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Yom Kippur Evening 5783

"Unmasking"

Unmasking can be unnerving. After more than two years wearing face coverings, we may be as anxious *about* taking them off as we are *to* take them off. Some of us are ready; some are not; some cannot because of significant health concerns. Others remain uncertain, not knowing what to do. Each of us must make our own decisions according to our own degrees of comfort and need.

When I first got vaccinated back in 2021, I readily unmasked whenever and wherever I could. Bullish about the world's reopening, I wanted to demonstrate my confidence as encouragement that others should be hopeful too. Then came Delta. But then things improved. Next, the first wave of Omicron. Again a respite. And finally with BA.4 and BA.5, I began to wonder: how many times do we allow ourselves to get burned, dropping our guard — physically and emotionally — before we decide to keep it up for good? All of us who have been hurt by others or by life know the hesitancy to make ourselves vulnerable again. How much safer it feels just to keep the armor on.

For some, the mask has become unremarkable, a quotidian routine; a part of who we are, like the clothing we wear.

But let's face it: we all wear masks. And I don't mean KF94s or N95s; but rather the facade we often don just to get through the day, which hides much more than nose, mouth and chin. Like the hood or cap pulled close over the eyes, it prevents family and friends, colleagues and acquaintances from seeing all the anxiety and conflict that roil beneath, or the fear that what lies there is not good enough and will be rejected if revealed.

We all wear masks. If not one, then another. Bravado to hide our doubts. Strength to disguise our weaknesses. Achievement to veil our disappointments. Humor to conceal our pain. Control when we feel powerless.

Kaphar: Covering

One of this country's great writers, and one of the first Black poets to be recognized for his greatness, Paul Laurence Dunbar, wrote:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.
>
> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?

Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

In his book *The Masks We Wear*, Pastor Eugene Rollins describes the *persona*, Latin for "mask," as the limited self-portrait we permit others to see without revealing more of ourselves than we wish to. And most of us don't want to reveal very much.

The persona presents two obstacles, the obvious being that our masks become barriers to knowing each other most fully. Less apparent and even more problematic: our personas become barriers to knowing ourselves most fully. What we conceal from others, we often hide from ourselves. And what we cannot see, we cannot examine or change, embrace or love.

But as Soren Kierkegaard counselled, "there comes a midnight hour" when all of us must unmask. And the nineteenth-century Danish theologian warned of the danger lest we forget it: "I have seen men," he wrote, "who so long deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself....[And] he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the most unhappy man of all."[1]

If, at times, wearing masks is essential for us to function, at this midnight hour, for the sake of our happiness and fulfillment in the New Year, it is essential we remove them.

Yom Kippur derives from the Hebrew *kaphar*, meaning "cover." According to the book of Leviticus, on Yom Kippur the High Priest entered the most sacred chamber of the Tent of Meeting — the Holy of Holies — to commune with God whose presence appeared over the *kaphar*, the cover of the Ark of the Covenant holding the Ten Commandments.

Yom Kippur summons us to lift the lid and examine what's inside, not of the Ark but of ourselves; to throw off our masks and look at ourselves in the mirror; to confront the stuff we don't want to explore but must if we ever hope to address it. We call this *cheshbon hanefesh*, an "accounting of the soul" — an honest measure of our fears and our hopes, and of whether our lives as we are living them align with what really matters to us, or should matter to us.

Cheshbon Hanefesh: Examining

When I was a little boy, one of my favorite albums was *Free to Be You and Me*. Fifty years ago this fall, Marlo Thomas assembled an extraordinary cast to teach children about sexism, racism, homophobia, gender stereotyping and the challenges of growing up. I remember all the stories and all the music, including the NFL's fearsome lineman Rosey Grier singing "It's All Right to Cry." "It's all right to cry," he sang. "It's all right to feel things."

It is all right. We need to be honest about what's going on behind the mask, and not pretend that everything is fine when it's not.

So many are hurting. Each of us arrived tonight burdened by anxieties no one else may know but no doubt others carry. While for some the past year brought profound joy, there exists enough suffering here to break the heart. Ask the families who have grown apart; the parents unable to communicate with their children; the grieving and the sick; the isolated and the lonely; the child enduring silently the bullying of others; the teenager standing alone outside a circle of friends.

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[1] "There comes a midnight hour when everyone has to throw off his mask," Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* in Peter J. Rubinstein, "Choosing our Legacy," 2013

Many of us are anxious. These are tough economic times. Some, who have watched their savings diminish daily, now worry about how to pay for their children's college education or their own retirement. For others, the circumstances are truly dire, their concerns much more immediate, including those with family along the path of destruction Hurricane Ian tore through Florida.

