

## **Rosh Hashanah 5779.**

Think for a few seconds 1 word that you think it defines you. Are you done?

At the count of 3 I want you to scream that word. Don't be shy; we will all scream together, probably nobody will hear your word. But we all have to commit to do this.

Are you with me?

1, 2, 3 GO!

Wow, that was noisy.

Now think for a few seconds of a word that you think you might be identify by your social groups.

Ready, set go!

Now, raise your hand if you would be willing to share that word. C'mon we are *mishpacha*, aren't we?

No, I would not put anyone on the spot, I would not ever expose the nakedness of a vulnerable word, how dare I? Who am I to do that? So, relax.

I guess that for some of you the word that you chose it defines you it's not the same one that you think you are perceived in the society. Raise your hand (I will include myself) if they were different words.

This is what I call wearing societal masks. Masks!! Masks allow us to create avatars of the self.

Masks are instruments we might use to have fun, to celebrate Purim, or Halloween, to disguise others, to cover ourselves or to disclose who we really are.

But the Yamim Noraim, Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur and the 10 days of Teshuvah in between are an invitation to take off our masks and confront the vulnerability of the self. No, we are not PERFECT. Even if you had or have a Jewish mother that tried to convince you are perfect, the most brilliant, the most successful, the one that no partner would deserve you, etc., WE ARE NOT PERFECT and imperfection is a virtue.

As we do on every Rosh Hashanah morning, we read the Akedah—story of Abraham and Isaac going to the top of Mt. Moriah to the place God said to Abraham that God would show him as the spot to offer his son, his only son, as a sacrificial offering. In this story, we listen to Isaac’s insightful questions as he tries to figure out what is going on with this journey and why his father needs a firestone and wood. We read in the story about the servants waiting at the bottom of the mountain for Abraham and Isaac to return and then read that only Abraham comes back down the mountain. “Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.” We wonder what actually happened to Isaac. We feel, at least I do, Abraham’s angst about his mission and why God would ever ask of Abraham, or any of us for that matter, to ever do such a thing to our child. We also note Sarah’s absence in the entire narrative.

Have you ever noticed that? Where is Sarah?

Sarah’s absence has always troubled me. Her lack of voice or any woman’s voice in the Akedah. She could not scream, why? Sarah doesn’t know what is happening. Was she too depressed to talk? Abraham didn’t say anything about God telling him to take

their son to be a sacrificial offering. Abraham didn't say goodbye. The text reads, "So early next morning, Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him." In the next chapter, Gen. 23, BOOM! Sarah dies. Some speculation among commentators is that she died after learning what happened on Mt. Moriah with no evidence of what happened to her son Isaac.

**The text has a mask.** Abraham is so intoxicated into his blind faith that he can manipulate the whole situation and convince himself that he is going to do the right thing. He can't even hear the voice of the angel ABRAHAM!! Neither the voice of God in the second ABRAHAM! Leave you knife, leave your weapon, leave it and reflect, you are about to kill your child, your child!!, PLEASE... LEAVE YOUR weapon AND LET HIM LIVE. Abraham was so intoxicated that he ended up using a weapon of mass destruction, he was ready to destroy his entire world, his son, his continuity and with him, Sarah. Abraham is drunk with the power of have been chosen by God, hiding behind the mask that kind of success, the mask of being the knight-the cavalier of God.

I grew up with SUPERHEROES, or SUPRESHEROES. You might have had the same experience, the superheroes and their alter ego!...Diego de la Vega...who was "EL ZORRO", Bruce Wayne "Batman", Peter Parker is SPIDERMAN, Clark Kent is SUPERMAN, Diana is WONDER WOMAN and Steve Rogers is CAPTAIN AMERICA. What do they have in common? MASKS. They all show the confidence of a superhero only behind their masks.

Are you one of those types of superhero, like the Abrahams of our days?

How intoxicated are we with what we consider success? Just to prove ourselves right, nowadays to dissent is out of the question, we alienate those who dare to dissent. And we keep wearing masks. Masks can conceal a personal AKEDAH. Masks can camouflage the Akedah towards others. A figurative knife that destroys relationships. A metaphorical knife that destroys us.

Hiding behind masks can be tricky, we could get used to them and think that THAT IS the norm until we realize that it could be a stigma that either the society paints of us or we make of this a distortion our new reality. So, we start judging ourselves through the crafty mask.

You know, it is true that we all wear a lot of different masks these days. Our masks are our protection from a not so nice and unaccepting world. They become a barrier between ourselves and others.

I'm afraid of these masks. I do wear them as well.

This year I have been thinking a lot about these masks and the definition of "SUCCESS". Who could be considered more "successful" than Oscar winner for best supporting actor Robin Williams, or international acclaimed chef Anthony Bourdain, or super wealthy American fashion designer Kate Spades, among many others of a long and painful list that left this world with a vacuum behind the masks of success.

