

## **Costumes, Whites, “Who Knows”: Yom Kippurim = A Day Like Purim**

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*Hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet achim gam yachad.* How good it is to be here, sitting together as sisters and brothers. There is so much going on that is on our minds, so much we need this day for. The day of atonement is the day of at-one-ment, a time when our community and also Jews in communities everywhere are together in synagogues more than any other time all year. We need to be at-one for some stillness, some time together, some wisdom.

It is always good and necessary to gather for reflection on our lives and the world. And we are so fortunate that Yom Kippur is falling this week, when we have so much to reflect on in our nation right now. The themes out there are the fundamental themes of helping and harming, of the power of words, of relationships between women and men. Our potential leaders are talking about wrongs and teshuvah and forgiveness, and about how to weigh one kind of harm against another.

These are, basically, all the fundamental questions of moral philosophy. We care about these things in our nation and in our leaders, because we care about them in our homes and our friendships and our workplaces. So we are very lucky to have some time to think, to talk with each other, to hear hopefully some framing thoughts. And ultimately to make some decisions and commitments, each of us, for our individual lives with the people around us, and as citizens.

It's so good that we can take the time, take all of a day and a bit more. Don't forget that the services and the teachings are to help you do that; they are not ends in

themselves.

Last week, I said that Rosh Hashanah and Chanuka have certain connections, as the festivals that begin and end the autumn. Two celebrations that are both all about hope and new beginnings. And I promised I would tell you about an unlikely connection along those lines for Yom Kippur.

In the Torah, this day is called *Yom Kippurim* – the day of cleansing, purification, restoring. There is a rabbinic play on words in Hebrew that says: *Yom Kippurim* means *Yom K'Purim* – a day like Purim. Purim – the day of dressing up in costume and reading the crazy story of Esther and Mordechai and Haman in the Persian capital. The meaning of Yom Kippur, these commentaries suggest, is found by comparing it to Purim.

How can this day, this day of fasting and introspection and seriousness, be anything like Purim, a day of drinking and celebration? How can this day, when we recall the High Priest entering the holy of holies in the Temple, be anything like the story of the Megillah, where God's name appears not at all?

But in fact, if you start comparing, it's clear that these two days are basically the same.

On Purim we put on masks and costumes. We hide our own faces – part of the fun is coming here and having people try to figure out who is who, underneath the colored makeup and unusual headdress. We dress up as heroes or villains – as Esther and Mordechai, or as Haman. We dress up as brash and brassy Vashti, as clueless Achashverosh. In communities we would call ultra-Orthodox, young men

who wear the same standard uniform of black coats and hats every other day dress up as the bad boys of modern American culture.

On Yom Kippur, we also dress up. We put away our usual clothing, and we dress in white. We dress up as the angels – as the pure light that surrounds God, as the most perfect beings other than God that we have in our folk imagination.

Twice a year we dress to bring out some part of us that isn't usually visible. On Purim, it might be the shadow side – maybe it's more fun to be Haman than Mordechai, or some outrageous or disgraced celebrity! Or we dress up as some kind of fantasy or cartoon. We bring out something a bit outrageous that's hiding inside, some part that is kind of dangerous that we usually bury. It's like saying: There is this small part inside me that is wild. It's not most of me, but if we don't let it out carefully who knows when it will explode.

We have fun with it all together, we laugh at it – then we put it away, and get back to our standard self.

On Yom Kippur, it's the flip side. It's as if we're saying – every other day of the year is actually a costume. We try to look respectable, but actually we lead lives of falseness and conformity. We're inconsiderate, or just polite enough to cover up the ways we aren't paying attention around us. We do just enough to get by without being a total jerk. So on Yom Kippur, we exchange those clothes. It's like saying: there is something real in me that wants to burst out. We portray that inner light that is actually in there, and wants to be seen. We work through the day to peel off the layer of wrongs and hurts, and uncover the essential goodness in ourselves, until at the end of the day that's all that is visible.

It's hard to get there. So much of our world is Purim. Look just this week, how much attention we give to the outrageous, to entertainment over sincerity, to conformity over integrity, to stories of harm over stories of healing. On Yom Kippur, we pool our power by being together so we can reverse the equations, and show our light, all of ours.

The second parallel of Purim and Yom Kippur is apparent in the stories that we tell and dramatize on each day. The Megillah, which we read on Purim, is a great comedy, but it's actually a story about the essential uncertainty of our lives. In a land of exile, far from our home, some queen offends some king, and suddenly another person becomes queen.

The king appoints a vizier, who takes a hating to one person, and suddenly an entire people is targeted for extermination. If it weren't for the new queen, all would be lost. The unconnected detail is all that stands between life and death. Everything in the Megillah is topsy-turvy and random – even the day itself, Purim, is the product of a random-number generator.

Yom Kippur is the same thing. We ask: Who shall live and who shall die? And the answer is, we don't know. That's the other reason we are dressed in white. We bring ourselves to face our own death – standing in white like the shroud of a traditional Jewish burial.

