

Besht Not to be Afraid of Masks

For the past three months at our weekly Lunch and Learn class we have been going through a collection of stories about Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, lovingly called, the “Besht.” He was born in 1700 and lived in the Ukrainian areas of Poland. As it was just a few generations after the notorious Chemielnicki pogroms in which mobs of antisemites murdered tens of thousands of Jews, the people longed for a connection to God that was loving and affirming. Who needed stern rebukes, fire, and brimstone from Rabbis when all around them was hellish?

So the Besht taught through stories that emphasized joy. Some of the stories were sweet, some were surprising, and many were quite strange, Regardless, they were always hopeful.

Once, one of his disciples was suffering from a great number of personal setbacks. The Baal Shem Tov said to him, “When you experience afflictions, you should recognize God behind the mask. It’s like a father, who is playing with his little child by putting on a frightening mask to see if he’ll recognize him. The boy is scared, but when he realizes that it’s his father, he cries out in fear, “Father, father!”

Then the father seeing that his child is afraid, takes off the mask and embraces him. Once the child sees that it was his loving father behind the mask, he is no longer afraid.

The Besht continued, "When you are suffering, understand that there's nothing but God. All life, all existence is of God. Yes, some things seem to be frightening in this world, but all you have to do is call out Father, Father, *Avinu Malkeinu*, O God, My loving Creator, and your suffering and distress will be removed. But if a person does not realize that everything is of God, when afflictions come, he will seek only worldly means and remedies to escape them and then his troubles will remain. I tell you, when you realize that God is everywhere and there is nothing separating you from God, all your fears and troubles will disappear.

This is not to say that we will not have times in which we suffer. As frail, mortal and vulnerable beings, we hurt and grieve and mourn. We suffer loss and disappointment. But the pain we feel is not a punishment, it is not something that strikes us from the outside. Rather, we are of God and all that we experience connects us with eternity.

For seven months we have suffered the consequences of this terrible plague. We have been isolated from loved ones.

We have seen businesses crumble. We have missed precious life-cycle events. We have even been denied the comfort from a proper Shiva when our loved ones died. Instead of homes crowded with loved ones sharing stories on sofas and chairs squeezed together, we have had Zoom sessions with the services posted on the Screen Share and people taking turns unmuting. Thank God for the Zoom sessions - - - but it's not the same.

When we first started the Zoom Shivas, some families were reluctant. "If no one can come by, why bother at all?" Some worried about the jerks or unwelcome intruders ruining the experience. Some worried that no one would want to join such a virtual shiva. "They won't come without platters of lox and pastrami."

It did not take a great deal of explanation for me to convince the families to at least give it a try. I promised that though it's not the same, at least friends and loved ones from all over the country, even around the world, could tune in and share. In a traditional shiva, most of them would never have been able to join in.

Besides which, without the noisy distractions of people eating and drinking and kibitzing with side conversations, the Zoom Shiva gatherings would actually be quite meaningful and focused.

So, they believed me and tuned in. The screen was divided into boxes that resembled a Hollywood Squares episode on steroids. Some squares had a familiar face or two, others showed only the name of a participant. Etiquette says that it is most polite and best to show your actual face. But my Mom says that if she hasn't had time to do her hair and make-up, etiquette can go take a hike.

As we looked at the faces of loved and friends as they tuned into those virtual Shivas and Memorials, we saw their compassion. Tears and tributes, tender stories and fun memories brought laughter and sighs that comforted our broken hearts. What some had worried was going to be a frightening ordeal turned into a loving embrace. On the screen, instead of frightening masks, we saw faces of those who love us.

As we concluded his stories last week, we read about the Besht's final days of life. At first disciples crowded around his death bed. Some promised to pray with all their hearts and souls for his recovery. So he sent them home or elsewhere on missions.

He didn't want them to devote their energies to his physical recovery. He wanted them to devote their passion, devotion, skills and strength to furthering that which he valued most in life: the well-being and the faith of the Children of Israel, his family and ours.

It is unknown what exactly happens after we die. Yes, the body returns to this earth and the soul is bound up with God . . . but what does that soul experience?

The unknown can be frightening. Like a fearful mask that conceals, we are afraid of that which is beyond our knowledge and control. But there is no mask. It's all God. And our connection with our loved ones who have passed away remains with us, in our hearts, in our minds, in our souls. All that is remains, a part of this eternity, a part of our lives, and with God, as long as we remember.