting affective responses. If we are to truly comprehend the meaning of Midrash

---

3 Tosafot, Gittin 2a., s.v. *mi-m'dinat ha-yam*; also see the Ramban, Rashba, and Ran there.

4 Ritva, Gittin 2a: והנכון דמשום הכי נקט מדינת הים ממש כלומר מעבר לים, ולא דוקא מעבר לים אלא בכלל דבריו חוצה לארץ ומקום רחוק קרי מדינת הים.

5 Vayikra Rabbah (Margoliot) 37:2.

6 This relationship between sea travel and danger is thematized in writings throughout the ancient Mediterranean. For our purposes, we will focus exclusively on the way this idea is made explicit in rabbinic writings.

7 See Exodus Rabbah 19:7.

8 See Talmud Bavli Yevamot 121a, cf. Talmud Yerushalmi Yevamot 16:4. See also Devarim Rabbah (Lieberman), Va-Ethanan.

9 See Yerushalmi Shabbat 2:6, cf. Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) 6:17 and Vayikra Rabbah (Margoliot) 35:8.

Tehillim's theological provocation, we must deepen our appreciation of the full array of emotions embedded in the experience of waiting for the return of a God who has set off to sea-country.<sup>11</sup>



---

<sup>11</sup> There is a rich emotional tapestry explored by the sages in their engagement with this metaphor. Anger and frustration (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 28), deep anxiety and heartbreak (Bemidbar Rabbah 16:23, Eikhah Rabbah 3:7), shame and desperation (Aggadat Bereishit 74:3)—all of these find their way into the sages' experience of divine absence. Here, we will focus only on the experiences of being buoyed by a hope, however fragile, and being subdued by resignation to a loss.

## An Emotional Portrait: Fragile Hope and Mourning

**W**e can begin by recalling that the image of a father/husband in sea-country suggests that, though the warmth and presence of the loved one is currently absent, a possibility of their return still exists—that is, hope remains. And this hope is something that is actively cultivated in the time of absence. We cling to the possibility of return, that our loved one intends to and will someday embrace us once again. This sense of a persistent hope can be felt in a *midrash* from *Shemot Rabbah* 18:12 concerning the night of Pesah. Therein, the moment of ultimate redemption is woven into a broader narrative of God’s care for Israel throughout history. The arrival of the messiah and the return of God are to transpire on the night Israel was redeemed from Egypt and subsequent events of salvation for individual Israelites took place. This night, the night of Pesah, has always already been pregnant with the possibility of redemption. Thus, as this *midrash* notes, Pesah is described in the Bible as a “night of protections” [ליל שימורים], the pluralized form of *shimurim* suggesting that this night harbors not only the securing of Israel from Egypt but a whole slew of securings throughout history.

If, in the first place, this night is “protected” because it is a night rife with examples of God’s protection of Israel and God’s commitment to rescue them, it is also “protected” in another sense. To reinforce the point that this night holds the seeds of a future redemption, the *midrash* introduces a verse from Isaiah:

שמות רבה יח:יב

...ובו משיח ואליהו מתגדלין, שנאמר “אמר שומר אתא בקר וגם לילה” (ישעיהו כא:יב).

### **Shemot Rabbah 18:12**

...and on that night Messiah and Elijah will mature, as it says: “The sentinel says: ‘Morning comes and also the night’” (Isaiah 21:12).

The coming of morning is here interpreted as a metaphor for the dawning of redemption, and the coming of night is taken as a veiled reference to the auspicious night of Pesah, during which the event of redemption will take place. It is the verse’s lexical similarities to the verse from Exodus that allow for its introduction in our *midrash*. Both make reference to some kind of securing or watching [ליל שימורים; אמר שומר], and both invoke the night [וגם לילה]. Critically however, the sense of “protected” has shifted. Whereas in Exodus it signified protection, rescue, and salvation, in Isaiah it signifies watchfulness, vigilance, and attentive waiting. Thus, the night of Pesah is also a night of *shimurim* insofar as it houses a vigilant watching and waiting for final redemption. We might say that Pesah is a night of *shimurim* both for God and for Israel: on the one hand, God has and will once again protect Israel from its oppressors; on the other, we watchfully await this redemption.

It is after we discover that the night pregnant with the possibility of redemption is also pregnant with a certain hopefulness that we are introduced to the figure of a wife waiting for the return of her husband from sea-country:



משל לאשה שהיתה מצפה לבעלה שפירש למדינת הים. אמר לה, יהא סימן הזה בידך. בעת שתראי אותו סימן, דעי שאני בא ואני קרוב לבא. כך ישראל מצפין; משעמדה אדום אמר הקב"ה, הסימן הזה יהיה בידכם ביום שעשיתי לכם תשועה, ובאותו לילה היו יודעים שאני גואלכם. ואם לאו, אל תאמינו שלא קרבה העת, שנאמר "אני ה' בעתה אחישנה" (ישעיהו ס:כב), ואומר "עוד אחת מעט היא ואני מרעיש את השמים ואת הארץ וגו' והפכתי כסא ממלכות" וגו' (חגי ב:ו, כב).

