

MASKS

Yizkor - Yom Kippur 5781

September 28, 2020

**Rabbi Jonathan Blake, Westchester Reform Temple
Scarsdale, New York**

When the story of 2020 is told, some day long from now, we will see a picture of the total devastation wrought by Covid-19, painted in stark and staggering numbers.

What may not come through so clearly will be the spiritual and psychological toll it has inflicted. How do you measure the pain of a millionfold broken hearts? How do you describe the collective loneliness of human beings deprived of human contact, of sleepless nights thinking about a faraway loved one facing a life-threatening disease, or the terror of slipping away without a hand to hold, without a kiss on the forehead, without a proper goodbye?

Enforced distance compounds our loss. And the wearing of masks—while a simple, necessary, lifesaving measure—has imposed on us yet another dimension of distance, another layer of loss. What used to be a rare neurological condition called “Face Blindness”—the inability to recognize or remember peoples’ faces—has now become a societal syndrome. I sometimes feel embarrassed when I don’t recognize a congregant’s face behind the

mask, even one familiar to me over many years; I console myself with the knowledge that we are all in the same boat.

I also console myself in the knowledge that you wear your mask to protect me, and I wear my mask to protect you. And when I do, I also get to wear--with affection and admiration--one of the many beautiful and highly functional masks that Kelly has sewn during the past six months. Never having before touched a sewing machine, necessity did indeed become the mother of invention over these months of quarantine, and Kelly took to the art and craft of sewing masks with characteristic alacrity.

She had an assist in the form of a congregant, who, after a pandemic spring cleaning, dropped off a real warhorse of a sewing machine of around 70 years' vintage, and with a great back story, too. His mother, a talented seamstress, had used it to sew Mamie Eisenhower's celebrated 1953 Inaugural ball gown, a gorgeous pink *peau de soie* dress designed by Nettie Rosenstein and embroidered with more than 2,000 rhinestones. In any case, I am grateful not only for my many masks' protective benefits, but also for their sartorial stylishness. (As most of you who know me already know, I never met an accessory I didn't like.)

Turns out that the word *mask* also has a fascinating backstory. It derives from the Italian *maschera*, but may also be related to the Arabic word *maskhara*, which means "mockery" or "buffoonery," and which is preserved in the English word *mascara*. There is a fine

line, it would seem, between putting on makeup and putting on a disguise, between dressing up and dressing to deceive.

And then there's the curious story of the Hebrew word for mask, *masecha*, which may or may not be related. What we do know is that the Torah uses this word, מסכה, when it discusses molten or graven images: idols, like the Golden Calf, which in the Torah is called *Egel Masecha*. That unholy relic was a counterfeit, a decoy god, and so its name is fitting. A mask, after, is all a kind of lie: a false front, a deception.

Masks hide, conceal, obfuscate. In Shakespeare, masks figure prominently in comedies that traffic in cases of mistaken identity. In Melville, the mask is a metaphor for the way in which the physical world conceals deeper truths that always elude us. While Ahab's rage is externally projected onto Moby-Dick, the white whale, what Ahab really hates is the uncertainty, the mystery, the inscrutability lurking in the heart of existence. "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," he fumes. "But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed — there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!" In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the mask—particularly the mask of blackface—symbolizes how society imposes an artificial and grotesque identity on Black Americans.

But today is no day for disguises, no time for hiding. Today is Yom Kippur, a day for stripping away all pretenses, dropping the armor we carry into the world, standing before God and humankind and ourselves with total honesty. We come as we are. We take off our masks.

I think of Eleanor Rigby, that indelible character in the Beatles song that bears her name; she, like so many of us, just one among “all the lonely people,” “wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door.”

“All the lonely people; where do they all belong?”

On this Yom Kippur, we do not have to stretch our imaginations to conjure up images of lonely people wondering where they belong. We are witnesses to a whole world of people who have had to confront being alone, and in too many cases, there have been none to comfort them.

If you have come to Yom Kippur seeking comfort, trying to access your intimate personal relationship to God, then now is your moment, during *Yizkor*, to remember people that you have loved and who loved you, who remind you of your best self.

“All the lonely people; where do they all belong?” On this Yom Kippur—and especially at this hour of *Yizkor*—they belong here. *We* belong here, we, especially, who have been marked by loss, and

touched by grief. We come here with our masks removed: exposed, vulnerable.

Back in prehistoric times, by which I mean February of this year (I refer to anything pre-pandemic as *prehistoric*, for so it feels, and might as well be), Kelly and I availed ourselves of an opportunity to travel to Egypt with a delegation of rabbis. Among the many eye-popping artifacts on display in The Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, right behind our hotel in Cairo, were a number of ancient funeral masks, including that of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun or King Tut. Such a mask was believed to strengthen the spirit of the mummy and guard the king's soul from evil spirits on its way to the afterworld.

By contrast, Jewish tradition declares that death is the greatest unmasking of them all. We traditionally bury our dead, unembalmed, in plain shrouds and unadorned boxes, so as to declare that all the stuff we accumulate in life, even the physical stuff of our bodies, matters not at all when compared to the spiritual attainment of a good name and a life of loving good deeds.

We mourn for all the stuff *behind* the mask, beneath the veneer. We continue to love our dead at this *Yizkor* hour precisely because these are the ones who let us in behind the mask. We knew them for who they truly were, in all their contradiction and complexity. The rest of the world got to see a *persona*: another wonderful word, taken directly into English from Latin. That word also means “mask”: the

public figure; the face that she keeps in a jar by the door. But we saw the essence beneath the mask, and our lives were made so much the more rich, more relevant, more real, for that reveal.

Others saw *persona*. We beheld *character*—a word that means, “deeply etched.” The stuff that cuts deep and true.

Today we stand before God in that place where no masks are worn and only truth is spoken. We pour out our souls before the altar of a God whose compassion for the wounded, the bereaved, knows no bounds, who loves us just the way we are, including our own broken hearts; the God who asks of us only one thing: that, for the sake of all whom we have loved and lost, we keep on living.

Let us acknowledge with special sympathy all those who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 and its related impact; those who had to let go without being able to hold a family member’s hand, with only a computer screen for connection and consolation. In this time of so much death, so much loss, we stand with you on this Yom Kippur, unmasked in our anguish, sharing the pain and bewilderment that the past year has inflicted on every feeling heart and every caring soul.

God: Do not hide your face, even when, in order to be safe, we must hide ours.

Turn us, God, to your face, on this day where nothing is hidden. We pray:

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ:

May God bless you and protect you.

יֵאֵר יְהוָה אֶפְנֵי אֵלֶיךָ וַיְחַנֶּנֶךָ:

May God's face shine light on you, and be gracious to you.

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה אֶפְנֵי אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם:

May God's countenance be lifted up to you, and give you peace.