

“God Wears Many Masks; *Including one with your face!*”

Shabbat Zachor

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I heard a funny story recently; Apparently Hitler consulted with fortune tellers. Once, one of these fortune tellers predicted that Hitler would die on a Jewish holiday. “Really, Hitler said; *Which one?*” To which the fortune teller responded “Whenever you die it will be a Jewish holiday!”

I can’t think of a more appropriate time to tell that joke, which is of course embedded with all kinds of truth and, like much of Jewish humor, a very real dose of pain than on this Shabbat: *Shabbat Zachor*, when we remember the arch-enemy of the Jewish people, the embodiment of evil and cruelty and inhumanity, the tribe of Amalek. According to tradition a notorious descendent of the Amalekites is none other than the wicked Haman, whose own diabolical plans to destroy the Jewish people of Persia are recorded in the Book of Esther, and our ancestors’ victory over that terrible villain is celebrated on the holiday of Purim this week.

Purim is a really peculiar holiday. At first blush it seems like the Jewish version of Halloween. In fact I always say that the best time to buy Purim costumes is on November 1st, when all the excess Halloween attire goes on sale! Purim is a time for carnivals, for dressing up, for acting silly, for eating sweet treats, for parties and se’udas, festive meals to celebrate the occasion. But Purim is also one of those holidays that has a pediatric version, and an adult version; there’s the G-rated Purim that is suitable for all audiences, and the unedited, unabridged, full-length version that is PG-13 or even R-rated. But it’s more than just scenes depicting heavy inebriation, sexual innuendo, or abject violence; the Book of Esther is a book of profoundly radical theology...so much so that some of our ancestors actively lobbied against its inclusion in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. God is not mentioned even once in all ten chapters of the book, and the characters are far from traditional exemplars of biblical piety; nice Jewish girls don’t enter beauty pageants to seduce gentile kings; nice Jewish boys don’t counsel others to conceal or deny their Jewish identities. Purim turns all of our expectations about faith, heroes and heroines, miracles and salvation on their heads. Nothing happens as we expect it to, and redemption comes from the most unlikely sources.

But it is for those very reasons that I think Purim may be one of if not the most important Jewish holiday on the calendar, and why I believe we need Purim now more than ever. Let me ask you to think about something; Why do we dress up and wear masks on Purim? Some people say that it is a reminder of how Haman was forced to dress Mordecai in a royal regalia and parade him on horseback through the streets of Shushan as a reward for foiling an assassination plot against the king, as detailed in the 6th chapter of the megillah. Others say it recalls the extensive couture and 12-month long beauty treatments Esther experiences in the king’s harem. Still other point to the donning of specific costumes throughout the story, Queen Vashti and the royal diadem, or Queen Esther dressing in royal garb for her audience with the king, or Mordecai tearing his clothes and

wearing *sak va'eifer*, sackcloth and ashes after Haman's order is sealed and promulgated against the Jews. Recently though I read an interpretation of the Purim mask or disguise that is worn not by any character in the megillah; the mask is worn by God. Rabbi Nathan Laufer, president emeritus of the Wexner Foundation, in his book *Rendezvous with God* writes that God wears the masks of Esther and Mordecai, the heroine and hero of the story. That is to say if God is anywhere in this story, God is in the background, or behind a mask, while God's will is done two human beings—and by the way two human beings who are afraid, who admit to tremendous doubt, whose lives are at great risk for speaking up and doing what is necessary to save lives and protect the innocent.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik¹ taught that the Jewish people made two major discoveries in the story of Purim. The first discovery was that although we regularly teach that all people, even scoundrels are created *b'tzelem Elohim*; that every single person has some spark of the divine within them; that there is an essential good in all people that sometimes, in his words, people go berserk, they turn into monsters; in Haman the Jews met the personification of evil, again in Soloveitchik's words "the enemy ... [who] enjoys causing misery and injury to all people," and who is often "preoccupied with the Jew." But there is a second Purim discovery, which Rav Soloveitchik calls the *shaliah Hashem*, the Divine agent. Whenever we are faced with an enemy, a foe who threatens to destroy us, someone else, another person arises to save the Jewish people. In the Purim story it was two people, not one, who became God's agents of salvation and hope. An old man and a young woman who probably never thought their lives would alter history forever; they become the agents of the Divine, the *shlichei Hashem*, who are the principal agents of change in the Purim story.

Friends, we all know that these past weeks have been traumatizing and deeply unsettling, not so much in some faraway kingdom, but right here in our own country. We again encountered what appeared to be a predator who, like Haman, was hell-bent on causing misery and suffering and death. We have all seen the pictures, read the bios, have had tears drip from our eyes onto the pages of our newspapers as beautiful children, teenagers on the cusp of charting their own course in the world, and heroic teachers who put themselves between the killer and his prey are profiled day after day. Our country is grieving, and we are snarled in debate about how to protect our children, and keep our schools and streets safe. Some of us have wondered: How is it possible that this country, the freest, most prosperous, most powerful nation in the world has become so violent, so blood-soaked. There is so much despair and cynicism in America today; whole sections of Constitutional law seem untouchable because of powerful lobbies and hefty political contributions. But just as in megillat Esther, just as in the Purim story, salvation will come from a new generation of Esthers and Mordecais who are prepared to speak out, and stand up, and walk out, and march, and organize, and declare this must change; this is not the society we want to be; we can be better—we must be better than we are now. I've started hearing those voices friends, the voices of today's Esthers and Mordecais. I have heard the most eloquent teenagers,

¹ Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph B. "Days of Deliverance; Essays on Purim and Hanukkah,"

many of them students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida who are taking to the airwaves, who are declaring that they will no longer stand idly by while the outrage and protest from one school shooting quickly fades away just in time for another one to take place. They are organizing their friends and classmates to stage walk outs from school. They are collaborating to swell the streets of Washington, D.C. to demand change next month. They are the ones who are saying, like Queen Esther declared in 7:4 “*ki nimkarnu ani v’ami le’hashmid, la’harog, u’le-abed..we have been sold out, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated.*” That’s what these kids are saying: We have been sold out by our representatives, our laws, our political system which has decided that ending the scourge of gun violence and school shootings just isn’t important enough, or profitable enough, or worth the political fall-out to do anything about it. But just as Haman cringed in terror when Esther pointed her finger at him as the enemy, all those who have perpetuated the status quo are also beginning to realize that they have been called out, and that this sense of urgency is not going to fade away any time soon. This time it just feels different; this time, expressions of thoughts and prayers sound sickeningly empty; this time activism will not end with posts on social media; this time the voices of a groundswell of American teenagers and teachers and families will not be silenced.

In just a few days, when I dress up for Purim, I am going to remember this idea: God wears many costumes, many disguises, many masks. And one of those masks looks just like you, and you, and you. One of the costumes in God’s collection is the image of you. And when God dons your image, you become God’s *shaliach*, you become the Divine Agent whose responsibility it becomes to do God’s will in the world: To speak and to act on God’s behalf. To be God’s hands and feet, God’s voice and presence to bring about justice and mercy, healing and hope in this world. My friends Purim is anything but a children’s holiday. Its message could not be more prescient. God wears many masks. God has worn the mask of Mordecai, the mask of Esther; now the mask God is wearing is you. Now it’s time for you to do your part...