A parable to a woman who awaited her husband who had set off for sea-country. He said to her, "Hold onto this sign and when you see that very sign, know that I am coming and I am close to returning." So too, Israel awaits. Once Edom arose, The Holy Blessed One said, "Have this sign close at hand on the day that I brought your salvation. And on that night, know that I am your liberator. But if not, don't believe [that your salvation is at hand] because the time is not yet close," as it says, "I am God; in its time I will accomplish it quickly" (Isaiah 60:22), and it says, "Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth... and overthrow the throne of kingdoms" (Hagai 2:6, 22).

The word for waiting used here, **מצפה**, is one that runs the semantic gamut from waiting to looking forward to and, ultimately, hoping.<sup>12</sup> It is an active waiting with a yearning for something better and a hope that it will arrive. This hopeful posture is deepened with each glance at the sign, the memento left by the husband. Each glance revives and cultivates the sense that the loved one is coming and is close to returning [בעת שתראי אותו סימן, דעי שאני בא ואני קרוב לבא]. For Israel, this sign is precisely the night of Pesah. Each time we return to experience its salvation-rich significance, we are drawn into a sense of possibility and a deeper hopefulness.

Yet at this point in the *midrash*, something new emerges that was not present in the figure of the hopeful, waiting wife. A certain unsuppressable doubt about God's forthcoming arrival seeps into the text: "But if not, don't believe [that your salvation is at hand] because the time is not yet close." This "if not" signals a fragility in the infrastructure of Israel's hope. The time of redemption seems always to be deferred, always to be a "once again, in a little while" [עוד אחת מעט היא]. Unending deferral and interminable waiting can only erode the vigilance of the sentinel who sits hopefully looking out for redemption. If this *midrash* points to an affect of hopefulness native to the theological predicament of waiting for the absent husband, it is nonetheless a fragile hope.

The fragility of this hope becomes still clearer from two statements made by Rav Yehudah in Masekhet Ta'anit:

#### תלמוד בבלי תענית כ.

"היתה ירושלם לגדה ביניהם" (איכה א:יז). אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: לברכה - כנדה, מה נדה יש לה היתר, אף ירושלים יש לה תקנה. "היתה כאלמנה" (א:א). אמר רב יהודה: לברכה - כאלמנה, ולא אלמנה ממש. אלא כאשה שהלך בעלה למדינת הים ודעתו לחזור עליה.

12 Jastrow, s.v. "צפי, צָפָה". Jastrow, Morris, comp. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature with an Index of Scriptural Quotations* (London: Luzac; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903).

### Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 20a

“Jerusalem among them was like a menstruating woman” (Lamentations 1:17). Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: As a blessing—like a menstruating woman: just as a menstruating woman will become permitted, so too Jerusalem will be repaired. “She became like a widow” (1:1). Rav Yehudah said: As a blessing—like a widow, but not actually a widow. Rather, like a woman whose husband went off to sea-country and intends to return to her.

The second statement invokes our image, applying it to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not *truly* a widow, but only in a situation akin to widowhood—namely, one in which the husband has set off to sea-country with the intent of returning. Importantly, Rav Yehudah prefaces this recapitulation of our figure with the claim that this is a blessing [לברכה]. By highlighting the blessing in this figure, Rav Yehudah turns our attention to the hope and possibility latent in awaiting the return of God. As we have said, our world is one colored by loss but not irrevocable loss. The hope of return persists.

However, the fragility of the hopefulness comes into sharper focus when we consider the first statement. There, Rav Yehudah turns to a verse in Lamentations that describes Jerusalem as a menstruating woman. In its context, this verse is unequivocally negative: Jerusalem is cast out, viewed with disgust and revulsion. In a patriarchal context, the menstruating woman is a powerful symbol of such a condition. Here however, Rav Yehudah once again wishes to see a blessing: “Just as a menstruating woman will become permitted, so too Jerusalem will be repaired.” This reading undoubtedly runs against the grain of the text and its plain sense, and as such, contains a certain instability and fragility. Nothing truly supports his hopeful rendering of the verse save the strength of his own hope. This very same structure is apparent in his reading of the first verse of Lamentations. Plainly, the first verse of Lamentations means to suggest the profound and irrevocable loss of widowhood, not the similar, yet different, situation of a hopeful wife waiting for the return of her husband. Rav Yehudah can turn to the presence of the comparative particle, כ, to support his reading, but it is not ironclad. Rav Yehudah’s hopeful reading is plagued by instability, and the fragility of his hopefulness reveals itself in the hermeneutic contortions necessary for the text to bear out his theological stance. Both Rav Yehudah and the *midrash* from Shemot Rabbah, then, give voice to this first affective dimension of waiting for God’s return: fragile hope.