And many of us are afraid. As we see our parents, siblings, spouses or friends age, or our own strength diminish, we fear this may be the year the blessings of family and health are taken from us. We don't want to acknowledge it let alone dwell on it, but on Yom Kippur we can't escape it.

Kol Nidre confronts us with our mortality. In many synagogues, as the haunting melody is sung, the Torah scrolls are removed from the Ark revealing an empty box, an *aron*, a casket. The *kittel*, the traditional garment worn by men this night, is white like a funeral shroud. Yom Kippur brings us face to face with death.

So "teach us to number our days," the psalmist implores, to make them count, "that we may get us a heart of wisdom."[2]

In their training for hospice service, chaplains learn to assist in the poignant conversations between the dying and their families. "Ask them," the chaplains are encouraged, "how they would like to use the time they have left."

Be it little or much, we, too, would do well to answer.

In a recent *New York Times* article titled "The Art of Choosing What to Do with Your Life," [3] Professors Benjamin and Jenna Storey share an insight from Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed that all our motivations — the reasons behind the seemingly separate decisions we make — are governed by one ultimate goal he called our "last end,"[4] which Aquinas identified as true happiness and fulfillment.[5]

Sometimes, though, we confuse means and ends.

We live in a community where we all feel the need to measure up to a certain standard. Too seldom do we consider whether it's the right standard, or the right one for us. It is far easier to step on the gas and drive than to contemplate what we really want out of life.

In their column, the Storeys recall a student who had worked tirelessly for a fellowship others assured her would open innumerable doors. But then having won it, she wasn't sure why she had pursued it to begin with.[6] She realized she didn't need countless opportunities; just the one right for her.

Yes, our children too are at risk. The world impresses on them its values — getting rich, getting fit, getting connected, getting online, getting in line, getting into the right college. And sometimes instead of unmasking for them our own struggles growing up — our own anxieties, our own self-doubts — we become unwitting accomplices. I have witnessed parents heartbroken by their child's defeat in a race for class president, enraged that their toddler could not get into the "best" nursery school, as if their future worth as human beings depended on it.

Too easily we just lose perspective.

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[2] Psalm 90:12

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/opinion/college-students-happiness-liberal-arts.html

[4] J. Budziszewski, *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on Happiness and Ultimate Purpose*

[5] https://iep.utm.edu/thomasaquinas-moral-philosophy/

[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/opinion/college-students-happiness-liberal-arts.html

Many of us live our days at a wearying pace. In our work, we are ever on call, beholden to texts, tweets and posts, voicemails and emails, the consequences of our own technological ingenuity. Exhausted, we ask: "what are we chasing; why are we running so fast?"

"To provide for those we love," we answer, "to give them, or ourselves, every opportunity;" "to serve the community." Yes, our intentions are usually the best! But as Will Storr explains in his book *The Status Game*, even our noblest aspirations often depend on attaining enough influence to realize them.[7] And when achieving the means becomes our "last end," it may never be satisfied.

In his short tale, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" Leo Tolstoy writes of a man named Pakhom who discovers the answer. Never content with the land he owns, he chases endlessly after more.

Now rich with a large estate, Pakhom learns that in the country of the Bashkirs, for the price of one thousand rubles, a man can take possession of all the land he can pace off in a day. Pakhom can't pass up the opportunity.

Arriving with his servant, he sets out early on the appointed morning to make his claim. Though the sun burns down on him he won't yield an acre. "I will go…another three miles," he says to himself. "The spot is so fine…it would be a pity to lose it." After many hours, he stakes the first corner of his holding and turns north. Onward he walks, reaching a well-watered stretch he also refuses to give up. Finally marking the second corner, he turns west only to notice the sun sinking toward the horizon. He has travelled too far. Frantically, he marks his third corner and races back. Running as fast as he can, he throws away his boots, his coat, his hat, and his flask, keeping just his spade to support his weary legs. And with the last rays of the setting sun, he reaches his destination, only to collapse upon it, dead.

His servant picks up the shovel in Pakhom's hand and digs him a grave, six feet from head to foot. In the end, that was all the land the man needed.

"The eye is never satisfied with seeing; endless are the desires of the heart."[8] "Who is rich?" the Mishna asks: "The one content with one's lot."[9]

Certainly, Judaism does not condemn prosperity; far from it. But as my father once observed, when "net worth becomes self-worth, life is equated with things"[10] and the foundations of our lives begin to erode. Ecclesiastes amassed more gold and silver than anyone before him only to discover it "all was vanity, a striving after wind…of no enduring value."[11] The true measure of our fortune lies in our ability to appreciate what we have…even if it might be less than it once was.

