

Carnival

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The great “Carnivales” of the Catholic world have always coincided with the period preceding Lent, when the righteous avoid pleasures of the flesh and atone. You said goodbye to meat (carne) and you celebrated being forgiven your sins. Many Christian ascetics and killjoys objected strongly to the levity that came with carnivals. Indeed, in places like Venice they were occasions of mass debauchery. The tradition of wearing masks or dressing in disguise to preserve anonymity or to assist secret assignations came to be part and parcel of Carnivals to this very day.

The Bible knows only too well the link between religion and sexual impropriety. The Golden Calf led to an orgy. In the pagan world in general, religious worship involved “giving of oneself” to the deity, or its willing priests and priestesses, whether sexually or with defecation. Biblical Judaism was not opposed to fun and pleasure. But it did emphasize self-control and restraint. Time and again, the Bible admonishes the Children of Israel not to follow the corrupt religious rites of the peoples they were trying to dispossess.

Just as festivals of light were universal and each religion found its own way of celebrating it, so too carnivals were universal. This does not mean that each culture did not have its own and original reasons for celebration. Either you did win a battle against the Greeks or you didn't. Either there was a plot to destroy you in the Persian Empire or there was not. But if the reason to celebrate varied from culture to culture, the carnivals came to resemble each other through the inevitable cross fertilization that comes when different cultures share the same space.

You will find examples of lights for the dead or covering mirrors to keep out evil spirits throughout the ancient world, long before they appear as Jewish customs. You will find lighting flames as the depth of winter approaches long before Chanukah was celebrated. And you will find masks and fancy dress and getting drunk well before Purim.

The fact is that for all the drunken excesses and self-indulgence of Purim, it has never been known as a time when sexual misconduct was rampant (one or two historical exceptions notwithstanding). If it happened, it was not part of the culture. As the Talmud says, you can judge a person by how he drinks; so too I would argue you could judge a religion by what happens when you remove restraints.

Purim has come to be associated with masks. Which normally means “to disguise” or “to cover.” It has different usages, but the one thing they have in common is that when you are masked, you are not whom you appear to be. No one was supposed to know who “The Man in the Iron Mask” really was! In a good person, disguise may be no more than a game; but in a bad person, such as a robber, you are covering your face to get up to monkey business. So it

usually has been with carnival masks.

In general, masks and disguise have played an important role in religious ceremonies going back well before the Biblical period and all around the world. From Oceania to Africa and the Andes, they were and often still are used to control, to instill fear and obedience. Chiefs and witch doctors wear them to reinforce their authority. In Africa, to frighten and discipline the child, mothers often paint a frightening face on the bottom of her water container. In many cultures judges wore masks to protect them from the fury of those they punished and their families. Disguise and uniforms are associated with authority and power. And of course masks are still used in war to frighten the enemy or ward off evil spirits.

In the Bible masks only appear once. In Exodus 34: "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of Testimony in his hands, he did not realize that the skin of his face shone...When Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses and his face was so bright, they were afraid to come closer to him...So Moses put a mask/veil on his face. When he went in to speak with God he took the mask/veil off, until he came out, and then he put the mask/veil on his face again until the next time he went in to speak to God."

This does seem strange. He was not wearing the mask to frighten anyone or to hide his identity. Quite the contrary. He was scarier without it. It seems he was wearing a mask in the way a disfigured person might to make him appear less alien. In his case the mask was making him more accessible. You might think that the process of religious inspiration itself was the scary part. Once you transmit it to ordinary people it is less frightening, but it is also less pure; it has been modified to make it accessible. This is why Moses is the only one in the Bible who wears a mask. He was uniquely close to the source. It's a symbol of the degree of proximity and distance from the ideal. We all of us are somewhere along that line that runs from one extreme to the other.

That is why, even if the custom of masks and disguises on Purim has come from somewhere else, it still finds a place in our tradition. Just as pagan harvest festivals have been adapted to a monotheistic purpose, so too masks and disguise. We can all be Hamans or Mordechais. Different potentials lurk beneath our surfaces. It is up to us to choose which one, which mask to wear, for better or worse.