

# Liminal Seasons and Theological Masks

What a privilege to have been able to attend the Rabbinical Assembly convention in St. Louis this past week. Seeing colleagues from throughout the movement, including Israel, Buenos Aires and Germany, and from all different ages and types of rabbimates was extremely moving. It was the largest turnout of rabbis within their first five years of ordination ever at a convention. In addition, there were amazing insights from the convention that I want to begin sharing today.

I learned the most from a 3-day session on liminal seasons and the soul of the institution from Reverend Susan Beaumont and from a three-day small group on theological masks by Rabbi Ira Stone. Reverend Beaumont defines liminality as “a quality of ambiguity and disorientation that occurs in transitory situations and spaces, when a person or group of people is betwixt and between something that has ended and a new situation not yet begun.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reverend Susan Beaumont, “Leading in a Liminal Season,” session for Rabbinical Assembly members 11/7/22.

We discussed the challenges of liminality-that we are not in a season disrupted by covid on a way back to a new normal-or worse yet to “what was”-but rather are in a time when we don’t know what the future holds. We know that covid caused or accelerated a paradigm shift yet we do not yet see where that will ultimately lead and feel the ambiguity of the moment. One of the advantages of such a period is we get to look at the soul of our congregation-who we are, where we are going and different ways in which we can get there. The creativity that can be present as such a moment is exciting and full of potential. At the same time those who highly value stability and the status quo might be afraid. They might say “is this the world that I’ve always known? Is this still the same synagogue?” Those fears are real and yet with taking a step back and examining what we are really afraid of we can better understand it.

The other aspect we spoke about with Rev. Beaumont is the difference between decision making and discernment. Rather than do what we often do-take big problems and narrow them down to the point where we take a vote, discernment enables us to open something up in

all its complexity, hear everyone's perspective and arrive at consensus. Consensus is not unanimity but rather making sure that every voice in the room has been heard and after that there is a process for people choosing to stand aside. Dealing with the larger questions of who we are and what we stand for is essential.

Applying this to Torah, we see a lot of liminality in Genesis 22 with the Akedah. When God tests Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his first born, Isaac senses the ambiguity of the moment. He tells Abraham, הנה העץ והעצים ואיה השה לעולה "here is the wood but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replies אלהים יראה את השה "God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering my son." This is often taken as Abraham evading the truth yet one can see it instead as Abraham saying "we don't know what will be. Let's see what God wants in the end." That is the difference between decision making and discernment. In decision making everything lies with the group making the decision; with discernment we consider what does God want from us in this moment.

We also seeing when Abraham is standing at *Petach HaOhel* (at the threshold of his tent)<sup>2</sup> he is also at a liminal point. He is standing in the threshold and needs to decide does he want to move forward into the unknown or step back into the familiar. He chooses to go forth.

Interestingly the Conservative Movement's conversion manual is called *Petach HaOhel*. Jews by choice always need to decide if they want to go forward into an unknown-assume a new religion and perhaps a new identity or if they want to stay within the unknown. We celebrate them when they choose to join our people when they are standing within the threshold.

This leads me to what I learned from Rabbi Ira Stone, the director of the Center of Contemporary Mussar. Rabbi Stone led a discussion on the masks we wear and the ideal to have a mask as a semi-permeable membrane-not being so rigid that we close ourselves off nor so open that we lose our sense of self. The goal is to determine which masks are good

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18:1

and which are defensive. If it's a defensive mask the trigger for it is fear so we need to ask what do I fear and is it real? The parallel in the Torah portion is Sarah's fear of Ishmael. She was too rigid to have a place for Hagar and Ishmael in her home. Was her fear justified? One who reads Rashi would say yes; one who reads Ramban would say no. It's a good practice when we get triggered by what or who we see or what or who we hear to take a step back and ask ourselves why this might be the case. Which expression do we wish to show on our face?

As a congregation I hope we can learn from both Reverend Beaumont and Rabbi Stone. When we are afraid of the liminal season in which we find ourselves, the uncertainty this creates, the ambiguity we are left with, we need to take a step back and ask ourselves what is really going on for us. At times this involves stepping into a threshold and at other times we might wish to hold back. Similarly, when we put on a mask, we need to determine whether this mask helps or hurts us, whether there is fear behind us and if that fear is real or perceived. Had I not attended the Rabbinical Assembly convention, I would not have had

these pearls of wisdom for which I am most grateful as I have the privilege to help lead Mosaic Law Congregation into its next chapter.