

IT'S A HARD WORLD, BUT A WONDERFUL WORLD TOO

Like Moses, we all sometimes live behind masks—obscuring our radiance, our full glory, and also our sadness, darkness, and fear. For some, the only place that feels safe is behind the mask, even though living there only further isolates us, and may even endanger our lives.

To all those peering out from behind the masveh, the mask: I see you. We see you. We love you. It is a hard world, but it is a wonderful world too. Hold on. Hold on.

Parashat Ki Tisa 2.23.19

Moses tarries in coming down the mountain with the Divine revelation, only to find that the people, fearing they had been left leaderless, built a Golden Calf to worship. As they danced around the idol chanting, “This is the Lord our God who led us out of Egypt!” Moses’s heart filled with rage and he smashed the holy tablets. Many people died that day, and Moses returned to the mountaintop. Once again, he experienced a deep intimacy with the Holy One, maybe even more profound the second time. We can only imagine the mutual understanding, guilt, forgiveness and love that they shared, so much so that when he came back down the mountain, at the end of our parasha, his face was so radiant that the people became terrified of him (Ex. 34:30).

And so Moses spoke with the leaders of the people, but when he was finished, וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה אֶת הַמַּסְוֶה וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה אֶת הַמַּסְוֶה -- he placed a veil, a mask (a *masveh*) over his face. He felt he needed to shield some of his radiance, so the people could bear to be in his presence.

What is this *masveh*? Is it a great moderating force that makes it possible for him to reveal who he really is, in a world that otherwise couldn’t take it? Or is it a great concealer? The thing that keeps him from manifesting his truest self?

We’re given one clue earlier in *parasha*, when Moses first descends from the mountaintop and sees the people dancing around the Golden Calf: *Moses saw the people-- they were exposed-- for Aaron had exposed their disgrace to anyone who might try to oppose them* (Exodus 32:25).

Moses had heard earlier about what they had done, but the full weight of his outrage emerged when the people’s truest selves were revealed. Bekhor Shor, a 12th century French commentator, stated it perfectly: Their idiocy was laid bare for all to see.

Maybe that taught Moses, perhaps rightly, that the world shouldn’t always see our deepest truth. And so he determined that the people might be better off if they didn’t see *his* truest self, which they probably wouldn’t be able to hold, in any case.

Isn’t Moses like us? We all live behind masks. Masks of desire and longing, of radiance and passion. Masks of paralyzing darkness and crippling fear.

Sometimes, the only place that feels safe is behind the mask.

So we shield others from the full, glorious force of our love, and also from our sadness, our not-*ok-ness*, our moral confusion. And after some time, we become so acclimated to life behind the mask, this revelation of half selves, that we're terrified of what would happen if someone lifted the veil.

Some of you know that David's film was recently nominated for a Humanitas Award-- honoring writers who tell stories that speak truth and inspire hope. The night of the ceremony, our beloved Marta Kaufman, IKAR member and honorary co-chair of our capital campaign committee, received a lifetime achievement award. In her speech, she spoke of Imposter Syndrome. The idea of Imposter Syndrome was introduced in an academic article published in 1978 that reported on a psychological pattern of self-perceived intellectual phoniness in high-achieving women who live in fear of being exposed as a fraud. Yes, originally it was thought that this applied primarily to women. But now we know that it's pretty much everyone.

Marta asked the room what I'm going to ask you right now: raise your hands if you have ever experienced Imposter Syndrome.

Look at this room! I see some of the wisest, most soulful, and most successful people raising your hands. And the same thing happened, of course, at the Humanitas Awards. In that room full of brilliant, high achieving writers, nearly every person raised their hands. This is a mask we *all* wear.

But we need to know this: wearing these masks is not only undermining, it could also be deadly.

Andrew Solomon wrote in the New Yorker this past summer: "The gap between public triumph and private despair is treacherous, with the outer shell obscuring the real person even to those with whom he or she had professed intimacy."

And this gap too often leads to suicide.

"Suicide is a result of despair, hopelessness, the feeling of being a burden on others," Solomon writes.

In the Talmud (Masekhet Brakhot 5b), a story is told of R' Yohanan. He was a person who suffered profoundly—they say he lost ten children in his life. Somehow, maybe because of all the loss he experienced, he developed almost magical healing powers. Whenever one of the Rabbis fell ill, R' Yohanan would be called to his bedside, and he would do something extraordinary. At a time when everyone else would keep their distance, lest they catch whatever was ailing the patient, R' Yohanan would walk right into the room and sit down beside the person. He would engage the sick person with an open heart, asking him about the suffering he was experiencing. And then he would ask if he wanted to be lifted out of the

suffering. If one who was unwell agreed, R' Yohanan would ask for his hand. And then something miraculous would happen: וְאִקְנִיָּהּ לִיהָ -- He would take the sick person's hand, and lift him up. Maybe physically, maybe spiritually, maybe both. What we know is that somehow this healer's touch helped the patient begin his journey of healing.

This happened again and again. Once, when R' Elazar fell ill, and R' Yohanan went in to visit him, as was his custom. As he approached R' Elazar, who was lying in a dark room, R' Yohanan perceived that he was weeping. He asked him: Why are you hurting? Is it because you didn't study enough Torah? Is it because you're hungry? Is it because you never had children?

R' Elazar replied: I am weeping on account of all of this beauty, which will one day decay in the earth. R' Yohanan took a deep breath. That, he said, is a really good reason to cry. And so the two men sat together and wept.

And then R' Yohanan asked for R' Elazar's hand and lifted him up. And R' Elazar began to heal.

