Masquerade: Thoughts for Purim-- by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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At least since the sixteenth century, Purim celebrations have included costumes and masquerade parties. Various explanations have been given.

The Purim story is replete with surprises. Things are not what they initially seem to be. Esther pretends not to be Jewish and masquerades as a Persian Queen. Mordecai wears sackcloth and ashes but is later dressed up as viceroy to the king. The king appears to be all powerful but he is an indecisive hedonist who allots real power to others. Haman seems to be in control but ends up being hanged on a tree on which he had hoped to hang Mordecai. When the Jews ultimately prevail, many of their one time enemies were “mityahadim,” appearing to be Jews themselves. Even God, whose name is not mentioned in Megillat Esther, seems to be hiding.

Masquerade: wearing a costume, playing a role, pretending to be someone other than yourself, hiding your true identity.

Masquerade: putting on a mask, camouflaging reality, creating false illusions.

Once a year, on Purim, Jews indulge in games of make believe, where the line between reality and illusion is blurred. Many other groups similarly have a day (or more) for masquerade balls and parades. Somehow, letting down our guard on one day enables us to face reality squarely all the other days of the year.

In describing the impact of a mask on its wearer, Elias Canetti notes: “As long as he wears it he is two things, himself and the mask…Because it can be torn away,

its wearer is bound to fear for it. He must take care that he does not lose it; it must never be dropped and must never open. He feels every kind of anxiety about what may happen to it.…He must manipulate it, remaining his everyday self, and, at the same time, must change into it as a performer. While he wears the mask he is thus two people and must remain two during the whole of his performance" (Crowds and Power, Seabury Press, NY, 1978, p. 377).

One wearing a mask wishes to preserve the illusion of being someone else. Being unmasked would ruin everything. So the mask wearer tries to protect the illusion by staying in control of the mask. No one must be allowed to get past the mask. The mask wearer becomes two people: the real self and the play actor wearing a mask.

But what happens if the mask wearer comes to identify totally with the mask?

Much human tragedy is the result of people forgetting who they are at root; they don various masks and personae, pretending to be what they in fact are not. They may imagine that they can only be successful or happy if they adopt a certain persona, if they betray their selves for the sake of winning the approval of others. The psychiatrist, Dr. Arno Gruen, has pointed out: "We establish irrational ideals of the 'real' man and the 'right kind' of woman, which not only separate us more and more from our genuine potentialities, but in the long run also lead us into self-destructiveness" (The Betrayal of the Self, Grove Press, NY, 1988, p. 60).

People, in their desire to be popular, often end up play-acting. They dress, speak, laugh, socialize—the way they expect that others want them to dress, speak, laugh and socialize. To gain approval, they will wear whatever mask they think will advance them.

Happily, many people are authentic, natural and good. They strive not to wear masks, not to pose as someone other than who they are. When they do feel that they are acting artificially, they are wise enough to catch themselves.

But so many others seem to be play-acting; they pretend to be what they are not; they create an image of themselves and want others to think that the image is true. Perceptive people can see through the mask; they pity the mask-wearers who must spend so much energy trying to live up to a false image of themselves. The mask-wearers are terrified by those who would unmask them.

Masquerades are fine if one realizes that they are infrequent descents into fantasy. Masquerades are destructive if the mask-wearers cease to distinguish between themselves and their masks.

Purim is a reminder that there is a fine line between reality and illusion. Blurring that line once a year underscores how easily one might lose sight of truth and authenticity. But after the day of masquerading, we are supposed to have come to a better understanding of who we are under the mask…and who we are when we don’t wear masks.