

PARASHAT VAYIGASH

DAVID WOLPE

# Unmasking

Growing up in Philadelphia, I lived down the street from Chaim Potok, author of *The Chosen, My Name is Asher Lev* and many other books. He belonged to my father's synagogue, and I would occasionally get to speak with him about writing and literature. He once told me that every novel has a central metaphor that helps the author think through the problems of the novel, sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden. For *The Chosen*, it was the baseball game.

The metaphor for our year is the mask. Wearing it, not wearing it, different kinds of masks, the sense of being hidden and the fear that it connotes – all of these themes have been woven throughout the pandemic. Of course, masks as metaphors are an ancient trope indeed. The story of Joseph is full of feints and deceptions and lies that seem like truth alongside truths that seem like lies. Potiphar's wife's accusation is a lie that seems true, as is the brothers' claim that Joseph was eaten by a wild animal. Joseph's innocence in Potiphar's house is a truth that seems like a lie, as is Benjamin's innocence of stealing the royal cup. When Judah, referring to the discovery of the cup, says, "God has uncovered the crime of your servants," (44:16) it is true, but it is not the crime he thinks; not the theft of the cup but the sale of Joseph.

In Isaiah we read, "And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the mask that is spread over all nations" (25:7).

Revealing people's genuine personality is a constant theme in the Hebrew Bible. The story of Joseph foreshadows the holiday of masks, Purim, when the unfolding narrative teaches us everyone's true nature. On Purim as with Joseph, those who begin on the bottom end up on top, a Jew finds his and her way to the corridors of power in a strange land and a non-Jewish ruler is instrumental in enabling the underlying character of others to be discovered.

## Genesis is a book of figurative masking and unmasking

IN THIS week's Torah portion, Judah, having grown out of the fecklessness of his youth, shows Joseph who he has become by taking responsibility. His act of unmasking brings Joseph to confess his own identity: "I am Joseph, your brother."

Genesis is a book of figurative masking and unmasking, all of it the human analogue for the great unmasking – the discovery of God's presence in the world. Adam and Eve find God in the garden. Abraham in Ur suddenly hears the Divine voice. Jacob lies down at Beth El and discovers God is there. Joseph is thrown into slavery and rises in Egypt, and when his brothers appear, insists that what they are experiencing is the hand of God in history.

We call the central moment of Jewish history at Sinai "revelation." There is no revelation without previous hiddenness. *Hester Panim*, God's hiding God's own face – the masking of God, in a sense – is a theme throughout the Torah and into modern Jewish theology. There are moments in the Torah when God's power is manifest – splitting seas and pillars of fire. In the Joseph story, as in the Purim story, it requires vision to discern God's presence. The tradition speaks of such moments in mystical terms, to peek behind the curtain (*pargod*), but we may equally think of glimpsing beneath the mask.

When we bless our children with Birkat Kohanim and ask that God's countenance be lifted to you and shine on you, one understanding of the blessing is that God should be unmasked in your life. You should be blessed to see God's presence, as Joseph did when he said, "It was not you who sent me here, but God." (45:8) Approaching the end of Genesis, it becomes clear how much is a dialectic of hiddenness and revelation, masking and unmasking. This year has been the year of the mask. May the coming year be the year when we can see one another's faces again, for to see a human face is the closest we can come in this world to seeing an image of God.

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SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

# Exile as a moral foundation

In this week's Torah portion, Vayigash, we read about the Jewish nation that is not actually a nation yet, but rather is an extended family of 70. They leave Canaan (later to be called the Land of Israel) to their first exile in Egypt. In this strange land, the family becomes a nation with its own unique identity. Why there? Wouldn't it have been more natural to leave the nation to form its identity in the land intended for it?

