

Behind the Mask: Internalizing Ourselves

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Perhaps one of the most widely known customs of Purim is that of dressing up in costumes. Ironically, this custom is not even mentioned in the gemara, nor is it quoted in any of the early halachic sources. Even in the Shulchan Aruch, this custom only gets a tangential mention by the Rama (696:8) when he briefly discusses the permissibility of dressing up on Purim in clothing of the opposite gender.²⁸ However, it is never described as a proper minhag that should be observed. On the contrary, in 695:2, the Rama actually says that we should wear *bigdei Shabbos*, our fancier clothing, on Purim. What then is the basis for this minhag? Surely there must be more behind this custom than simply being a Jewish Halloween. What is the meaning behind this custom?

Many have suggested that dressing up in costumes and hiding ourselves is symbolic of how Hashem “hid” Himself in the Megillah, not using a splitting of the sea or even an improbable military victory as His vehicle of salvation, but rather a behind-the-scenes orchestration of everyday events. Others have explained that the custom teaches us that we should never take things at face value, and that there is always more than meets the eye. However, perhaps there is a deeper message that we can glean from this curious, yet widely established custom.

Yet another intriguing halachah on Purim is that of drinking wine. As opposed to dressing up, drinking wine is actually discussed in the gemara and quoted in the Shulchan Aruch. Once again, we are left to try to find an understanding behind this intriguing halachah. Certainly it is not simply a license to get drunk so that we can enjoy ourselves and let loose one day a year. What is the basis of this confusing halachah?

In addition to Purim’s being a holiday of salvation, it is also a time of kabalas haTorah. When Bnei Yisroel stood at Har Sinai and accepted the Torah from Hashem, there was something missing within that acceptance that prevented it from being perfect and everlasting.

(Shemos, 19) And they stood [lit] underneath the mountain... This teaches us that Hashem held the mountain over Bnei Yisroel and said to them: “If you accept the Torah, good. If not, there will be your burial place”

Shabbat 88a

(שמות יט) ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כנגיית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם.
סכת שבת דף פח.

²⁸ Although see the Mishna Brurah who quotes poskim that are against this custom of wearing clothing of the opposite gender even in this case.

When Bnei Yisroel accepted the torah at Har Sinai, they did so out of *yirah*, fear, a factor that prevented this acceptance from being *the* kabalas haTorah for all time. Therefore, at some point in our future, we were going to have to reaccept the Torah. We were going to have to recommit ourselves in a manner free of all coercion and pressure.

This second kabalas haTorah took place at Purim.

Rava says, even so, Bnei Yisroel reaccepted the Torah during the times of Achashveirosh. As it says "They established and they accepted": they established what had already been accepted.

Shabbat 88a

אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה
בימי אחשוורוש. דכתיב קימו וקבלו
היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.
סכת שבת דף פה.

It is interesting to note that these two episodes of kabalas haTorah are each marked by phrases that have an important common denominator: *naaseh v'nishma* at Har Sinai and *kiymu v'kiblu* at Purim. Both of these phrases achieve their significance in their being, seemingly, reversed. *Nishma* (learning) should precede *naaseh* (doing), just as *kiblu* (accepting) should precede *kiymu* (establishing). The fact that the opposite order is used requires some explanation, given their place as the defining words for each of these historical occasions. Additionally, we need to understand why the wording of the acceptance by Bnei Yisroel was changed from Har Sinai to Purim.

As ovdei Hashem, we understand that to perform mitzvos simply as actions, without ever internalizing their meaning and message, is missing the point. To learn Torah as merely an intellectual exercise, without hearing the messages and feeling the connection to Hashem, relegates our learning to a simple pursuit of knowledge. Ideally, we strive to internalize all that we do, and to allow the Torah that we learn and the mitzvos that we perform to become a part of us and shape our very being.

Therein we can establish a distinction between our acceptance of the Torah at Har Sinai and our acceptance of the Torah at Purim. At Har Sinai, we pledged to perform. We proclaimed "*naaseh*" as a promise to perform all that Hashem would command us to do even before learning about it. However, there is another level that we would have to strive to reach, that of internalizing the *kedusha* of the Torah and allowing it to become a part of ourselves. That was achieved at the second acceptance of the Torah at Purim, a pledge of *kiyum*, of establishment.

Rav Shlomo Volbe, *zt'l* (AleI Shur, 2 vol, p. 465), points out that in the aftermath of Har Sinai, Bnei Yisroel went on to perform the *cheit ha'eigel*. In stark contrast, in the aftermath of Purim, Bnei Yisroel went on to rebuild the Beis Hamikdash. It is the difference between performing and internalizing, between *naaseh* and *kiymu*.

As we approach Purim every year, we are faced with the challenge of internalizing all that we have achieved over the past year in order to turn our *naaseh* into *kiymu*. But how can we do this? How can we be sure that our efforts have yielded their desired outcomes?

Nichnas Yayin Yatza Sod

As wine enters, [a person's] essence is revealed

Eruvin 65a

נכנס יין יצא סוד.
מסכת עירובין דף סה.

