



The Torah of Masks: On Seeing and Being Seen

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Two years into the pandemic, many organizations that until now required masks have recently become “mask-optional.” This is a decision that some experience as liberating. Others, however, particularly those who are high-risk or have loved ones who are high-risk, experience this same decision as terrifying. For them, mask-optional means increased exposure to the very real and ongoing dangers posed by COVID-19. As a result, we are in a moment of heightened emotions, uncertainty, and sensitivity, in which the same decision impacts—and is experienced by—our community in dramatically different ways. At the same time, even as many organizations make the move to go mask-optional, it’s unclear how long this moment will last. In times like these, that for some are liberating and for others are terrifying, we can turn to Moshe as a model for how to live in this in-between space of masking and unmasking that we face now and may likely continue to find ourselves wrestling with in the months and years to come.

Before you dive into these texts, take a moment with yourself or with your *havruta* to reflect on how you are feeling in this moment of transition:



- What words or feelings come to mind when you think about unmasking?
- What words or feelings come to mind when you think about remasking?
- How does this moment impact different people in your life?
- Who at this moment might need extra care and visibility?

I. Bringing Down the Veil

Moshe's close encounter with God after receiving the ten commandments leaves his face radiant with the light of encounter. However, the light is too bright for the Israelites to see him in all of his radiance; they shrink back at the sight of him. For the rest of his life, Moshe chooses to mask when with the people to cover the light of his face and to unmask when before God. Take a look at the verses below:

Exodus 34:30, 33-35	שמות לד:ל, לג-לה
³⁰Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moshe's face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him... ³³And when Moshe had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴Whenever Moshe went in before God to converse, he would leave the veil off until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see how radiant the skin of Moshe's face was. Moshe would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with God.	³⁰וַיֵּרָא אֶהָרֹן וְכָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּה קָרָן עֹר פָּנָיו וַיִּירָאוּ מִגִּשְׁתֹּת אֵלָיו: ... ³³וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה מִדְּבַר אֲתָם וַיִּתֵּן עַל־פָּנָיו מִסּוּהָ: ³⁴וּבָבֹא מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי ה' לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ יֹסִיר אֶת־הַמִּסּוּהָ עַד־צֵאתוֹ וַיָּצֵא וַדַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְ�רָאֵל אֶת אֲשֶׁר יְצִיָּה: ³⁵וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְ�רָאֵל אֶת־פָּנָיו מֹשֶׁה כִּי קָרָן עֹר פָּנָיו מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּשִׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמִּסּוּהָ עַל־פָּנָיו עַד־בֹּאוֹ לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ:



The precise process of Moshe's masking and unmasking is not totally clear from these verses. However, it seems that Moshe navigated the complexities of when to mask and unmask when with the people and when before God. When Moshe spoke with God, he would remove his mask. After he finished speaking with God and was with the people, he would continue unmasked while transmitting prophecy, and then, once finished, would replace the mask for his everyday interactions with the Israelites.¹

Questions for discussion

1. *How do you understand Moshe's need to unmask before God and mask with the people? How do you understand the nuance that Moshe would remain unmasked while transmitting prophecy and replace his mask once finished?*
2. *How do you imagine it felt for Moshe to continuously and indefinitely move between masking and unmasking? How may this have affected his relationship with the people? How might it have affected his relationship with God?*
3. *How might this offer us a model of masking and unmasking that is dependent on the specifics of situation and circumstances?*

II. Seeing and Being Seen

Masking quite literally prevents significant parts of our face from being seen. There are some circumstances in which Moshe allows himself, and perhaps needs to allow himself, to be fully seen. When he is speaking with God and when transmitting prophecy to the people, Moshe keeps his mask lowered. Removing a mask affords the opportunity to see people and to be seen by people in ways that many of us have not been able to do for years.

¹ R. Avital Hochstein offers a beautiful close analysis of these verses around Moshe's masking in her essay, "Moshe's Mask—And Our Own," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/moshes-mask>.



At the same time, as some are eager to see and be seen in this literal way, this is also a moment with the potential to make invisible those for whom unmasking can be life-threatening. When Moshe is not actively transmitting prophecy, he raises that mask in order to conceal the light of his face and protect the people. It is his masking that creates a context in which the Israelites do not need to draw back in fear and are able to come close. How do we navigate this transitional moment of masking and unmasking, ensuring that no one is made invisible? How do we go beyond masks and work to see the needs of those around us so that each and everyone one of us is seen, and can come close without fear?

In her commentary on Parashat Lekh Lekha, R. Avital Hochstein writes of the reciprocal relationship between seeing and being seen. After Hagar flees mistreatment at the hand of Sarah (still Sarai in this story), an angel of God intercedes and tells Hagar that she is pregnant, instructing her to name the child Yishmael (literally meaning: God will hear) because God has heard her suffering. Take a look at the verse below in which Hagar names the God that spoke to her El-roi, a phrase of unclear meaning, but something to do with the root for “seeing” (ה.ר.א.ה):.

Genesis 16:13	בראשית טז:יג
And she called God Who spoke to her, “You Are El-roi,” for she said, “Even here I see after being seen!”*	וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמֹהּ ה' הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ אֵתְהָ אֵל רֹאִי כִּי אָמְרָה הָגָם הָלָם רָאִיתִי אַחֲרַי רֹאִי:

After her experience of having her suffering heard, at least as attested to by the angel, Hagar names God perhaps, “the God Who sees.” While it is a bit harder to understand the plain meaning of the second part of the verse, what is clear is that Hagar draws a connection between being seen and her ability to see.



R. Hochstein writes,

“Here Hagar is making a link between her being seen and her ability to see. As if to say: ‘I am able to see after God has seen me.’ This experience of visibility, of having been seen, both defines how Hagar sees God and is connected to her being a seeing person: ‘Even here I see after being seen.’ Hagar makes the connection between her having been seen and her ability to see others, as if she is saying, ‘After having the experience where others see me, I can also see others.’

“Hagar teaches us that vision has tremendous power in relationships. Seeing causes the one being seen to feel that their existence has been acknowledged and accepted. This can lead those who are seen to become seers themselves, thus creating a kind of reciprocal seeing that is the key to deep knowledge of the others with whom we share our lives.”²

Questions for discussion

1. *Is there a moment in your life in which you didn't feel seen? What was that experience like?*
2. *Can you think of a moment in which being seen allowed you to become a seer of others? How do you understand the connection between the two?*
3. *In what way might Moshe's being seen by God allow him to become a seer himself?*

This is a moment in which seeing and being seen are at the forefront of our experience. When unmasking, there is an opportunity to be seen in a way in which we haven't been seen for awhile. We can see other people's faces and their lips as they form words and express emotions of joy and fear and sadness and we can likewise be fully seen in our experience of a

² R. Avital Hochstein, Parshat Lekh Lekha 5776, “‘She Called God by Name’: Between Seeing and Hearing in the Meeting of Hagar and the Angel,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/she-called-god-name> (translated from the Hebrew by Dena Weiss).



given moment. At the same time, there is also an imperative to see those for whom unmasking is an impossibility and to ensure that they too are fully seen.

In this transitional moment, may we be like Moshe, able to deftly move between worlds, knowing when it is a safe moment to unmask and when it's necessary to raise back up the mask in order to allow all people to draw together without fear. And, may we be blessed like Hagar, to feel seen in the fullness of our experience and in so doing, to become seers ourselves.