Statistics show that suicide rates have grown radically and suicide attempts have grown exponentially since the year 2000, especially at a young age.

We have a problem.

We put on your smile, when asked how are you doing? And we all play the Disney fantasy world of “have a nice day, create fantasies of our being and convinced ourselves that “it’s a small world after all” without allowing to convey the message of who and how we really are, because if we don’t...that could be seen as a shhhh....FAILURE!

Yet the more we get to know each other, the more masks we take off or not? Maybe the answer is YES, or maybe NOT. We might think, I ‘ll never take off that last mask. To let someone see me exactly as I am. We feel if we do that, and then someone doesn’t like me exactly as I am, I’m ruined. I won’t take that risk. So, we keep playing our games and putting on the masks because we are afraid to tell other who we are.

**Carol Dweck**, synthesized the following in her remarkably insightful ***Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*** — One of the most basic beliefs we carry about ourselves, Dweck found in her research, has to do with how we view and inhabit what we consider to be our personality. A “fixed mindset” assumes that our character, intelligence, and creative ability are static givens which we can’t change in any meaningful way, and success is the affirmation of that inherent intelligence, an assessment of how those givens measure up against an equally fixed standard; striving for success and avoiding failure at all costs become a way of maintaining the sense of being smart or skilled. A “growth mindset,” on the other hand, thrives on challenge and sees failure not as evidence of unintelligence but as a heartening springboard for growth and for stretching our existing abilities. Out of these two mindsets, which we manifest from a very early age, springs a

great deal of our behavior, our relationship with success and failure in both professional and personal contexts, and ultimately our capacity for happiness.

Does it really hurt anybody if we hide behind masks and keep the status quo of the “apparently, everything is right”?

But how much of that is the projection of our own masks?

Oscar Wilde once said “If you give a man a mask, he will tell you the truth. Then what exactly conveys the truth? Is it the person, him or herself or is it the mask, the clothing that he or she wears, that reveals deeper images of self?

Research has shown that *the view you adopt for yourself* profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value.

Believing that your qualities are carved in stone — *the fixed mindset* — asks

*Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser. . .*

Two weeks ago, I was sad to learn that our teacher Rabbi Shavit Artson moved to a new home. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy for him and his family, he told me he is enjoying his new place but I remember how he described the home in many years ago in West Los Angeles. A home built in the 1950's Our dining room has wood paneling along its four walls. When they first bought the house, the room was painted a disgusting green, presumably done in the late 70s during the high watermark of the aesthetics of the

Brady Bunch. The actual wood grain and tone were covered. With that greenish coat of pain or paint, the walls looked fake and cheap. When they finally got around to repainting the upstairs of the house, he asked the painter if he could just paint the phony paneling a simple white because the green was hideous. The painter, knowing his job, pondered for a moment, then took his thumbnail and scratched on the panel. The paint peeled away, and he said, "You know, I think that under this green there is actual wood." His team spent three days sandblasting and then varnishing. At the end of the week the dining room was transformed! The wood is so rich! That became Rabbi Artson's favorite room in the house until he moved. He said "I had thought, erroneously, that it was the wood itself that was that sickly green, when in fact, that trashy look was just the coating that someone has painted over it".

So today, I propose we play a game. Let's move from the seat of judgment to the seat of compassion.

The prayers of RH are about changing God's seat from judgment to compassion. Avinu Malkeynu inscribe s in the book of life, have compassion upon us. Where do you seat? In a place of judgment. Judging yourself or in a place of compassion. Where do you stand, in a place with comfortable shoes or in a place where the shoes are not so comfortable to remind us that sometimes it is good to go beyond our comfort zone.

Changing my seat from judgment to compassion is the closest form of imitating the God that I think I know, the God I love.

Ladies and gentleman, I would like to propose a personal challenge for 5779, to be authentic to our true selves and to judge ourselves with compassion. Let's show who we

really are and when we discover the face to face being of the other, let's move away from the seat of judgment.

Would you like to hear the words I chose for myself?

Who wants to guess?

Any takers?

Remember that one is the way I/ you truly perceive yourself and the other is the way you think others think of you.

For the first one I chose VULNERABLE.

For the second category, I chose CONFIDENT.

Such a disparity!

Avinu Malkeynu...

**Help us move from the voice of outer perception to the ears of listening to ourselves.**

ATEM EDAI, you are my witnesses declared the Prophet Isaiah, now you know that I live with the constant fear of the vulnerability of life.

So in this 5779, while the book of life is opening I ask God to have compassion upon us, to allow us to reveal the true inner being, without masks, just with the knowledge of who we sincerely are, not superheroes or supersheroes. Just the way we are.

In this 5779, may we all be inscribed in the book of a good quality of life.

L'Shannah tovah!