

Getting Out of Our Masks

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Max Friedman is a young member of our congregation. He recently graduated from George Washington University, but even before graduation Max was a digital entrepreneur. What makes me proud that he is part of our community is the way Max has channelled so much of his enterprise into *tzedakah* -- for instance his startup Givebutter, a fundraising platform that helps student organizations and nonprofits raise money online.

I mention Max today, though, because of an article he published in Fast Company about ten days ago. Max wrote this on Facebook when he shared the article:

...two years ago there was an article that was written about me with the headline "Is This GW Student the Next Mark Zuckerberg?"

And while it was cool to be even remotely associated with Mark, it sparked something inside of me that I had never felt before - I felt like an imposter. I did nothing wrong, and I had nothing to do with the article aside from being featured in it, yet for some reason I could not shake off these feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and self-doubt. I thought the whole thing was a mistake.

Since then, I've learned that there's actually a term for this; it's called Imposter Syndrome, and over 70% of people report being affected by it to some degree in their lives.

Max's whole article is called, "How I Beat the Imposter Phenomenon as the Youngest Person in the Room." He talks about how he handles carrying the burden of a label -- "The Next Mark Zuckerberg" -- a label that he didn't ask for, that follows him or that he often has felt follows him when he walks into a room to pitch a potential customer or investor.

Another word for this kind of label, or the “Imposter Phenomenon” that goes with it, would be a *mask*. Something people see that is not real when they look at you, or me. Being seen with a mask on is the story of Esther, and it’s what we all enact on Purim.

A mask could well be a compliment -- “The Next Mark Zuckerberg”, “the greatest mom I know”, etc. -- but that mask leads to the imposter feeling of being seen in an undeserved way. And masks can of course be negative. We all know the judgments that people make based on how we look, the masks they attribute.

Masks come from the outside world, from the culture, or from assumptions people make when they don’t get to know us first. And we can create our own masks too when we don’t know what we really want to reveal, or when we want to show other people only what we think they will value or appreciate.

In the Megillah, Esther has not just one mask, but a series of masks placed on her. She is born as Hadassah, Hebrew for the myrtle tree, which is something whose essence you can’t really suppress -- the distinctive leaves, the aroma.

But she gets turned into Esther, which is a pun on the Hebrew word *הַסְתֵּר* *hester*, which means hiddenness. Esther is the ethnically unidentified teenage beauty that Mordechai tells her to be. Then she is in the care of the king’s harem-meisters for months, as they cover her face with makeup and her whole body with lotions. Then she is the queen of an empire, but only as an ornament.

None of these Esthers are who Hadassah is. Though to tell the truth we have no idea, when the story begins, who Hadassah is. Neither did she, probably. That’s one reason we let ourselves take on masks from other people, or put them on ourselves. Masks come in ready-made models, and it’s easier to have one on sometimes, than to figure out exactly who I am, and then to figure out exactly how to show that.

But even when we present ourselves with a positive mask, and maybe especially when we do, we experience what Max Friedman calls “insecurity, anxiety, and self-doubt.” We can sense the gap, or we fear a gap, between the mask and the real face that we don’t want to show, or we don’t know how to show.

On Purim we deliberately put on a mask -- and then we take it off. Both together constitute the costume ritual of the holiday.

What can we learn about taking off our masks, getting out of imposter mode -- from Queen Esther, and from Max Friedman?

In his article, Max shares two lessons that he discovered, and to me they are also explanations of Esther.

Max's first lesson is: "reframe 'inexperience' as 'gaining experience.'" For Max, that meant changing from the mask of "the next Mark Zuckerberg" back into "students working on a project...seeking advice." This was an identity he and his collaborators could embrace, and as Max explains it, "we spun our inexperience into something forward-looking and true to ourselves." Youth became not a mask, but a face, and an exciting one.

When Mordechai came back to Esther and told her that it was time to act like the queen, she did the same thing. Her first response was that she was an imposter queen -- the king doesn't even want to see me. But soon, Esther embraced both the fact that she wasn't yet that kind of queen -- and that she would try to act as a true queen would for her people.

It wasn't a simple matter of taking off her mask, because there wasn't something for Esther to show yet. Only when she decided to serve her people, to step out for a higher purpose, would the mask really be off. Esther would be, to use Max's words, "forward-looking, and true to herself."

Max's second lesson is: "use friendships as your foundation." He talks about how hard it can be to find mentors who know you well enough to advise you about your work and your path -- but friends can do a lot of that. Max writes about the importance of his best friends and his parents, and says: "For me, imposter syndrome is most potent whenever I'm featured in a public setting--in the press, on a podcast, at an event, etc. I'll often feel irrationally insecure and struggle with fits of self-doubt. In these moments, I always turn to my closest friends."

Esther didn't have friends -- that stretches the analogy a bit too far. She had to believe in her support system outside the palace: Mordechai encouraging her, people praying for her.

But the lesson from Max, at least, is that real friends help us get out of the mask. There is a gift that I give to many of our community's kids when they are about to go to college. It's a little handheld mirror. I say: This mirror shows you what you look like as the image of God. And if you can see yourself this way, you will find yourself becoming a true friend to others, the person who shows them what they look like not in their mask, but as the image of God in their own unique way.

When you take off a *mask*, we see your *face*. A mask is frozen -- that's why it's false, that's why it makes us feel wrong. It highlights the uncomfortable difference between who you pretend to be and who you are at the moment. But a face moves. It expresses all our feelings, our happiness *and* disappointment with ourselves, our surprise and our pride as we learn and grow. Your face is how you show who you are *and* who you are becoming, and the gap between them isn't embarrassing anymore, because we all wear that on our own faces.

Who you are and who you are becoming. From inexperience to gaining experience, not just in work but in relationships and tikkun olam. With friendships as a foundation. Notice the masks you put on -- we all do it. Then take it off, and show your face.