But these fragile hopes for the loved one’s return can erode, and the possibility of the loved one’s death always lingers in the background, especially as their absence transpires across the treacherous landscape of the sea. With time, there may be ways in which resignation to the realities of loss sets in, ways in which life must continue despite the loved one’s absence, and a process of mourning and bereavement must be undergone. In certain ways, the experience of an interminable absence across an unbearable distance becomes practically indistinguishable from the experience of the irrevocable loss that occurs in death.

Such at least is the argument of a short *midrash* from the late twelfth century collection, Sekhel Tov (Buber), Mikketz-Va-yigash 44:20. The *midrash* concerns Judah’s impassioned plea to the viceroy—whom he does not yet know is his brother Joseph—concerning Benjamin. As he begins,

Judah sets the scene of his predicament by invoking the death of Joseph, which has left Benjamin an only child to his mother and an especially beloved son to his father. The author of our text is troubled by this invocation, because it suggests that Judah is pretending to speak with full knowledge about matters that are uncertain to him—the brothers left Joseph in a pit and he was not there when they returned. As far as Judah knows, Joseph may still be alive! In response, our text suggests that “once he had wandered far off and was no longer around, he is considered like a dead person” [כיון שהרחיק נדוד ואיננו, הרי הוא חשוב כמו מת]. That is, Judah *could* speak with certainty because, for all intents and purposes, Joseph was dead. Once he had disappeared and wandered off into the distance, nothing separated the experience of an uncertain absence from that of a deathly loss.

This text parallels what is at stake in the image of the father/husband in sea-country. In one sense, it remains always uncertain whether the loved one is dead. But in another equally true sense, with the passage of time and the breadth of distance, the loved one appears to his beloved as irrevocably lost. The dispositions we take up toward the dead—mourning, grief, bereavement, reconciliation—would not be inapt even though it remains uncertain whether the loved one in fact died. Thus, beyond fragile hope, the theological predicament of enduring the uncertainty of God’s absence can include a dimension of grief and mourning for the loss of God. Many questions remain to be answered about precisely what taking up an attitude of bereavement toward God might mean.<sup>13</sup> For now, I leave these questions open. The important thing to recall is that none of these affective responses are existentially exclusive; instead, we hold them in tension with one another, at times feeling hope more strongly, at others loss. Nevertheless, we are always in one way or another enduring the uncertainty of God’s absence.

**We cling to the thought that our loved one intends to and will someday embrace us once again.**

---

13 Indeed, the Sekhel Tov suggests that forgetting about the dead may be part and parcel of this attitude (ואחיו מת. אפשר אדם כיהודה אומר דבר שאינו ברור לו, אלא כיון שהרחיק נדוד ואיננו, הרי הוא חשוב כמו מת, ודומה לדבר [תהלים לא:יג] נשכחתי כמת מלב). Would that be appropriate with respect to God? Or might mourning instead be a practice of keeping God’s memory alive in one’s life? Addressing this question would first of all involve a reflection on mourning more generally. Such reflection would likely involve a reconsideration and transvaluation of the classical Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia, in which the healthy response of mourning involves letting go of the lost object and the pathological response of melancholia involves refusing to let go. For an example of a text that begins this work, see *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, ed. Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 1996).

## The Meaning of Divine Absence: Transcendence, Hiddenness, and Sea-Country

**T**he idea of God's absence is not novel. There are various ways in which Jewish theology has reflected on the significance of divine absence in our world. Both Maimonidean and Hasidic theological reflections address themselves in one way or another to the question of divine absence, and some even situate it at the heart of their theologies. Thus, it behooves us to ask: in what ways does our picture of divine absence differ from these others? And what might be gained by turning to the image of the absentee father/husband in conceptualizing divine absence? In addressing these questions, I don't intend to engage any other specific theologies. Instead, I will frame this discussion around two contrasting conceptions of divine absence that help clarify just what is at stake in grounding a theology of divine absence in the image we have been considering. These are: (1) absence as transcendence, and (2) absence as hiddenness.

To say that God is transcendent is to say that God exists in a realm apart from our own and is radically inaccessible to human thought and experience. God appears as absent here because God is fundamentally non-presentable. God's being is radically incommensurate with the world we inhabit, and thus unavailable to any and all human experience. This picture of absence differs from that offered by the image of a husband/father setting off for sea-country. Fundamentally, absence as transcendence is an *objectively spatial* metaphor while absence as related to sea-country and the phenomenon of distance is a *relatively spatial* metaphor.

The language of transcendence is meant to capture something objective about the character of things in the world. Some things are inside of its bounds and some things are decidedly not. In our case, God as transcendent is *objectively* outside the bounds of the experiential world.



