Masks and Realities: Thoughts for Parashat Va-et-hanan

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By
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Some years ago, Woody Allen made a film called Zelig about a man who constantly changed his appearance to blend in with the people around him. Who was Zelig? Did he have a personality of his own? Was he simply an inveterate copycat who thought his survival depended on losing himself in the crowd?

During the course of a lifetime, any human being might play the role of Zelig. A person may wear many masks. In order to curry favor with others, one adopts their attitudes, opinions, styles and behavior patterns. In the process, a person becomes inauthentic, a play actor rather than a real person true to who he/she really is. One wears a mask and adopts a false pose; and then, when that game is over, one puts on another mask and assumes another role…and on and on with a lifetime of masks.

Much human misery is the result of people betraying themselves by adopting artificial personae. They are so anxious to impress or blend in with others that they lose their own selves in the process. Even worse, they come to believe that they actually are what their masks portray them to be. For them, falsehood becomes truth. They no longer have the ability to distinguish between who they are and who they are pretending to be.

This week's Torah reading includes the commandment: You shall not bear false witness (eid shav) against your neighbor. This echoes the commandment as recorded in Shemot 20:13, where the phrase used for false witness is eid sheker.

The commandment teaches the prohibition of giving false testimony.

However, the wording suggests a different and deeper meaning as well. The word for testimony is "eidut," and that would have been the expected word to find in this commandment. But instead of "eidut" (testimony), we find "eid" (witness). The Torah, thus, is putting a spotlight not on the testimony—but on the person giving the testimony. The commandment might be understood to include the message: You shall not be a false person; false people give false testimony; false

people are not trustworthy. False people lie to themselves and lie to others.

In his novel, “Elmer Gantry,” Sinclair Lewis portrays the life of a highly “successful” preacher, a charismatic evangelist who attracts many church members and raises lots of money. He is a gifted orator and a clever manipulator of people. The only thing wrong with Elmer Gantry is that he is essentially a phony. His beliefs and behaviors do not coincide with his preachments. He pretends to be a faithful and moral spiritual leader: but he is in fact not faithful or moral. He is able to deal with the dissonance between who he is and who he pretends to be, because he is so successful in attracting large audiences. He gains a feeling of power when he can control large groups of followers. As long as people applaud him and gratify his ego, he doesn’t need to reflect too carefully about how false his life actually is.

To the public, Elmer Gantry seems successful and happy. To himself—at least for much of the time—Elmer Gantry seems successful and happy. But perceptive people see right through Elmer’s masks, and know that he is a fraud. Success and happiness bought at the price of authenticity is too high a price. Indeed, such “success” and such “happiness” are fundamentally tainted.

The world is full of Zeligs and Elmer Gantrys. The world is full of mask-wearers and pretenders and con artists. We must be wise enough to see through these shams…and wise enough not to put on masks of our own.

Angel for Shabbat