

IT'S DAY IN THE SUN

by Rabbi Label Lam

He urged them very much, so they turned toward him and came to his house; he made a feast for them and he baked matzos and they ate. (Breishis 19:3)

He baked matzos: It was Pesach. (Rashi)

Why was Lot serving matzos to his guests four hundred and one years before the event of the exodus from Egypt? What significance could matzah have before then?

We say at the Pesach Seder that matzah reminds us that we left Egypt in such a hurry that the dough that baked on our backs didn't have a chance to rise, yet four centuries earlier, before the commandment and the historical circumstances, Lot was compelled to make matzos for some perhaps mysterious reason we shall explore.

Almost eleven years ago, when the world was engulfed in the "Gulf War" and Israel was being fired upon by Iraq with scud missiles, many important safety issues were being debated. Gas masks were widely distributed but their effectiveness, it was found, would be compromised by facial hair.

Questions were directed to a certain awesomely great Talmud scholar who was sitting in Bnei Brak, in the center of the cyclone: "Do we shave off our beards to fit the masks?" I heard from my teachers that he gave the same seemingly cavalier answer to all that asked, "On Purim you'll wear your masks!"

The response registered as odd. Matters of life and death push away even Shabbos observance. Having a beard is not nearly as weighty as the holy Shabbos. Obviously the danger was not as significant or as imminent as was commonly perceived.

As things turned out, after months of bombing by the allied forces, a four-day ground war started as many as the days before Purim. The announcement was made of the Iraqi concession on the Fast of Esther, the day immediately preceding Purim. That day people began to dismantle their sealed rooms. That night was Purim and Jews filled the streets to celebrate after the reading of the Megilla, which talks about the amazing salvation of the Jewish people through the avenue of hidden miracles. People did not have a chance nor were their minds focused upon buying handsome new costumes or masks for the festive day.

By default the costume of choice that was most on display and that was worn with a sense of joyous relief was none other than the ubiquitous gas mask. Those words of the Tzadik now had the ring of

profound truth and deep insight, "On Purim you'll wear your masks!"

Imagine for a moment please, that in order to preserve the memory of that great day of salvation a new Jewish holiday would have been declared commemorating the end of the war. To honor the occasion it is decided that we are to put on gas masks and dance in the streets as had actually occurred. This becomes a new standard form of Jewish celebration.

After the fact a few scholars who have had their finger on the pulse of Jewish History do a little anthropological survey and discover that for thousands of years Jews have had the custom to wear masks on this day in particular. How odd it would seem, that the theme of the mask would intersect the same day for apparently independent reasons or is there perhaps some deeper hidden meaning?

In much the same way, matzah has significance on Pesach long before and long after the great event of the exodus. The readiness to move on with little when the signal is given, implied by that plain matzah, retains its not just symbolic meaning each year. With that posture and attitude and menu we position ourselves every year since and it proved to be an exit visa for Lot and his daughters on that very same day centuries before.

There's something real about the stuff that comes alive with meaning on that particular day. The Almighty dovetailed history and manipulated the whole universe so that the humble mitzvah of matzah could enter the big play and in its quiet yet crunchy way have its day in the sun.

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