SHEKHINTA BA-GALUTA:  
A MIDRASHIC RESPONSE TO DESTRUCTION AND PERSECUTION

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The destruction of the Second Temple and the devastation of Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. were major calamities in the life of the Jew of late antiquity. As Jacob Neusner reminded us, though Jews continued to govern themselves, much as they had prior to the destruction, albeit through different institutions, the loss of the Temple and cessation of the cult nevertheless had a drastic affect upon the socio-religious life of Palestinian Jewry. These events raised several crucial problems, chief of which was how to explain the disaster and cope with it.

One clear response to these events, which is found in both rabbinic and apocalyptic sources, stresses that God was justified in punishing His people, Israel, and that the catastrophe resulted from Israel’s sins. The Rabbis emphasized this by introducing the motif of Histalkut ha-Shekhinah, the departure of God’s indwelling spirit. When Israel sinned, not only did God destroy the Temple and exile Israel from its land, but He no longer could dwell in their midst. The notion of Histalkut ha-Shekhinah not only expressed the

2) Note, for example, The Book of Barukh (1 Barukh) 3:10 ff.
4) The motif of Histalqut ha-Shekhinah occurs in several sources, the locus classicus being Eikha Rabbati, petihta #24. A concomitant motif to Histalqut ha-Shekhinah is the notion of the departure of the Ruah ha-Qodesh, the Holy Spirit, from Israel. Peter Schäfer, in his work Die Vorstellung vom heiligen Geist in der rabbinschen
shock and sense of grief resulting from the destruction of the Temple which created a barrier between God and the people of Israel, but it also served as a means of rebuke: God's indwelling presence was repelled by the sins of the people.

It is inconceivable, however, that the tradition portray God as simply abandoning His people and ignoring their plight. He who covenanted with the people Israel in perpetuity had to feel distressed at their tragic fate. Therefore, the Rabbis also emphasized that the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Israel caused God to lament. There is a plethora of passages in rabbinic tradition which describe God as weeping over the destroyed Temple and lamenting the fate of His people.

Yet, the view that God was sorely distressed by the fate of His people alone would not have sufficiently underscored the extent to which God was still wedded to Israel. To this end, the Rabbis also pictured God as being accessible to Israel no matter what its predicament. Esconsed in exile and persecuted, they knew that God could not abandon them. For example, in P. T. Berakhot 13a-b R. Isaac states that God was with Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in the fiery furnace, with Jonah in the whale and with Daniel in the lion's den.

The Shekhinah is said to be with Israel despite its sinfulness and state of impurity. God shows His affection for His people by

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Literatur (Munich, 1972), p. 100 ff., has shown that the disappearance of the Holy Spirit is bound up with the removal of God's indwelling presence. Cf. Targum Jonathan to Isaiah 32:5; Eikha Rabbati, petihta 23; Kohelet Rabbah 12:7; Aggadat Bereshit 23:2 and Midrash ha-Gadol to Genesis 6:4.

5) It is interesting to note in this regard how in the very passage from Eikha Rabbati (petihta 24) which underscores the notion of Histalqul ha-Shekhinah, God nevertheless is pictured as weeping and mourning.

6) Peter Kuhn, in his recent work Gottes Trauer und Klage in der rabbinischen Uberlieferung (Leiden, 1978), p. 351, estimates that there are approximately 75 text traditions which deal with God's lamenting the destruction of the Temple and Israel's suffering in exile. Kuhn analyzes all of these traditions, most of which seem to portray God as weeping over the destroyed Temple and the downfall of Israel.

7) George Foot Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era (New York, 1927; reprinted ed. New York, 1971), Vol. 1, p. 371 and Abelson, The Immanence, pp. 138, 283. Among the traditions which stress God's accessibility to Israel, see P. T. Berakhot 13b, Devarim Rabbah 2:16 and Shemot Rabbah 32:2. In addition, God is pictured as accompanying righteous individuals in whatever circumstances they may be found. In this regard, see Bereshit Rabbah 86:2, Tanhuma Buber, Vayeshev #6, Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 11:14, Pirqei d'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 39, and Midrash ha-Gadol to Genesis 46:4.

8) See, for example, Sifra Mezorah, pereq 9:4.