

Tonight a very small group of service participants return to the sanctuary to livestream this Kol Nidre. You at home might wonder why. Those who planned the panoply of High Holiday events realized that no matter how great our zoom services are and no matter how great the drive in, there is something deeply moving about seeing our holy space again, and seeing all that it contains: the Ten Commandments tapestry, our reading table, our ark, our Torah scrolls. Things that matter. Physical things we miss. Because sometimes, as non materialistic as I usually preach us to be, in this time of anxiety and loss of normalcy, material things do mean something to us. A bike. An apartment. Enough toilet paper.

And, of course...the mask.

Now, those of you who know me well know I believe the well-dressed Rabbi should have a tallit to match every outfit; now I need a mask to match every tallit! I have my Rabbi mask (show), my Sylvia Solomon Yom Kippur white glittery mask (show), the first one made for me back in March by Nick Gunz's mother (show.) The few service participants allowed into the sanctuary with me tonight all have matching plain Yom Kippur white masks courtesy of Jan Mitchell who is only aggravated that she didn't have time to embroider each one with the City Shul logo. There's a store in Vermont making matching masks and bowties but I haven't found a store yet making matching kipot and masks— a great COVID Bar Mitzvah scheme— although you realize a mask makes an excellent kipa and vice versa.

And now our masks have become such an important part of our day; I end up coming back to my house 5 minutes after leaving because I inevitably forget mine. I have a mask in every purse and in both paniers on my bike.

I sometimes spend five minutes looking for the mask that is already on my face. And that, I realized, is a Yom Kippur message to me. Because there are so many other masks that I put on which have deeper implications than keeping aerosols from my face. Aren't there two kinds of masks we all wear? The physical masks we wear daily because of COVID, and the metaphoric masks we wear to project who we want the world to see?

Typically masks protect us: surgical masks, gas masks. But on Yom Kippur we ask ourselves: are my metaphorical masks, my emotional and psychological masks, helping me— or hurting me? Helping others—or hurting them?

We've been wearing those masks long before this pandemic: the personas we put on for the world around us. Half-humourously half-seriously articulated in the old Jim Carrey movie *The Mask*, we become something else when we put on that mask, something or someone we aren't able to be without it. The mask of happiness when we are sad; the mask of success and having it all even if we are struggling; the mask of confidence when what we really need is some support. The mask we put on when we enter our office; the masks we wear even with our spouses or our kids or our best friends. The cool guy. The funny one. The martyr. The people-pleaser. The intellectual.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of the first African American poets to gain recognition, wrote these words in the late 1800's, and they still echo today:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile  
And mouth with myriad subtleties,  
Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
    We wear the mask.

The Vilna Gaon made a pun on the Biblical Hebrew name for Yom Kippur: Yom Hakippurim— and says that it is actually Yom K'Purim, a day like Purim! Now that's surprising, since Purim is a pretty fun holiday when we drink a little too much. So how is Purim like Yom Kippur? On Purim we put masks on to hide who we really are, and on Yom Kippur, we take off the masks we wear all year to reveal who we really want to be.

Tonight and tomorrow we are asked to take off the masks we disguise our real selves in, and to come clean with ourselves. We cannot do teshuva as long as we pretend to be something we are not. We cannot do teshuva as long as we hide behind whatever masks we have made to obscure ourselves emotionally.

In Exodus 34:17, the Torah commands:

וּנְפֹת־לֹא מִיִּלִּילֵאֵה־לֹא יִהְיוּ הַכֶּסֶם אֶל וְשֵׁעַת

“Do not turn to idols or make molten gods for yourselves.” The word *masecha* is usually translated as melted-down metal, but in modern Hebrew it means a mask. A covering. So I’m translating it as: the gods of masks you shall not worship. These masks we make are false gods. They are not the Divine spark which resides in us. They cover the Divine spark within us, and conceal it. On Yom Kippur we are asked to stop worshipping the god of masks and to reveal the depth of our own true selves.

In 1 Samuel 16 we read: “Adonai does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but Adonai looks at the heart.” Yom Kippur reminds us that God sees beyond the mask. Into the heart. And so should we.

Tonight and tomorrow we are asked to see the unmasked Divine face in ourselves and in others. And perhaps in doing so we will be able to even unmask God. As my colleague Rabbi Jeff Salkin wrote: “What does God tell Moses? “You cannot see My face.” Perhaps God also wears a mask – which might mean that God, or messengers of God, or emanations of God, show up in our lives, and they are all in disguise.”

Now, other cultures are more used to masking the face, but for us, unaccustomed to not seeing each others faces, we struggle. We struggle to read the language of the eyes. We struggle to express our-

selves muted. When Moses covered his face after he came down from the mountain, after having seen Gd face to face, panim el panim as the Torah says, he was so lit up by God that it was dangerous for him to show his face to others. But we, we have not had that supernatural experience before we don our mask. Covering our faces, we need to remember the Divine glow of everyone else's face underneath.

The face of the other is how we see God, Martin Buber taught. In the Talmud, The face of the other is where we learn we are not all the same, Emmanuel Levinas teaches, and in seeing the differentiated face of another who is not us, we learn to care for someone who is separate. According to the Talmud in Sanhedrin, this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy Blessed One, as when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But when the Holy One created humanity, even though each person is in the Divine Image, each person has a unique face.

And now, the material mask obscures so much of our individual uniqueness and, in that challenging inability to see the other's face, we finally share what is truly common—our fragility. Our basic humanity.

Let not our masks—the metaphoric ones we choose to wear, and the physical ones we are legislated to wear—hide that common humanity. Although before the pandemic we wore masks to protect ourselves now we wear masks to protect others. Let not those protective masks become walls and barriers to sharing our true selves with each other.

May this year be one in which we can reveal the self behind the figurative mask even as we wear the very real physical mask.

Gmar Chatimah Tova.