

March 2015

Costumes and Confessions

I have a confession to make: Purim is not my favorite holiday. Okay, I am not quite telling the whole truth. I don't care much for Purim. No, that's not completely honest either. After all these years, I'm just going to put it out there: I really, really dislike Purim. And now that I've shared my deepest, darkest rabbinic secret, I realize that even this is not true. Furthermore, it isn't fair to Purim. In truth, I have no problem with the holiday of Purim, the story of Purim, or the megillah itself. I certainly have no problem with hamantaschen, the delicious, three-cornered, jelly-filled baked pastry treat that I start craving the minute the last latkes have been eaten. No, what really troubles me is not the holiday of Purim, but the part where I have to dress up in a costume.

As a child, I loved dressing up as Queen Esther. It was the only option, really. We had to dress like the characters in the Purim story. Maybe some people were able to get away with costumes that were "Jew-ish" but unrelated to Purim: Moses, Pharaoh, or the rabbi. So while the boys had several options they could choose, the girls had two choices: Queen Esther, the beautiful heroine who saved the day, or Queen Vashti, the naughty queen who disobeyed her husband, the king. What was a girl to do? I now know that Vashti stands for tenacity, courage, and women's rights; she represents confident women everywhere who refuse to be judged by their looks and their ability to dance. But at age six, who could blame me for choosing beauty, wisdom, and bravery? And what six-year-old doesn't want to wear a crown and be a queen for the day?

Today, people don't limit their costumes to the characters in the Purim story; instead, kids and adults alike dress up in all kinds of costumes! I have seen the whole range of comic book superheroes, a wide variety of Disney princesses, and a sprinkling of clowns, hippies, pirates, cowboys, "Cohn-heads," (the Cohn family never ceases to impress), and even the occasional St. Patrick's Day Purim leprechaun! These days, any costume will do, as long as it is safe, modest, and doesn't scare the little ones.

Where did this tradition of dressing up for Purim start, anyway? The Book of Esther (the megillah) does not command the wearing of Purim costumes, and neither does the Talmud. Several rabbis and historians have claimed that the custom originated in Germany in the medieval period, perhaps in response to the

European Christian carnivals that took place around the same time of year. Others believe the purpose of dressing in costume was to imitate the many costume parties that took place in the story itself. Still others believe that dressing in royal costumes commemorates the part of the story when Mordecai (Esther's cousin) dressed in royal clothing and was escorted through the town by Haman (the villain). Most agree that regardless of when and where the custom began, the purpose of wearing masks and/or dressing in costume is to hide one's identity. This could replicate the way that Esther hid her identity as a Jew, or it could symbolize the way God is hidden in the story. (Many scholars and rabbis have pointed out that while the name of God is never mentioned in the story, the people attributed the miracle to the workings of the Divine.)

When I dress up, I don't feel like I'm hiding; I feel like I am drawing more attention to myself. Perhaps that is the reason for my discomfort. Wearing a mask or wearing a costume usually means hiding one's true self. On the other hand (because in Judaism there is always another hand), what's wrong with pretending, even just for a day or just a few hours, to be someone else? Wearing a costume might be hiding but looked at another way, it might allow me to be less inhibited and express myself more freely. Perhaps wearing a costume brings the opportunity to step out of a guarded reality and into a more expressive existence. Dressing up gives me an excuse to act out, to play a role, to perform on a different stage.

So with all that in mind, here is my realization and perhaps most honest confession: I think I might like dressing up for Purim. In fact, one of my favorite Purim costume moments took place a couple years ago when I dressed up as a fortune-telling gypsy. Wearing a long skirt, colorful scarves and a long, red wig, I walked past Lillian Swerdlow in the sanctuary just in time to hear her ask someone next to her, "Where's the Rabbi?" I had just walked right past her and she didn't even recognize me! I supposed it really can be fun to live as someone else for a day, to be unrecognizable, and to get in the spirit of the holiday.

One rabbi I know used to print his Purim newsletter article upside-down each year. This was a reminder that on this day we do things differently, in a backwards fashion, acting the opposite of our usual selves. When our Purim celebration comes on March 1, don't be concerned if I seem a bit... different from my usual self. Maybe you won't even recognize me!