The Maharal explains that wine possesses a unique feature in that it is drawn from the deepest, most hidden part of the grape. It therefore has the ability to reach and connect to the deepest part of the person drinking it. By drinking wine, we allow that which is truly inside of us to come out. We remove all of our inhibitions and provide an opportunity to feel that which we have attempted to instill within ourselves. We no longer have any safeguards; we are free to feel those emotions that are so hidden within our being. It is then that we can feel to what extent we have internalized all that we have learned and performed. Once we no longer have walls guarding our inner thoughts, no longer have obstacles blocking us from being in touch with what we are feeling inside, we can then glimpse into what our true essence is. Our drinking wine on Purim should not lead to levity and partying, but rather to a deeper sense of who we truly are. It is not silliness and games that should be the product of the alcohol, but rather the effects that our Torah and mitzvos have had on our lives. With every sip of alcohol, another word of Torah should be emitted. With every cup of wine, we hopefully reveal a deeper level of love for Hashem. The more the inebriation affects us, the more it should reveal our true desire to better ourselves and become more passionate and more fervent in our *avodas* Hashem.

Of course, reaching that level is a daunting task. After all, we live in a society that bombards us from all sides with influences telling us to live our lives out in the open. We are being convinced that whatever we do should be shared on a blog or a tweet. It's not enough for us to just live our own lives, but we need to have our lives be publicized for all to see. All too often, people aren't even really experiencing their own lives, but rather that of TV and movies, of sports and magazines. Our culture has made it so difficult to just stop and focus on ourselves; to be introspective and be in touch with what is our true nature, to tap into those internalized values. This idea was expressed by the Belzer Rebbe as the culmination of the three levels of *galus* that we experience, the first two being the exile of Bnei Yisroel from Eretz Yisroel and the exile of Bnei Yisroel from each other, through *machlokes* and strife. The third level, which he says is the harshest of all, is the exile of a person from their true selves.

Mordechai and Esther- Their Defining Characteristic

Rav Volbe explains that Hashem carried out His plans of salvation for the Jewish people through Mordechai and Esther because they shared the crucial trait of *tzniyus*, modesty. In reference to Mordechai, the gemara says:

Where can we see a reference to Mordechai in the Torah?
(Shmos, 30) Pure Myrrh which in Aramaic is Mori Dachi.
Chulin 139b

מרדכי מן התורה מניין? דכתיב (שמות ל')
 מר דרור ומתרגמינן: מירא דכיא.
 מסכת חולין דף קל"ט:

The *mor dror* was a key ingredient of the *ketores* that would be used in the Beis Hamikdash on Yom Kippur in the Kodesh Hakadoshim, the most hidden and sacred place that only the kohen gadol could enter, only once a year.

Similarly, the gemara tells us about Esther:

In reward for the tzniyus that Rachel had, she merited to have a Shaul as a descendent. And in reward for the

בשכר צניעות שהיתה בה ברחל - זכתה ויצא
 ממנה שאול, ובשכר צניעות שהיה בו בשאול

tzniyus that Shaul had, he merited to have Esther as a descendant.

Megillah 13b

- זכה ויצאת ממנו אסתר.
מסכת מגילה דף יג:

Esther carried on this legacy of *tzniyus*, as Rav Volbe points out, in the most challenging of circumstances. Even though she was in a public position as queen of the greatest empire in the world, Esther still maintained the utmost level of *tzniyus*. As the megillah says:

Esther did not reveal her origins or her nationality, as Mordechai had told her.

Esther 2:20

אין אסתר מגדת מולדתה ואת עמה כאשר צוה עליה
מרדכי
אסתר ב:כ

Both Mordechai and Esther embodied the *midah* of *tzniyus*, a *midah* that is crucial to connecting to Hashem, especially in a time of *hester panim*, the concealment of Hashem's presence. When Hashem "hides", the only way to connect to Him is by exhibiting a *midah* that most closely resembles *hester panim*, that of *tzniyus*.

The *midah* of *tzniyus* does not simply refer to a mode of dress; that is but one manifestation of this trait. Rather *tzniyus* is defined as being able to stay within ourselves, and not constantly needing to look for ways to display that which is within us. It is the trait of being able to feel meaning in our lives internally and not having to look to external sources to feel good about ourselves. In a time of *hester panim*, when Hashem Himself is in "hiding", it becomes so much more difficult for us to connect to Him and therefore so much more of a struggle to find meaning in our lives. It is then that our *tzniyus* must be invoked, because it is the *midah* of *tzniyus* that tells us to look inward and focus on ourselves and our own strengths. We must avoid the trap of trying to find our worth in externals, and rather search internally to imbue our lives with *kedushah*. Only then can we truly find the meaning in our lives, and connect ourselves to Hashem. As the Maharal says, the first step in one's *avodas Hashem* must to be a "*hakaras ha'atzmi*", self-recognition.

And so we put on a mask. Not simply to symbolize something to the world or even to demonstrate some hidden meaning to those around us, but rather for ourselves; to remind ourselves to stop searching for our self worth in external sources and instead to focus inward to ascertain how valuable each of us are. Wearing a costume gives us a chance to reconnect with that potential and value that we each possess, because only we know who we truly are, and the only way to fill our lives with *kedusha* is by being in touch with that inner self.

Just as a person needs to believe in Hashem, so too he needs to believe in himself.

Sefer Tzidkas Hatzadik #154

כשם שחייב אדם להאמין בהקב"ה כך צריך אחר כך להאמין בעצמו.

ספר צדקת הצדיק אות קנד

May we be *zocheh* this Purim to have the ability and the strength to focus inward and to realize how powerful and *kadosh* each of us really are. To use that potential to internalize all that it is we try to accomplish in our *avodas Hashem*. And in that way, our *kabalas haTorah* will be one that will impact our lives to the level that we strive to achieve.