There is one phrase that occurs both in the Megillah and in the story of Jonah, which we will read tomorrow afternoon. In Hebrew, the phrase is *Mi yode'a* – “Who knows?” When Mordechai challenges Esther to risk her life and approach the king, to ask him to save the Jews, he says: If you are silent, you and your father's house

will perish, *umi yod'ea im la'et kazot higat lamalchut?* “Who knows if you became a queen for just such a moment?” When the king of Nineveh orders his people to wear sackcloth and change their ways, he says the exact same thing: *Mi yode'a, yashuv v'nicham Elohim, v'shav me-charon apo v'lo noved* – “Who knows, maybe God will turn back and change God's mind, and go back from anger and we will not perish.”

The reality that both Purim and Yom Kippur remind us is that life is a *mi-yode'a* proposition. Who knows? We don't know the future. Yet Esther and the King of Nineveh teach us how to live in the face of our fears and our unknowns. Changing our ways like Nineveh, stepping up like Esther, might or might not change our destiny. Yet we do those things, not to be rewarded for certain, but because that is the only way to live.

So both Purim and Yom Kippur are about taking responsibility. On Purim, after Mordechai says *mi yode'a*, who knows if this is the reason you became queen – Esther risks her life to stand up and march into the king's inner sanctum, uninvited. She figures out, step by step, how to tell him who she is, and who the people are who she is standing with and standing up for, and to ask for her life and for their lives.

Tonight and all day tomorrow, we will do the same thing. We portray ourselves also marching into the inner sanctum – with the High Priest into the Holy of Holies in the Temple, with our Book of Remembered Deeds into the court of divine judgment. We imagine that our own lives are at stake. We are coming there to camp out and figure out how to say who we are. We will detail our wrongs of the past year, over and over, trying to get it right. We will detail our rights as well. Not

letting any corner go unseen. We will do it over and over, until we figure out if we have said who we are.

We will ask for our lives, for my life and for the lives of everyone who is around us. We will ask for the chance to live them well in the next year.

Both holidays ask: How should I live, knowing I could die anytime? Some people go through traumas, go through crises, and come out with a new perspective on life. On Yom Kippur, we stage our own death. We imagine the worst that could happen, so we can come out the other side and say – who am I? Who should I be in the new year? How will I be different, facing what I've faced?

And the answer from both holidays is the same. On Purim, Esther and Mordechai said that the answer is to tell the story of the random world, to celebrate anyway, and then to take care of each other with *mishloach manot* and *matanot la'evyonim*. To bring food to each other, to build community; and to see the people in economic need and give to them. On Yom Kippur, we give the same answer. It's *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* – it's looking at ourselves and resolving to change, it's looking into our hearts and acknowledging a power greater than ourselves, and it is making the world a more generous and just place. (These do not annul the decree, as we sometimes translate, but they make its severity pass, make it more bearable.)

The Kol Nidre prayer says that our words are often like Purim masks – they sound like promises and pledges and commitments, but often they are not. We speak accidentally, or without intention. We make excuses, or we go along and say the things that everyone around us says, no matter how tasteless or insincere. But today, we want to say pure words. We want to say, truthfully, the things we have done this

year, bad and good. We want to train our mouths, our tongues, and our lips to say honest words for the future.

Who knows? *Mi yode'a?* By the end of the day, the point is not to be bowed in front of the king, but to discover.... that we are each Queen Esther, elevated for this moment, that we are each the king of Nineveh, with the power to command teshuvah all around us. We are women and men who can speak up for ourselves. We are people who can rise to an occasion. We are Jews who are proud to say who we are, and to stand up for each other. We are people who can go into the world and save lives, and then tell that story so other people will know it and draw strength. We each have a secret, and it's the secret of someone else's rescue.

Both Purim and Yom Kippur are times when we look for what is hidden and bring it out. We need to see it ourselves, and to know that each of us is worthy of being seen, as who we are. Not just by God, but by one another.

After both days, we go back into our complex identities, our complicated personalities. We're not simply our Purim costumes, or our Yom Kippur pure selves. But we can accept each other's imperfections, because we have this day when we have seen each other in a bright new light, the light of what's possible in each of us.

When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Yom Kippur was a time of love. In the afternoon, after the sacrifices and the high priest had gone in and purified the Holy of Holies, the young women and men of Jerusalem would dress in white and go out into the streets to fall in love. My colleague Rabbi Sharon Brous, whom you've heard me quote time and again, says: "If you can love me after I'm giving you

access to my fears, my hopes, to me, I will let you see the best and also the worst of me. I will let you see my soul – and I want to see yours. Show me your scars – I promise not to run.”

So let's dedicate these 25 hours to taking off our masks, to finding our true light and showing it. To standing up as the queens and kings we are, with the power to live with courage and with dedication to each other, in the face of the uncertainty about what is in the future. To letting each other be real, without suffocating conformity, without fear of what happens with too much sincerity. And let's stand up with and for each other, as we coach our mouths and minds and hearts to start off a good new year.

*Gmar Chatimah Tova!*