

Masks

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In Biblical Hebrew there is no word for face. The Bible uses the word *Panim*, which literally means, faces. It is an example, like *Mayim*, water, of a noun refers to a singular in English but sounds plural. It makes a lot of sense. We all have “faces.” The face we show to our parents, our children, our friends and our work colleagues. They reflect different kinds of relationships and interactions. Yet all these faces are facets of our singular personality.

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. Theologically it is important too, because *Elohim*, meaning God, is also a plural word. Not that there are different Gods. But that God interacts with us and we with God on so many different levels, moods and experiences and facets.

The Bible says that Moses had to cover his face and wore a mask, *Masveh*(Exodus 34) when he spoke to the Israelites after Sinai. Because his face shone so much that people were frightened to look at him. **Light** and **enlightenment** are connected both in Hebrew and English. Perhaps in Moses’s case they just couldn’t understand his deeper self after his encounter with God on Sinai. They could only deal with him on a superficial level.

We often disguise parts of ourselves because to reveal ourselves to everyone in the same way would be too much for most people to cope with. But then what we do reveal is often only a small part of who we are. And although it might be necessary sometimes, it can also be dangerous and problematic. What we reveal on Facebook can come back to bite us.

Adam and Eve tried to hide from God but that did not work. Covering up, started with fig leaves. But human ingenuity soon developed masks and veils. Rivkah covered herself with a veil as a sign of modesty. Tamar veiled herself to look like a prostitute, although her aim was a noble one. Covering was both a requirement and a deception. As it is to this very day.

Whereas *Masveh* is only used once in the Torah, there is another word that seems to be a more common way of describing a mask, both literally and metaphorically. The *Masachin* the Tabernacle was a curtain that hid the view

of what went on inside, from the outside. And using the same word, the Torah describes the Golden Calf idol as an *Eygel Masecha* (Exodus 32). Although there the translation is sometimes given as a molten god, it is clear that the implication is a false god. In general, idol or pagan gods are described in the Torah as *Elohey Masecha* (Exodus 34 etc.).

The word *Masechais* is more commonly used for mask in Modern Hebrew. Both *masvehand masechais* imply both covering up, deceiving, misleading in a bad way, but in a fun sense too. Images, false gods, in other words are deceptive, they are not what we would like them to be or indeed what they really are. A diamond is only carbon, gold is just a metal. But we endow them with enormous value and significance. But having fun, playing games, dressing up, is important too. Lest we take ourselves too seriously. After all, even God laughs according to the Bible.

The earliest masks were used by witchdoctors, shamans and primitive religions to represent the awesome powers of the spirits and to instill fear, reinforce authority and otherwise control the tribe, the community. Death masks were used as a record and to promote immortality, rather than to influence behavior. Only later did masks appear in Greek theatre in a less ominous way, to symbolize different moods and states.

At the same time, masks and prosthetic limbs will have helped injured warriors or those who wanted to disguise deformity, leprosy or other disfiguring diseases. In many cases masks suggested that what lies behind them is even more terrifying or disturbing than what appears outwardly.

The most beautiful masks I have seen are those that originated in royal entertainments in Versailles and Venice for the great Carnivals. These too became tools of deception. The Carnival or Mardi Gras originated as a celebration of spring reviving the dead winter earth. Then they became farewells to meat and the pleasures of life just before the serious Christian period of self-denial called Lent. The Venice Carnival became the opportunity to use disguise for immoral purposes. I gather there is some of that New Orleans nowadays too.

Veils on the other hand can suggest that what is under the surface is far more attractive and seductive. Though nowadays modest female dress can often cover up terrorist activities. So once again, as is so common in Biblical language and ideology, here is something that can go both ways, give opposite messages. It's rather like theatre that can be both entertaining and disturbing.

Why did masks come to be associated with Purim?

Partly it is because Purim celebrates the dangers and pitfalls of deception. Vashti does not want to reveal herself. Esther hides her identity. The magnificence of the royal feasts disguises the debts and insecurities of the Empire. Bigtan and Teresh illustrate that rebellion was always a danger. Haman disguises his real ambitions. Esther does not reveal her motives for inviting Haman to her feast. The enemies of the Jews are given the opportunity to hide or reveal their hidden hatred. And above all God is hidden. Not mentioned at all in the text. Not once. And yet God, it seems, is pulling the strings. Everything is not as we think.

This is the official reason as to why we disguise ourselves on Purim to illustrate how dangerous deception can be and why, as the megillah says *Venahafochu*, everything can be overturned, revealed for what it really is. But really, I think it is clear that this is another example of one culture borrowing from another. This is what would be called by that ghastly and negative cliché, cultural appropriation! But in reality, it illustrates the commonality of humanity before the ideologues got in the way and increased divisiveness.

The Jewish approach always had been, to both allow and restrain. To harness and control. On Purim the most important obligations after the Megillah, are to give to charity and presents to friends. Things that strengthen human bonds. At the same time the Talmud says one should enjoy wine on Purim to the point where one is so tipsy one can no longer distinguish between "Cursed Haman and blessed Mordechai." Now many ordinary Jews, particularly Hassidim tend to take it too far. Drunken teenagers passing out or throwing up in the streets is all too often the norm on Purim.

Normally too much frivolity is looked down on. But once a year we are given the opportunity to take off our masks. That's when we really show who we are. Sadly, the results are often not very impressive. Thank goodness there is always an abundance of charity, which is the true measure of Purim.