

Let's consider a different Esther. A film called *The Last Marranos* brought me crypto-Jewish secrets from a remote village in Portugal. Women observed there had a tradition that conflated the story of the Exodus with that of Queen Esther. Perhaps these descendants of crypto-Jews preserved in Esther a memory of Doña Graça Nasi. This historical sixteenth century Portuguese Jewish woman, so important in her time as to have been called "la Señora" (Lady Graça), was a great protector and patron of crypto-Jews who left Portugal in their escape from the Inquisition.

Another Esther: for some scholars and Jews who have identified as gay, as queer, or as transpeople, the crypto-Jewish Esther has become a symbol that dignifies or sacralizes the experience of survival in a hidden identity, and points to the salvific power of self-revelation.

This week of Purim, while acknowledging both Vashti and Esther, I would draw our attention to Memucan. When Vashti said 'no' to the king, Memucan advised him to strip her of her power, lest the princesses of Persia and Media follow her lead(ership) (Esther 1:16–20). Memucan understood that historical change could be catalyzed by even one important woman—one person. Esther or Vashti, the story of Purim teaches a lesson: it all depends not only on whether we can vanquish Haman or Memucan, but also on whether we act on what he knew. One individual can lead, and by example change the course of history.

**To view the video that inspired this commentary, visit
www.jtsa.edu/purim-heroines**

References:

The Last Marranos. Directed by: Frédéric Brenner and Stan Neumann. (1991).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991).

"She said 'no' to the king", Margot Stein, Rayzel Raphael, Bayla Ruchama, Juliet Spitzer (1988)



Tetzavveh 5781

Purim

תצוה תשפ"א
פורים



The Masks that We Wear

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Growing up in Israel, Purim was a wonderful experience, full of fun and games. Dressing up, putting on masks, going to parties, and attending the Purim Parade in Tel Aviv—the *Adloyada*. This name is derived from a rabbinic saying in the Talmud that one should revel on Purim by drinking “until one no longer knows [how to distinguish between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordecai’]” (BT Megillah 7b). Attending the parade was great fun, but also had a mysterious aspect. Who are the people hiding behind the masks? What are they concealing and what are they trying to reveal? It was all very colorful and happy but, in equal measure, scary and confusing.

This Purim is precisely a year since another scary and confusing event slipped into our lives. Most of us began sheltering in place, changing our behavior in a dramatic way, distancing ourselves from friends and family, working from home, and protecting ourselves by wearing masks in public. As you read this, we are still wearing masks—and not only Purim masks. These masks are not intended to hide our identity behind some pretended new one. These days, donning masks is for a serious purpose, to protect ourselves and the people around us from the virus threatening our health and well-being. However, even these masks can change our behavior and create a sense of distance and secrecy.

The Torah portion we are reading this Shabbat, right in between the day of Purim most of us celebrate and Shushan Purim (which is celebrated in Jerusalem and a few other cities), deals with garments of the High Priest and, implicitly, with the mystery associated with wearing this opulent attire during the sacrificial ceremonies. The Torah illustrates with extreme precision the priestly vestments and the ordinations of Aaron and his sons. The High Priest's garments are gorgeous, made from the most expensive fabrics, in stunning

colors of gold, blue, and crimson, and adorned with the best precious stones.

These garments play several roles. The precious stones embedded in the High Priest's *hoshen* (breastplate) represent the whole nation: "Aaron shall carry the names of the sons of Israel on the breastpiece of decision over his heart, when he enters the sanctuary, for remembrance before the LORD at all times" (Exod. 28:29). Similarly, the names of the tribes of Israel are engraved on two lazuli stones on the shoulders of the *ephod*. The Gemara (BT Zevahim 88b) cites Rabbi Inini bar Sason who asks, "Why was the passage in the Torah that discusses animal sacrifice (Lev. 1–7) juxtaposed to the passage [in Leviticus] that discusses the priestly vestments (Lev. 8)?" He then explains that just as offerings effect atonement, so too, priestly vestments symbolically effect atonement. He continues to list the specific atonement purpose of each element of the vestments. According to the Zohar, "All the priestly garments were emblematic of supernal mystery" (Zohar 2:231a). This mystical reading focuses on the layered nature of the vestments.

Reading this long and detailed section dedicated to the description of clothing, I wonder about the importance attributed to clothing and to the way we present ourselves in public. The Rambam notes that the commandment to dress the High Priest in dazzling garments is not only to enhance the status of the priest himself and the nation he represents, but also to glorify the name of God. Ralph Lee, an American puppeteer known for his nontraditional masks and costumes, often speaks about aspects of wearing masks and costumes and asks: *Does a mask hide certain aspects of the wearer? Or give the person the freedom or/and responsibilities to become someone else?*

Asking this question as an educator, I am reminded about a short children's book, *The Egg that Disguised Itself* (הביצה שהתחפשה) by Dan Pagis. I have used this story when teaching creative dance to young children during Purim, developing the various images presented in the book into dance phrases. The author was born in Bukovina, Romania; lost his mother when he was four years old; spent his early years in a Nazi concentration camp in the Ukraine; immigrated to Palestine in 1946; and became a literature professor and a poet. He wrote many poems, mostly exploring the Holocaust, but he also wrote and illustrated this one children's book, a book that might be regarded as a straightforward rhyme about an egg that finds

itself in an identity crisis, trying to become something different, and, in the end, surrendering to the natural fate of an egg and becoming a baby chick.

Bored and lonely, the egg is looking to be something else, an artificial identity constructed by costumes; limited by its physical form—a round egg—it is looking to free itself from its shape. The egg tries disguise after disguise, but in vain; its "egginess" always shows until at the end, when, found by the mother hen, it develops into its true self, a baby chick. A deeper look at the poem and the work of the poet, reveals Pagis trying to disguise and conceal himself throughout his life: hiding from the Nazis during the war; trying to rid himself of his Diaspora identity by changing his name to an Israeli name; trying to fit in with the local society. However, his writing reveals understanding and acceptance of his true identity, an immigrant in a new country writing about his old country and his life story.

The masks that we are wearing this Purim, and our unnatural social distancing behavior, are both features of a collective responsibility. We don masks to protect not only ourselves, but also the people around us. As the vaccine makes its way into more and more people, and the pandemic at long last ebbs, will we be able to display the same commitment to care for each other once we no longer need to wear masks? Will we learn that the world and ourselves are not exactly the same as we left it a year ago, just before Purim when we began sheltering in place? Will we be capable of developing, maturing, and realizing that we need to reattune ourselves to our new reality?

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Purim Heroines

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I did not wear the crown and satiny dress, or stand in line for the beauty pageant. Queen Esther was not a role model I—or many other children—could choose. Later, in the academy, I understood that Esther's subterfuge and seduction were the strategies of the weak, the politics of the minority. In Jewish settings, I found joy in singing along with the children as they restored Vashti to her rightful place, chanting the ebullient song: "She /said/ 'no' to the king; she said 'no' to the king!"