



Blessing For Taking Off Masks

By Jake Marmer



There is something deeply ritualistic about masks, and even the purely pragmatic pandemic masks we've grown accustomed to hold the quiet power of concealment and revelation. It is bewildering that over the past 13 months, there are people we've come to know and like, while half of our face is invisible. Those we've only seen on Zoom and never in person. As coming together again is becoming an imminent possibility, the emotions surrounding the act of seeing each other, fully, face-to-face again, are overwhelming. So overwhelming that they, perhaps, call for blessing—a poetic container to hold the moment of intensity and gratitude.

With that, I'm sharing a blessing I composed for taking off masks. For anyone wishing to use it, my hope is that the act of taking off the mask occurs in the safest manner possible.

For context, I shared the blessing at the spring seminar of the Bronfman Fellowship, where I am the Education Director. The gathering, our first in-person program in 16 months, occurred in late April 2021. Our 26 Fellows, who've deeply bonded while only on Zoom,

were finally able to come together with some of our staff and faculty members. In our first hour together, we spread into a broad circle outside. After the blessing, in English and Hebrew, we took off our masks, and stood together for a silent half-minute, allowing ourselves to see and be seen, finally, in person. Prior to the blessing I invoked Emmanuel Levinas who famously wrote, "the face is present in its refusal to be contained," a near-liturgical phrase that echoes in the blessing, and in the moment felt more visceral than ever:

ברכינו אבינו ואמנו, כולנו כאחד באור פניך, כי באור פניך נתת לנו רוח העולם אור פנינו, אור
 אין סוף, ותורת חיים, אהבת חסד, צדקה וברכה, ורחמים ושלווה. ברוך אתה רוח העולם
 המגלה עולם בפנים ובחוצץ

May we be blessed, all of us together as one, with the light of your face, for in the light of your face, Spirit of the World, you've given us the light of our own faces, endless light that will not be contained, and the Torah of life, love of kindness, charity, blessing, mercy, and peace. Blessed are you, Spirit of the World, who unmasks the world that is around us and the world that is within.

Deep gratitude to my Bronfman faculty colleagues Micha'el Rosenberg and Arielle Tonkin, as well as to my partner Shoshana Olidort, who've all offered valuable input and ideas about different aspects of the invocation.

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