
Dvar Torah

Who Was That Masked Man?

Reflections on Moses, Batman, Agnon

Dan Shevitz

And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chieftains in the assembly returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he instructed them concerning all that the Lord had imparted to him on Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would leave the veil off until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see how radiant the skin of Moses' face was. Moses would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him.

EXODUS 34:29

Moses

WHAT AN ENTRANCE! HAVING SHATTERED THE FIRST TABLETS, MOSES COMMUNES WITH GOD AND RETURNS TO EARTH WITH A SECOND VERSION. UNLIKE THE FIRST ATTEMPT, MOSES IS NO LONGER seething with anger; this time he is literally glowing. But instead of letting

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Israel share in the divine effulgence he has brought with him, he veils it. Why does Moses put on a mask?

The passage appears in the biblical portion *Ki Tissa*, read in synagogues on the Sabbath just after Purim, so it is natural to have masks on the mind. When I first puzzled about Moses's veil, the thought occurred to me that he was celebrating Purim and dressing up for the holiday. This dubious explanation has one advantage: it explains a lot of the bizarre behavior attested in the whole account. But the Purim mask itself is not so innocent as we might think.

In rabbinic sources, Moses descends with the second tablets on the Day of Atonement. The Talmudic sages did not shrink from seeing here also an allusion to Purim. *Yom Kippurim* (the Day of Atonement), they say, may be read alternatively as *Yom K'Purim*, a day like Purim. Pretending to be Haman, Vashti, and Achashverosh, on Purim we masquerade not so much as who-we-are but as who-we-might-be. The costumery of Purim hints at the more sublime transformations of the Holy Day. But as whom—or what—did Moses masquerade?

A mask serves many purposes; it can be a disguise, or a concealment, or a trademark, or a bridge to another identity. But in Moses's case the mask was a bridge not from identity to identity, but from identity to anonymity. Having spent so much time with God, Moses aspires to be like God, and is perhaps not a little resentful that he has to return to the mundane realities of Israelite politics. He has stormed Sinai, fought with the angels and bested them, he has become more comfortable in Heaven than on Earth. And so, in imitation of God, Moses aspires to the transcendence and invisibility of the divine world.

In the same *parasha* (portion), we learn that Moses moves his tent outside the camp; he can no longer abide with the common folks. If they require him, they must leave habitation and seek him in the wilderness, just as Moses was forced to do when seeking God.

By becoming invisible and anonymous, Moses thinks he is sharing God's way. Did not God warn Moses several times not to let the people approach the holy mountain? Were we not warned that we cannot see God and live? An invisible deity is much safer than a revealed one. There is danger in seeing too much. Yet, we are told, Moses saw God face to face. Perhaps only in the privacy of the cloud of the Presence could

these two antagonists reveal themselves. (What, by the way, was God's mask?) Much safer for the Jews not to see too much of Moses; much safer for Moses too.

To be fair, it's not easy to make the transition from the heights of spiritual bliss to earthly banality; after basking in the Divine Presence, it's hard to get back to answering the phone. But the transformation of everyday activities (answering the phone included) was precisely what the experience of Sinai was all about! What if Moses had said to those who recoiled from his glow: "You come back here! Look at my face! See the glow? That's not me, that's God! You can have that too!" Israelite history might have gone a bit better.

Yet if Moses learned from God the way of transcendence, perhaps God learned from Moses the way of revelation. For in the very same *parasha*, we read that on every holiday each Israelite must appear in God's temple to see the face of the Lord. To see the face of God! Were we not warned that this is impossible, even fatal? The Rabbis recoiled from this prospect so much that they ordained quite ungrammatically that the text should be revocalized in the passive voice: *yireh* (to see) became *yeira'eh* (to be seen), suggesting that the pilgrim is the one who is seen by God, not the other way around! The meaning of the text, however, is inescapable: God is inviting, if not obliging, us to penetrate the divine anonymity. Moses and God pass each other on Sinai: as Moses is struggling his way up, God is finding the way down.

Batman

Why does Batman wear a mask? We can ask the same question of others who conceal their faces without criminal intent, such as the Lone Ranger. In the case of both crusaders, the mask reminds us of the trauma of their youth. Both encountered death (the former of the murder of his family, the latter the massacre of his comrades) and barely escaped with their lives. They were transformed by the experience—today we might call them reborn. Yet they do not let go completely of their previous lives. Batman returns to the ancestral Wayne mansion to resume his former pursuits; the Lone Ranger travels the same territory he did as a Texas Ranger, retaining the friendship of Tonto, who saved him from the massacre. The masks they

wear do not only conceal; they serve as sort of a gateway into and out of their previous lives. Remove the mask and you're Bruce Wayne; replace it and you're Batman. The mask is one way of being someone else without irretrievably abandoning one's identity.

Agnon

In college I was introduced to Shai Agnon, whose stories have delighted me since. Among my favorites is "Tallit Acheret" (Another Tallis), one of his Yom Kippur stories. Through the eyes of a child, Agnon describes the cantor pulling on his great tallis over his head for the Yom Kippur service. Agnon then muses on this practice. Why, he asks, does the cantor choose the moment of Kol Nidre to conceal himself in his prayer shawl? At the very moment that we are attempting to bare our souls and yearn to be noticed by God—is this the occasion to hide in a tallis?

Now, anyone who has ever wrapped himself or (thankfully we can now add) herself in a big tallis knows that it is a very special place to daven. It is spiritually a very cozy asylum. I still like to retreat behind the warm, fuzzy folds of my coarse woolen cloak when I am in spiritual high gear. But ever since I read that story, I realized that I can no longer do so on Yom Kippur. I have to peel back the tallis and be seen.

For the tallis is also a mask: we masquerade as Jews. There are all sorts of familiar sartorial implements at our disposal to accessorize this identity. We can hardly escape these devices, since they help us define ourselves. But they are all just accretions. Garments, the Hidden Wisdom teaches us, are the means by which things reveal themselves, but they must not be confused with the essence. We can no more be Jews without masks that we can drink a glass of water without the glass, but it is a mistake to treat the glass as though it were the water. When it comes to spiritual garments, this mistake can be a serious theological error, as Moses no doubt discovered. Even a tallis should be shaken out every now and then.