What does it take to see a person in that kind of pain and not to run away, but to sit down and maybe weep along with her? And then do whatever you can to help lift her out of her pain? What would it mean for us to let ourselves be lifted?

Today marks the *yahrzeit*—the one year anniversary of the death of a young person in our community. He was a kind, decent and gentle man who left the world too soon. He had a gentle presence and a soft voice. He was a healer, like R' Yohanan, who embodied the healing power of touch. I remember once when he came to our house for shabbat dinner he asked little Sami why she was limping. She said she had hurt her foot, so he told her to take off her shoe and he put both his hands on her foot. Maybe it was his magical healing powers, maybe it was the love and attention, but within minutes, she was walking just fine. We learned from him to reach out to one another with gentle love and presence, always.

He suffered terribly, behind a mask that none of us knew he wore. He never wanted to hurt a soul, and yet his soul hurt so badly. After his death, we wondered if maybe it was his desire not to ever cause pain that made him keep his pain to himself.

In June, as many of you remember, Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade ended their lives within a few days of one another. It's so prevalent in American life: about 45,000 people die from suicide in America each year. And it's on the rise. There was a particular concern this summer, that these high-profile deaths would lead, inevitably, to more loss, because after Robin Williams's death, there had been a 10% spike in suicides.

But then something astonishing happened. Twitter, rarely a source of comfort and inspiration, erupted with stories: "I, too," many wrote, "stood at the edge of life."

One writer shared: "It's been 6 years since I was barefoot on the railing of a bridge, in the rain, literally holding on by a pinky, just hoping I'd slip. I had beautiful kids. A loving family. Friends. A

good job, great money.” He survived that night, and then told a friend what he had been planning. His friend hugged him and said: “Don’t go home. Stay here today.” It saved his life.

There were thousands of these stories. One of them was written by someone in our community, who bravely posted that he, too, had seriously contemplated ending his life. He wrote that a few friends and his community had brought him back with small acts of love. Many who read his post responded: “We love you. We see you.” And some others wrote: “I was there too.” “Mine was 9 years ago.” “Mine was 6.” “I lost my father to suicide.” “I lost my best friend.”

That week, we posted the notice we now print every week in our study sheet:

We love you. We know these are hard days for many in our community and in the country. We want you to know-- even in the darkest hours-- that you are not alone. Please, let us know if you need a little extra love. Let us help you figure out how to get meaningfully involved. Remember: we all get by with a little help from our friends...

We meant it then, and we mean it now.

There are no simple answers here. But what we know is this: sometimes we all live close to the edge of the darkness. Some of us live very, very close, and some are stuck deep within that darkness.

It’s our job, when we are able, to reach out with open and loving arms. To hear each other, to embrace each other, to love each other up. We have to create no stigma zones, where we can talk honestly and openly about mental illness, depression and anxiety. We have to talk about the dark days, about losing jobs and getting dumped, about not making rent and about everyone thinking we’re we’re living the dream while we think we’re failing on all fronts. We have to talk about not wanting to get out of bed. And we have to not run away when someone peels off the mask and reveals the suffering beneath.

In that beautiful story in the Talmud, we learn that R’ Yohanan, the healer, once fell ill himself, and R’ Hanina went in to visit him. He did what R’ Yohanan had done for so many others. He asked R’ Yohanan for his hand, and he raised him up.

The Rabbis ask a great question about this. R’ Yohanan was the healer of healers! Why couldn’t he raise himself up? They explain: A prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

A prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

We have to know that our presence could be the greatest gift we could give, and that someone else’s presence could actually be life-saving, if we can receive it.

I have learned this from you, our community that has stood, again and again, for love.

I have learned it from those in this place who have shared your broken hearts and your stories of grief and triumph and not run away even when it really hurt.

I have learned it from the mother of the healer whose *yahrzeit* we mark today, who has greeted every day since his death with creativity and beauty and love, despite her broken heart.

And I learned this from my colleagues, Rabbi Jonathan Kligler from Woodstock, NY, who wrote a eulogy a few years ago for a 15-year-old girl in his congregation who took her life. In this eulogy, he shared that his own father died by suicide when he was in his 20s.

I want to close today with his words:

“After many years, naturally, of feeling angry at my dad, now I am left with compassion for him, maybe because I have been alive long enough to appreciate how hard it is to be good human being.

It is time to break the cycle of shaming and harsh judgment when we learn of someone taking their own life, and instead respond with compassion, and try to understand the unbearable suffering that led them to their choice to die...

There but for the grace of God might I have gone. Do not judge [someone who takes her life]. You were not in her shoes, and will never know what she was experiencing. Instead, open your hearts to those who are suffering, and if you can, catch them before they fall.

Because I'll tell you: it is a hard world, but it is a wonderful world too. Life is difficult, but it is worth it. It is overflowing with sunsets and laughing children, acts of kindness, great music, running barefoot, fresh fruit, great conversations – the list of goodness is literally endless...

After each day of creating, the Creator looks it all over and declares, “This is good!” And when it is all done, at the end of the sixth day, “the Creator looked at all that had been created, and behold, it was *very good!*” Yes, life is very good. So please hang in there, you beautiful people: it will get better. It may be hard work to be a person, but it is worth all the hardship.”

So to all those peering out from behind the *masveh*, the mask, today: I see you. We see you. We love you. Please remember: it's a hard world, but it is a wonderful world too. Hold on. Hold on.

Please keep these numbers—which provide free, confidential, 24/7 support—on hand: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255, or text HOME to 741741.