It is very difficult to exist within a foreign society and culture, and yet this is the reality chosen as the environment for the nation to establish itself. There are several reasons for this, but we will focus on two of them. Firstly, being in a foreign environment causes a person to adopt a worldview in which reality is incomplete and necessitates repair. It was therefore appropriate for a nation about to be given the mission and goal of "tikkun olam", repairing the world morally and spiritually, to grow into a reality that did not suit its existence. A person who grows up in a seemingly perfect social reality does not feel the inner motivation to change and repair the world. The Jewish nation that came into being in an alien environment is a nation that carries within it a vision of a repaired world. As such, it is called upon to work toward advancing the

world – morally, socially, culturally and spiritually.

Also, the nation began in a demeaned social status suffering from great discrimination. One of the biggest issues any society deals with is how it treats foreigners. This question is especially important in an agricultural society like those in ancient times. Any foreigner entering the land is checked to see what advantages or disadvantages he has: Does he create more than he uses or vice versa?

## One of the biggest issues any society deals with? How it treats foreigners

The Jewish nation's time in Egypt created the basis for the repeated warnings in the Torah regarding the proper treatment of foreigners – that person who has been disconnected from his homeland and often also from his family when exiled to a foreign land. The memory of the exile in Egypt is a foundational memory meant to inform Jewish society as one that does not reject the foreigner or stranger, but respects him and makes it

possible for him to live respectably. Again and again, the Bible repeated the connection between the exile in Egypt and the obligation to respect foreigners. "And you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23: 9); "The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God" (Leviticus 19: 34); "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10: 19).

A nation that rose in exile can see a stranger and respect him, give him space and allow him to exist and integrate. The book of Genesis contains almost no laws or commandments because it is a book that describes the foundation upon which the Jewish nation was built: the period of the forefathers. During this time, the nation's spiritual foundations were formed and this is when its first exile – the exile to Egypt – began. That was where the important foundation of appropriate treatment of foreigners was laid, a foundation that was to impact the independent Jewish state from ancient times to today.

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JUDAISM 3.0  
GOL KALEV

# Jacob's purchase of Jerusalem

Upon his return to the Promised Land, Jacob acquires a parcel of land. Unlike his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac who endured prolonged disputes over contested wells and territory, Jacob makes his ownership unquestionable by purchasing the property. But what is this territory he bought? The biblical text seems clear. It is Jerusalem! "And Jacob came to Shalem, the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram, and encamped before the city."

Shalem is a name for Jerusalem, as evident in the books of Genesis, Joshua and Psalms. Biblical interpreters concur that Shalem is Jerusalem but most of them argue that Shalem here is not a reference to a city that is owned by Shechem but rather a description of Jacob's state of being – "complete" or "in peace."

This in my view is a departure from the text (*pshat*). Rashbam offers a dissenting opinion, arguing that indeed Shalem is a city owned by Shechem, but he claims that this is not "the" Jerusalem but another city that happens to have the same name.

The interpreters' difficulty in recognizing Jacob's purchase of Jerusalem is understandable since Shechem is situated kilometers north of Jerusalem, but we know of even broader territorial spheres of Esau, Ishmael and Abimelech.

Hence it is logical that Jerusalem would be the city of Shechem, just as Beersheba is the city of Abimelech.

THE BIBLE describes the transaction: "And he bought the parcel of ground where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred kesitah."

As long as one accepts that "spread his tent" equals "encamped," it seems inevitable to conclude, based on the text, that Jacob purchased Jerusalem!

This is further strengthened by what Jacob does there once the acquisition has taken place. He builds a temple to worship God, which we know is a defining characteristic of Jerusalem. "And he erected there an altar and called it El-elohe-Israel," says the Bible.

Supporting evidence is provided by the treaty that Abraham struck a century earlier with the King of Shalem, who is described as "priest of God". Hence, in seeking a territory to purchase, it would only seem natural – from a political, practical and theological point of view – that Jacob would purchase Shalem! Indeed, after the purchase, the family of Israel are referred to by the locals as "Shlemim" – i.e. the people of Shalem ("Jerusalemites").

Moreover, at this juncture there is no indication that there is any additional travel intended, nor any such instruction to Jacob by God.

