**Wearing Our Masks**

The most well-known symbol of Purim is the mask. There is no kindergarten or school in the Jewish world in which children and parents don’t know that you celebrate Purim by putting on a costume. Even those who don’t remember exactly what happened on Purim and why we celebrate know it’s a must to dress up, and I’m sure you all have fond memories of Purim in your childhood.

The source of this *minhag* is in the Mahari Mintz, who describes how his fellow Rabbis would dress up in costumes. After him, the Rema writes in the Shulchan Aruch about the “custom to wear masks on Purim.” For one looking from outside, it seems foreign and strange to the spirit of Jewish tradition. Some even claimed that the source of this custom was from similar events that happened in Germany and Italy in the Middle Ages. The Sages suggested different reasons for this custom. Among them, the fact that Mordechai changed his clothing from regular clothing to torn sackcloth and then to royal attire.

However this year, I think we can add another idea.

Nowadays, this custom seems understandable and familiar. We all wear masks – young and old, men and women, Jews and non-Jews.

What does this tell us? What should we be thinking when we wear masks on Purim? The Talmud asks, “Where can we find Esther in the Torah?” What is the source of Megillat Esther in the Torah? The answer is surprising: “And I will certainly hide (הֶסְתֵּר) My Face on that day.”

What is the connection between Queen Esther and the words “I will certainly hide My Face”? There are times in Jewish history when Divine Providence is apparent and clear. *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, for example. Anyone who saw *kriyat Yam Suf* and the Egyptians drowning in the sea while Israel walked on dry land saw the extended Hand of G-d in the world. But there are other times in our history when everything seems dark; the world seems like a great, bubbling pot left on the fire without supervision or purpose.

This is the *minhag* the Torah hints to in these words. This is what the Jews experienced at the time of Mordechai and Esther. What did G-d want from us? Why did Haman issue a decree to wipe out the Jewish nation? How many questions would we have asked in those times, as in many other periods in which we were persecuted by murderous, antisemitic nations?

הֶסְתֵּר – G-d ‘hiding’ Himself, is the mask.

Hence we wear masks on Purim to express that this is a holiday of *חסר פנים*. That we don’t understand of how G-d runs the world, and with total faith and *bitachon* we rely on Him to never abandon His nation.

The truth is, this is how we should feel every year. I remember Purim in the year of the Gulf War, when we were constantly running to the sealed rooms for fear of chemical attacks; then too, we wore masks. On Purim that year, we came back out to our lives, without masks. Divine Providence was revealed to us in that despite dozens of missile attacks, less than a handful of Jews in the entire country were directly harmed.

That Purim, the Jews had *ora*, light (to borrow a term from the Megillah). This year, the *ора* is much greater. We will wear our masks knowing we still live in that Divinely-orchestrated hidden reality, and wait as patiently as we can for healing and comfort.

Most of all, we want to see the faces of our friends and loved ones. We want to see who hides behind the masks. Deep down, we also want to see G-d behind His mask, and imbue our lives with profound meaning and significance. We want to see G-d’s light – אל הפנים – don’t hide Your Face from us.

Rabbi David Stav is Chief Rabbi of Shoham.