Clothed in Meaning

As part of the festivities on Purim, we wear masks and costumes. Let’s look at some of the words associated with those disguises.

One word we’ve all become very familiar with this year isCHASES – “mask.” Originally it meant “covering” and took on the meaning “mask” in Modern Hebrew, influenced by the English word “mask” and the French word masque. Those words, while not deriving from the same root asCHASES, actually do have a Semitic origin, coming from the Arabic maskhara, meaning “crown” or “buffoon.” That word comes from the verb sahkira meaning “to ridicule,” and may be related to the HebrewCHAPears – “a lie.”

CHASES comes from the root נֶסֶךְ – “to weave.” As such, it is cognate with the word מֵעִילָה – “tractate (of the Talmud),” which means “molten image,” (as in the Bible, but with a different meaning and origin. It means “molten calf,” as in the Hebrew נְגֵל מַסִּכָּה). Its root is also נֶסֶךְ, but meaning “to pour out” – not “to weave.”

The Hebrew word for costume is CHAPears. It is actually related to the root חֲלִיפָה – “to search.” How so? While in the piel form the verb means “to search,” in the reflexive hitpael form, it means “to disguise oneself.” For example, in Shmuel I 28:8, we read that King Saul “disguised himself (מַסֵּכֶת חֲלִיפה) and wore different clothes.” Yehuda Kiel, in his commentary Daat Mikra, explains that the root is from חֲלַף חֲלָף – search: he made others search for him (the reflexive.)

Beyond the words for mask and costume, quite a few words for clothing in Hebrew are related to deception and falsehood.

For example, בד – “garment” shares the same root as CHAPears – “disguise.” In the same way a garment is used to cover the body, a traitor will cover up their disloyal behavior.

Similarly, we have the pairs מַסֶּכָה – “coat” and מַסֶּכֶת – “treachery, embezzlement” and מְעִיל – “linen” and מֵעִילָה – “to lie, concoct.”

One other root with both meanings isCHLIF – “change.” From that root, חָלַף means “to change.” From that root, חָלַף means “change of clothes.” This is how it is used when Yosef gives clothing to his brothers – חֲלֵפֹת שְׂמָלֹת (Bereishit 37:11). Today, based on that meaning, a חָלְפָה is a suit.

Another meaning of חָלְפָה is “replacement, successor” as found in Iyov 14:14 – “All the time of my military service I wait / Until my replacement comes.” That is the meaning in the Arabic cognate caliph, the one who succeeded the leader.

In addition to a change of clothes (and people), it is also associated with deception. This is how Ya’akov uses it when he tells his wives that Lavan mistreated him:

“As you know, I have served your father with all my might; but your father has cheated me, changing [חֲלָף] my wages time and again. G-d, however, would not let him do me harm” (Bereishit 31:6–7).

All of these words show the connection between clothing and deception, because at their core, clothing covers up who we really are. Not surprisingly, clothing plays a major role in deception stories throughout the Bible. For example, Adam and Chava covered up their sin with fig leaves, Ya’akov tricked Yitzchak by dressing up as Esav, Tamar deceived Yehuda with her clothing, and Yosef hid his identity from his brothers by dressing as an Egyptian.

And while the custom of wearing masks and costumes on Purim first appears only in the Middle Ages, clothing plays a major role in Megillat Esther as well. Mordechai dresses in sackcloth after hearing of Haman’s decree, and as a response Esther tries sending him clothing to wear. Later, Haman asks to wear the king’s clothing but in the end it is Mordechai who dons the royal robes.

In a story where everyone’s true intentions are masked, and even G-d’s involvement is concealed, costumes are a perfectly natural celebration!

David Curwin is a writer living in Efrat, and the author of the Balashon blog. balashon.com • balashon1@gmail.com.