

## To Hide or Not To Hide

April, 1984. Elk Rapids, Michigan. A reflection on “hiding” by Andy Mellen.<sup>1</sup>

**SOME PEOPLE HIDE IN CLOSETS**, some hide in attics, some hide in basements; some hide in freeway off-ramps; I hide in myself.

When I was a youngster, I hid as the class clown. When I was a teenager, I hid as the class drunk. When I was in my early twenties, I hid as a Marine – hiding from little people in black pajamas. When I was in my late twenties, I hid as a husband and father. When I was in my early thirties, I hid as a drug addict in San Francisco. Now that I am in my late thirties, I am hiding in a small cabin in northern Michigan. I am hiding from the corporate confusion. I must be doing it rather well, as my hiding places are the welfare office and the unemployment line – a somewhat dubious barometer of success.

There is no growth in hiding places. It is lonely, unrewarding, self-defeating – but, nonetheless, the easier way.

Hiding places are eradicated by honesty. Being a little bit dishonest, or a little bit in hiding, is like being a little bit pregnant.

Like Andy Mellen, each of us has our hiding places: the physical places to which we retreat when we are scared or overwhelmed and the psychological spaces that shelter us from discomfort and unease. And like Andy Mellen, we may find ourselves too often in hiding, too removed from the world around us, holding ourselves back from what we know we need to do.

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When we find ourselves too quick to withdraw, too eager to turn a blind eye to what needs to be done, this week’s Torah portion calls us out. We read:

If you see your fellow’s ox or sheep gone astray, do not hide yourself from them; you must take them back to your fellow. ... If you see your fellow’s

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ass or ox fallen on the road, do not hide yourself from them; you must help [your fellow] raise it. (Deut. 22:1, 4).

This passage deals with the requirement to return lost property even at considerable inconvenience to us. We're warned **לֹא־תִרְאֶה ... וְהִתְעַלַּמְתָּ** – do not see and then hide yourself, acting as though you never noticed the straying or fallen beast. As Rashi clarifies, this could literally mean “Covering your eyes as though you don't see it,” though of course the meaning is metaphorical as well.

How often we are tempted to pretend as though we have not heard a cry for help! How easy it is to retreat to our hiding place and take shelter there from the urgent needs of our neighbors! That's why we need verses like these, to keep us honest and to remind us of our duty to one another.

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How curious, then, that as the Rabbis consider the deeper meanings of this passage, they do not focus not on its urgent call to action. Instead, traditional commentary goes out of its way to examine precisely when we *may* hide, illuminating the circumstances when it's permissible or even necessary to say no.

Drawing on a narrow opening in the Torah's Hebrew grammar, an early rabbinic text teaches:

**פְּעָמִים תִּשְׂאֵתָה מִתְעַלֵּם וּפְעָמִים שְׂאִין אֶתָּה מִתְעַלֵּם**. Sometimes you do hide yourself from them, and sometimes you do not hide yourself from them. How [can this be]? If he were a priest and [the lost property] is in a graveyard, or if he is an elder and [collecting the lost property] does not accord with his dignity, or if your loss [in helping to retrieve the property] would be greater than your friend has already lost – then you are exempt.<sup>2</sup>

It seems as though the Rabbis are speaking directly to the pleasers among us, to those of us who, even when our own wellbeing is at stake, will go out of our way to help anyone who asks for help. Our tradition wants to protect us from being taken advantage of. If my neighbor can pick up her own ox and it would hurt me to help, it is

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<sup>2</sup> Sifrei Devarim Piska 222.

**ספרי דברים פסקא רכב**

**וְהִתְעַלַּמְתָּ מֵהֶם** – פְּעָמִים תִּשְׂאֵתָה מִתְעַלֵּם וּפְעָמִים שְׂאִין אֶתָּה מִתְעַלֵּם. פִּיּוּז? הֲיָה פֶהוּ, וְהִיא בְּבֵית הַקְּבָרוֹת, אוֹ שְׂהִיָּה הֲיָה זָקֵן וְאִינָהּ לְפִי כְבוֹדוֹ, אוֹ שְׂהִיָּתָה שְׁלוֹ מְרוּבָה מִשְׁלֵ חֲבֵרוֹ – פְּטוֹר. לְכֹד נֶאֱמַר: **וְהִתְעַלַּמְתָּ** – פְּעָמִים תִּשְׂאֵתָה מִתְעַלֵּם וּפְעָמִים שְׂאִין אֶתָּה מִתְעַלֵּם.

Translation modified from Dena Weiss's in "Help, but Don't Enable," available online:  
[https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh\\_torah\\_source\\_sheets/CJLVPParashatKiTeitzei5778.pdf](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/CJLVPParashatKiTeitzei5778.pdf)

fair for me to keep my distance even if she asks for a hand. My responsibility to myself does not evaporate when someone else asks for help.

I know it's hard to say no. I have trouble with it myself, and I know many of you feel the same way. But in his powerful essay called "On Saying NO to people," Reverend Henry T. Close offers his view on why it's so important to learn how. He writes:

If I can't say NO, I can't really say YES either. Both NO and YES grow out of my sense of being a real person, of affirming *my* wishes, *my* life, my respecting of my *self*. If I can't say NO, then I am just submitting, and I will feel defeated and apathetic. I will be tempted to avoid people altogether. Or, if I can't avoid them, I will constantly be on guard and defensive, dreading every contact in which people threaten to intimidate me with their demands.<sup>3</sup>

We need boundaries in order to be whole. As Reverend Close teaches, "the more I learn to say NO, the more I become a real self."<sup>4</sup> We all have our own personal reasons for letting ourselves get stretched too thin, and our society and our culture are constantly asserting that it's rude to say no. But in always saying yes, we lose who we are, and we owe it to ourselves to find ways, from time to time, to politely but firmly decline to help.

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At times, I am astounded by the empathy of our ancient sages. The Torah is screaming at us to help a neighbor in need, and the Rabbis step in to insist that sometimes, we need to decline. They remind us of the human element in these interactions, that power is not always equal, and that each of us has the right to determine the proper balance between our duty to others and our responsibility to ourselves.

Sometimes, it is cowardly to hide. And sometimes, it's essential. It's up to us to be truly honest with ourselves to determine what to do in any given situation.

Sometimes we need Andy Mellen's reminder that hiding is "lonely" and "unrewarding." But sometimes, we might recall the teaching of Barbara Mitchell of Park Forest, Illinois:

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<sup>3</sup> *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, June 1974, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

**I HAVE A HIDING PLACE** to which I retreat when I am in pain. Like a snail, I curl up inside myself, wrapping my shell around me. I am unable to reach out to another human being. I reach only to myself – becoming mother to a hurt child, wiping away the tears, soothing the pain.

Slowly, peace comes over me and my strength flows back. I open the shell and soak up the warmth. Like a child who knows she is loved, I once again embrace life.<sup>5</sup>

When *we* hide, too, may it be to heal.

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