During the recession fifteen years ago, I recall a giant billboard posted along the Van Wyck Expressway. You may remember it. "Recession 101," it read. "Self-worth beats net worth." We shouldn't need it, and we surely don't want it, but sometimes a jolt to our security can remind us of certain basic truths, just as Yom Kippur asks us to strip away if only

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[7] Will Storr, *The Status Game*, "Prologue," in David Brooks, "Is Life a Story or a Game?," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2022

[8] *Gates of Repentance*, Ed. Chaim Stern, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 480

[9] *Pirkei Avot* 4:1

[10] Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, "When *Pekude* and Ponzi Meet: Thoughts for Founder's Day," Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, March 19, 2009

[11] Ecclesiastes 2:8-11

momentarily what is not essential to rediscover what is essential: the people we love, the community that surrounds us, the values and tradition that sustain us. These give us meaning, purpose and hope for tomorrow. When we build our lives on them, our foundations are secure.

But first we must take off the mask and be honest with ourselves.

Ayeka: Answering

And that is why we are here.

Tonight God demands of us a question — the same question God asked the very first human beings: "*Ayeka*? Where are you, and what are you hiding?"

You know the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden — how beguiled by the serpent, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Then, seeing they are naked — their actions exposed — Adam and Eve attempt to hide from God, masking themselves with fig leaves. Next comes the test. God calls out to them, "*Ayeka*? Where are you?" — which does not mean what it appears to mean, because God knows precisely where they are. Nor does it mean, "What have you done?" because God knows that too. It means, "Are you prepared to acknowledge your faults and your fears, or are you going to cover them up with fig leaves, denying the power I have given you to choose the direction of your lives."

Rabbi Jack Stern writes: "No Jew…can ever confront…these Holy Days without [answering] that first…question from God to the first humans on earth…'Where are you?' And if, like them, we have been hiding in the garden, Yom Kippur is the day to come out…out of our…hiding places, out of our trick-playing consciences, out of our…cynicism…."[12]

Kippur: Atoning

Because Yom Kippur offers us the chance to start anew. If we have made a wrong turn along life's complicated pathway (and who has not), we can alter course and explore different directions. If we are frustrated in our relationships, we can seek counsel from those who may help us communicate more effectively. If we have concealed from those we love our imperfections and our anxieties for fear they will love us less, we can show greater faith in them and in our own self-worth. If we are isolated or afraid, we can reach out a hand knowing there will be others eager to grasp it. How many connections has this congregation forged between individuals who came here lonely but here found new companionship and new strength. How many of you have made that kind phone call to another just setting out on a journey you once navigated — the path to the other side of illness or loss.

Yes, it can be a risk to reveal ourselves to ourselves; to let others in; to face the future with hope. But it is worth it. Jewish tradition acknowledges a depth of joy, *ditza* it is called, only those who make themselves vulnerable can ever know,[13] because only by cutting away the protective hardening we have grown about our hearts shielding us from disappointment and hurt, can we experience all the fulfillment life can bring.

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[12] Rabbi Jack Stern, "Personal Jewish Morality," *The Right Not To Remain Silent*, 295, 298

[13] Rabbi David Mescheloff, https://www.quora.com/How-many-words-in-the-Hebrew-language-are-there-for-joy from Cantor Sara Anderson

"Alas for those who cannot sing, but die with all their music in them. Let us treasure the time we have, and resolve to use it well, counting each moment precious — a chance to apprehend some truth, to experience some beauty, to conquer some evil, to relieve some suffering, to love and be loved, to achieve something of lasting worth."[14]

We will read those words tomorrow at *Yizkor*. Between now and then, we are granted these precious hours to uncover and discover who we have been and who we hope to be.

The *kaphar*, the cover over the Ark, is called the Atonement Seat because the Israelites believed that upon it God granted atonement.

"Atonement" is a remarkably descriptive word. Its root, from Middle English, is "at one." It means to reconcile, to harmonize, to repair and make whole.

That is why we have come tonight — to be made whole again.

We have passed through two and a half difficult years that fragmented our lives, some of us in the most painful ways. We put on a brave face each day because we had no choice. But all of us are at least a little bit broken. In this New Year, let us now, finally, begin to heal.

[14] John D. Rayner, in *Gates of Repentance*, Ed. Chaim Stern, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 484