And so, the epic story that started in Abraham's Lech Lecha comes to a happy end. Jacob returns home, purchases Jerusalem, his claim is globally recognized and Israel lives in peace under his vine and fig tree. Indeed, Theodor Herzl's utopia *Old New Land* could be viewed as a subconscious midrash for Genesis 33:18. Life is so good that Jacob's daughter Dina feels safe to venture out to spread the light of Zion to the locals.

## End of the Old-Land utopia

Dina is kidnapped, and in a brutal retaliatory operation, the sons of Israel massacre the inhabitants



UNDER HIS VINE: View of a field used for growing vines in the Judean Mountains outside Jerusalem. (Nati Shohat/Flash90)

of Shechem. This triggers the risk-aversion tendencies of Jacob, evident earlier in his escape from Padan Aram and in his encounter with Esau. He tells his sons, "they will gather themselves together against me and smite me and I shall be destroyed, I and my house." He decides to leave his newly-purchased property.

After a God-mandated worship at Beit El, he does not return but proceeds toward Hebron where his father Isaac lives, and where there is a history of friendly relations with the locals. Indeed, Hebron, where Abraham purchased a field from Ephron, and Jerusalem, that Jacob purchased from Shechem, are the two documented Israel-owned real estates of the Torah. Hebron would remain the de facto capital of Israel for centuries to come, but it seems that the Children of Israel never forgot Jerusalem.

When King David was inaugurated, he unexpectedly moved the capital from Hebron to Jerusalem! King David "goes there to the Jebusite," the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Jebusites then tell him: "You will not come here because you have been removed by the blind and the lame."

Who those blind and lame were remains a mystery. The common interpretation is that they played a role in "the battle of Jerusalem." But a textual read could suggest that they are mentioned in the context of negating David's legal claim to the city.

Is the Jebusites' reference to the blind and the lame a suggestion that the Shechem atrocities invalidate Jacob's purchase? Or alternatively, does it indicate that the Israelis turning Shechem into a shelter city for their fugitives gives rise to a symmetric legal claim to turn Jerusalem into a city for the blind and the lame?

We don't know but can ascertain from both King David's unexplained decision to set the capital in Jerusalem, and the apparent ease of its capture, that there was a preexisting claim to Jerusalem. Similarly, when David seeks to purchase a threshing floor near the city, the owner offers it for free.

Moreover, the David-Jebus dialogue bares startling resemblance to the diplomatic dialogue between Jephthah, who claimed Israeli ownership of land due

to rights obtained centuries prior, and the King of Ammon, who refuted the Israeli claim. (In both cases the international law foreplay was then settled by force.)

Just as Jacob's tenure in Jerusalem was finite, so was the Israelis' who were expelled by the Babylonians. Yet the Israelis never forgot Jerusalem, weeping by the rivers of Babylon as they remembered Zion. After returning, they were exiled again by the Romans. It is during this time that the longing for Zion morphed into a cornerstone of rabbinical Judaism (Judaism 2.0), alongside the contradicting principle not to rebel nor attempt to return. This was the operating environment of the interpreters of the Bible.

## Resumption of the Old-New-Land utopia

Just as Jacob received a prophetic urge to return, so did Herzl. That night in Padan Aram when Jacob gathered his family to tell them we are coming home is akin to that night in Basel in 1897 when Herzl gathered his nation to tell them the same. One of the attendees, Israel Zangwill, reflected: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the river of Basel, we sat and determined to weep no more!"

The Israelis reclaimed all of Jerusalem in 1967 and turned it – just as Herzl envisioned in Old New Land – into "a home for all the best strivings of the human spirit: for faith, love, knowledge." For the following 50 years, diplomatic attempts were made to take away Jerusalem, to lame it (divide it) or blind it (make it a "Corpus separatum," an extraterritorial city).

But in 2017, the US recognized that Jerusalem is indeed the capital of Israel, and subsequently since 2020, the nations of the region have been striking peace treaties with Israel. Nearly 4,000 years after Jacob's acquisition, his 100 kesitah are now yielding a return on investment of infinity.

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