

Yom Kippur 5781 morning

MASKS

Once upon a time, we'd look around the packed sanctuary during the High Holy Days and see new suits and dresses, a sprinkling of fur stoles and some awesomely extravagant hats that evoked twitters before there was a Twitter! Now, we wear these masks. Oy!

As we have all learned, masks have many important functions. In its current and most ubiquitous use, a mask is an essential part of our COVID-19 PPE (personal protective equipment). There are also masks to project a message or a character. Naturally, entrepreneurs have developed PPE masks that both protect and project; some have simple logos, others have elaborate designs, and some declare allegiance to a favorite sports team.

Well before COVID, we were accustomed to different kinds of masks in sports: baseball catchers wear a mask, as do modern football players, and it's a penalty to tug on it. Hockey goalies wear masks and they can be rather freaky if worn by someone named Jason. Of course, the masks we usually associate with fear are Halloween masks. The masks worn during Purim are not often scary, even the ones of he that shall not be named (Haman ---Boo!).

Actually, there is an association of Purim with Yom Kippur, including masks. Kabbalistic commentators noted that the Torah calls the Day of Atonement “*Yom Kippurim.*” (Lev. 23:28) A day “Like Purim.” How did they come up with that? Well, the Hebrew letter *kaf* serves as a prefix, a shortened form of the preposition “*k’mo*” which means “like” or “as.” Therefore, they taught that the *Yom Kippurim*, Day of Atonement is “*K-Purim,*” or “Like Purim.”

Other commentators have noted wryly that that just as Esther hid her true identity to protect herself, we dress up in costumes on Purim. And on Yom Kippur we also put on appearances, displays of piety that even the prophet Isaiah castigated, as we heard during the Haftarah reading.

Furthermore, in the Book of Esther, God is hidden, never mentioned by name. Neither does the book mention the Land of Israel or the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the Talmud there’s a teaching that claims that Esther is in the Torah. Now that is a rather surprising claim. How could Esther, Mordechai and the Purim gang whose adventures took place nearly a thousand years after the Torah was written, be mentioned in the Torah? The sages of the Gemara had the same question. They asked: *From where in the Torah is Esther?*

The response refers to a passage we just read the week before last, where it is written: **וְאֶנְכִי הִסְתֵּיר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא**

"And I will surely hide (astir)" (Deuteronomy 31:18; BT Chullin 139b).

Astir, which means "I will hide" sounds like Esther, the hiding queen.

Esther's name is linked to hiding as she concealed her Jewish identity under royal garments. Likewise, her name "Esther" is an adopted foreign name that she used in public instead of her Hebrew name, Hadassah.

Even the opposite actions of feasting and fasting link Purim to Yom Kippur. Esther arranged a feast to win the favor of King Achasverosh, while we fast on Yom Kippur in order to demonstrate to God, *Avinu Malkeinu*, our sincerity.

And it should be pointed out that just before Purim is the Fast of Esther and at the conclusion of Yom Kippur is the magnificent Break the Fast.

Fasts, too, are open displays of piety that are not always of the noblest intent. The prophet Isaiah scolded our ancestors against the vain belief that mere external displays, masks of piety, were desired. He wrote:

Is such the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when Adonai is favorable? (Isaiah 58:5)

Isaiah wanted us to approach God not with our faces, not with external displays. Rather, he urged us to make our offerings from the depth of our being, from our heart. Our offerings should come from our heart, *avodah sheb'lev* and not our face because we have one heart but many faces.

As Rabbi Jeremy Rosen pointed out, Biblical Hebrew has no word for a singular “face.” The Bible uses the word *panim*, which literally means “faces.” In English, to be “two-faced” is an insult. In Hebrew, it is a reflection of the complex and ever-changing nature of our responses to the world around us.

Our changing faces reflect different relationships, situations, and moods. These “faces” are not false masks. Well, at least they do not have to be. It is natural for one’s face to light up in joy when you see a loved one or a dear friend. And it is to be expected that our face will display a scowl when we hear bad news or bite into something bitter or smell something foul.

And every one of those faces is true. The smile and the scowl; the interested and the bored, the focused and the distracted; the compassionate and the harsh; the sweet and the cynical. They are all ours. Faces, not masks. Faces, with their varied moods. Faces that express truth and depth and complexity far beyond the capacity of mere words. As eyes are windows to the soul, so, too faces are reflections of our heart. The challenge before us then, is not which face we choose to show the world. Rather, the challenge is transforming what is in our heart and souls so that the best that is within us shines forth.

We've had many unique experiences during this COVID-19 pandemic, but one clearly stands out: that is we can see faces changing on the screen. Our varied countenances show up on Zoom. Some are constantly fluffing their hair, or shifting the angle of their look as if trying to remember "which one was my good side?" Some are totally unself-conscious about their look: yawning broadly, rolling their eyes, dropping jaws in disbelief, or burying their heads in their hands to indicate either that they are very tired, very bored or a bit of both. Some try to toy with their look with computer generated backgrounds. All this reveals both self-consciousness and self-awareness.