By contrast, the language of distance is always in reference to some subject or thing for whom something appears distant. Things only appear as distant from a particular location; they appear *over there* from *over here*. Thus, distance is a *relatively spatial* designation for it is always relative to some point of view or subject. When distance and absence are so considered, the possibility of a *distressing* distance emerges. For only from the relative, subjective position of an individual can the distance appear as distressingly far away.<sup>14</sup>

The metaphor of sea-country is always in relation to a point of view. As we learned from the Rishonim, *medinat ha-yam* does not primarily signify a specific country or geographical location but a place that is situated at a distance from the speaker, a space that is far away. Thus, Catherine Hezser can summarize her account of the multiple significations of *medinat ha-yam* in Rabbinic literature by saying that “Perhaps *medinat ha-yam* refers to any location that was perceived as distant and foreign from a particular rabbi’s point-of-view.”<sup>15</sup>

What makes the image of *medinat ha-yam* powerful and rich is not its *objective* spatiality but its *relative* spatiality, its announcement of a *distressing* and seemingly unbridgeable distance that has opened up between us and God. Only in relation to such a distance does it begin to make sense to speak of hope, anxiety, shame and despair, anger and frustration, and bereavement, for then, we are in the sphere of human life and human relationships. Put succinctly, if transcendence is about the objective metaphysical distance between people and God, sea-country is about the relational existential distance between a beloved and her lover. If we wish for our theologies to admit of the plurality of complex feelings we hold toward God’s absence, *medinat ha-yam* recommends itself more readily than does transcendence.

God truly is  
absent, distant,  
far away,  
and located  
across an  
ever-widening  
chasm

Like the absence of sea-country and unlike absence as transcendence, absence as hiddenness is a relational matter. Something is always hidden *from someone* and thus we open ourselves onto the emotional complexities of an existential, subjective relation to such absence. However, hiddenness sets itself apart from sea-country in a different yet critical way. Absence as hiddenness suggests that what is absent is nonetheless in a certain way available. It is situated close by and only absent insofar as it is cloaked or obscured from view. We need only locate the hiding place to discover that what we thought was absent was truly present all along, if only in a somewhat concealed fashion. In theological matters, absence as hiddenness is often one in which all that is required is to “open one’s eyes” and suddenly the world becomes pervaded with the living and vital presence

---

14 For a parallel phenomenological discussion of distance and transcendence in relation to the early Socratic dialogues, see Sean D. Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato’s Early Dialogues* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), pp. 111-115.

15 Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Travel in Antiquity* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), p. 286.

of God. We discover that God's hiddenness was simply a function of our blindness to God's presence.

When we turn to the image of God's departure to sea-country, we find a profoundly different model of divine absence. First, the absence encoded in the sea-country imagery is not simply a function of human blindness. God truly is absent, distant, far away, and located across an ever-widening chasm. Practically speaking, there is nothing we can do to change that situation. We cannot just open our eyes and remove the obstacles that obscure God from view. Unlike God's Torah, God actually is beyond the sea and seemingly irretrievable.<sup>16</sup> A change of perspective may reveal something beautiful or profound about the world God created, but it is not yet an intimacy with God.

Second, absence as hiddenness suggests a presence that has been deferred or occluded. It commits one to the claim that there *is something out there*, even if it is hidden. By contrast, the imagery of sea-country involves profound uncertainty about whether God in fact remains out there. The dangers of sea travel place God's life in a kind of uncertain limbo and leave us with an emotionally charged question: *Are you still out there, God?* At times, we respond with a hopeful (if hesitant) yes; at times, we find ourselves resigned to loss and engaged in grief and mourning. If we wish for our theological vocabulary to admit of both the obstinacy of God's absence and the uncertainty of God's continued presence and future arrival, *medinat ha-yam* proves superior to hiddenness.

The divine absence described by these texts in the image of *medinat ha-yam* is one that cannot be endured indifferently or objectively, one that cannot be easily overcome by opening our eyes and learning to see the world differently, and one that always involves an implicit reference to the possibility of an irrevocable loss of God, which would leave us with the hard work of grief and mourning. If I have been stressing the tragic side of this theological imagery, it is only because we deserve theologies that are forthright and honest about the difficulty, tragedy, and uncertainty bound up with being in relationship with God here and now. Our theologies ought to make space and give voice to those moments of profound resignation to the irrevocable loss of God, enabling us to claim those raw emotions as part of our religious lives and the complicated story of our life with God. Yet theological honesty and forthrightness also demand that we take stock of the hope, however fragile, that continues to linger on. For somewhere, out beyond the sea, God may still be there. Indeed, who knows? Once again, in a little while, God may be coming and close to returning. We can only hope.

---

<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 30:13.



*All images used are licensed for commercial reproduction.*