At a recent Lunch and Learn class we had an interesting discussion about the difference between self-conscious and self-aware. As was described some time ago in the journal Scientific American (Ferris Jabr, August 22, 2012):

Consciousness is awareness of one's body and one's environment; self-awareness is recognition of that consciousness - not only understanding that one exists, but further understanding that one is aware of one's existence. Another way of thinking about it: To be conscious is to think; to be self-aware is to realize that you are a thinking being and to think about your thoughts.

To which we should add that self-consciousness is hyper awareness of oneself, one's appearance, or one's actions.

Moses was both self-conscious and self-aware when he covered his face in order to avoid frightening his people after he came down from Mount Sinai. The Torah said that he wore a mask or a veil, which in Hebrew is called "*masveh*" (Exodus 34:33). His encounter with God on Mount Sinai caused his face to shine. Michelangelo famously sculpted a depiction of Moses with horns of light that led to generations of gentiles looking for horns jutting from our Jewish heads. No horns, just light! So why did Moses have to mask his face? Perhaps, so that the people would not look upon him as if he were God. The Torah relates that Moses would take off the veil to reveal

his glowing face only when he shared God's words. Otherwise, he shielded his face.

Masks pop up throughout our traditions. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God but that did not work. Covering up with fig leaves apparently just does not do the trick. Rebecca covered herself with a veil as a sign of modesty. Leah disguised herself to look like her sister and steal the honeymoon away from Rachel. Tamar veiled herself to look like a prostitute to trick and shame her father-in-law into an illicit tryst. Perhaps you didn't know that the Torah has such racy drama. Well, it does. Check it out and tell the kids that there are parts that are inappropriate for them, parts of the Torah that we need to hide from them. That will surely get them to read it!

Hiding, concealing, deceptions that are revealing;

Faces we show, feelings we suppress;

Clothes we wear to influence and impress.

Our masks are many, our face is every changing.

But what is in our heart and souls? These, too, need a telling.

I began by sharing how there is a surprising but meaningful link between Yom Kippur and Purim. That connection is so strong that it is taught that when the messianic age blesses all humanity with an eternal peace and harmony, all the Festivals and Holy Days will be abolished except Purim

and Yom Kippur. (Midrash Mishlei 9:2) Yes, that's right, two starkly different sacred days twinned for eternity. Purim and Yom Kippur, two days of feasts and fasts, hiding behind masks, dressing up to shine or obscure: hidden agendas and confessions of the soul. One with raucous revelry, the other with soulful solemnity; one with grinding groggers and laughter, while during the other plaintively pounding the chest and crying *Al Chet Shechatanu, for the sins we sinned*. One with headaches from too much imbibing, the other from caffeine withdrawal and starving. Any yet, beyond the contrasts, beneath the masks, there is much in common.

The renowned Torah scholar Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik maintained that the most significant feature common to both Purim and Yom Kippur is a call for Divine compassion and intercession, a mood of petition arising out of great distress." The modern Purim frivolities we enjoy mask the real fear experienced long ago by the Jews of Shushan and Persia. They feared for their lives. Yom Kippur is also a day of "*Nora v'ayom, an awesome day of dread*" on which we plea for Divine compassion and intercession.

This Yom Kippur more than ever before, we express prayers and pleas with hearts distressed from the ravages of this plague. Though masks obscure our mouths and noses, sadness can still be seen in our eyes. This vulnerability we feel is real. We are mortal and afraid. Our world seems to

be evolving too fast for us to keep up. Postures of confidence are not able to mask the gnawing feeling of imposter syndrome. How can we keep up a brave face when we honestly have no idea what is going to happen tomorrow?

And yet, hope can also be seen beneath these masks because we have learned new skills during this pandemic: we have learned to look beneath the surface. We have found a revitalizing spirit of ingenuity and creativity that can help us transcend isolation and frustration. We have rediscovered the life affirming role of loved ones and community; they are a sacred source of purpose and meaning. The lessons learned will strengthen us and help us persevere through every future challenge and setback.

After nearly seven months of hiding behind masks and looking at faces reduced to flat two-dimensional images on a screen, the day will come again when we are able to be with one another. And when we do, we'll be enlightened by our experiences with masks and faces. We'll be more mindful of false assumptions and appearances. We will know that apparent opposites, even Purim and Yom Kippur, and dare I say Democrats and Republicans, have more in common than that which superficial stereotypes define. We will know to look beyond the face and acknowledge the heart of the ones we are with.

Let us look forward to that day when our masks are off, and we see each other not for the face we show, but for the compassionate heart of emotion and the longing for love and meaning that radiates from every soul. . . . if only we let it shine.