

The Lot of One Year: Liturgy, Poetry, and Art for Purim 2021

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Part One

Introduction: Purim—A Memorial Service

One year ago, our lives changed.

Purim,

holiday of abundant joy, enjoyment, silliness, and care,
marks the watershed moment between what was once—normal—
and what has become our new life.

Hitting this day in the Jewish calendar,
we are confronted with the entire weight
of the lot that fell upon us.

And yet, those of us alive must be grateful.

With pain, with sadness, and with anger we remember
the hundreds of thousands
who did not survive.

May their memories be for a blessing,
and may their names never be erased.

May we move forward and toward redemption;
with their names on our lips,
their love for life in our heart,
and their yearning for justice on our minds.

R. Sonja K. Pilz, PhD, for the [Bayit Liturgical Arts Working Group](#)

LAST PURIM (1)

I didn't go to Purim in 2020.
For the first time in many years
I wasn't asked to be in the shpiel
And I was glad of it
When I wasn't seething with mild resentment.
And then there was this new Covid thing
And I was scared.
But my friend, Ellen,
Was going
So I made her promise
That she wouldn't
Hug anybody.

My last real Purim was in 2019.
I was Haman in the shpiel
Or was that the year I was Vashti?

Trisha Arlin



Illustration by R. Allie Fischman

LAST PURIM (2)

We dressed up as characters from the Megillah. My son was a young Mordechai. I played Vashti in a long velvet dress topped with a spangled belly-dancer skirt I bought years ago in the Old City. The synagogue board president wore blue plastic food prep gloves while putting out the desserts for the potluck. There were bottles of hand sanitizer on every table. Over hamentaschen I chatted with a congregant whose daughter lives in Hong Kong, where the pandemic had already closed things down. It seemed possible that we might shut down here too, for a few weeks. A week later the schools sent the kids home, and my synagogue closed its doors “to stop the spread.” A year later 460,000 have died and we’re still meeting remotely. We compare masks and social distancing to darkened windows during the London Blitz: uncomfortable and lonely, but we’re keeping each other safe.

R. Rachel Barenblat

LAST PURIM (3)

Last Purim we celebrated the Whole Ma(gay)llah, the Canadian capital’s first ever drag Purim extravaganza. The Jewish Federation and Capital Pride joined together to support us celebrating the holiday as a *divine* coming out, to fête and build community, dress up, bend and defy gender labels, and celebrate. As some of the Capital’s finest (and Jewish!) drag monarchs danced and lip synced, about eighty glorious rainbow people shone, enjoying creative kosher catering (hamentaschen! Hot lips! Chocolate fondue!), bar service, music and more. It was my first adventure in drag (I went by Reish Lakish, in honour of the Talmudic scholar who had quite the strong *chevrutah* with Rabbi Yochanan), and it was the first time that I went to a downtown nightclub since before kids.

It felt so - alive. And free.

“We must do this again next year!” we said.

There was hand sanitizer, and many of us had masks, but those served to reveal rather than conceal.

Four days later everything shut down.

R. Dara Lithwick

LAST PURIM (4)

A crowd assembled, dutifully hand sanitizing and elbow bumping, in various states of dress — vagabonds, royalty, baseball players, Red Light district leather wearers, clowns, ship captains and more. With a Corona beer conspicuously in hand, I ascended the synagogue Bimah looking judiciously GQ. From behind the lectern, I donned my Uncle Sam costume and emceed a Purim-themed Taboo game with clues displayed on our Big Screen. After folks laughed themselves to belly aches, I offered a short teaching about *hester panim* (“Taboo is like God in the Book of Esther, ever present but never said”), then chanted Megillat Esther as one high-energy congregant ran around hilariously pantomiming *all* major roles with hats, scarves, and a “Haman” made of an inverted mop with stick-on googly eyes and a three-cornered black “hat.” We didn’t know that weeks later, our area would be a covid epicenter with the nation’s highest death rate. We didn’t know that a year later, the building still would be locked – laughter and Esther trope faintly echoing, an empty Corona bottle on the piano, Purim decorations on the walls, frozen in time like a Twilight Zone episode, sackcloth and ashes for millions dead.

R. David Markus



Illustration by R. Allie Fischman

LAST PURIM (5)

Last Purim, it rained into the black streets of Brooklyn
As I walked my way from the subway stop at Court Street
Up to my still new shul,
Ready to read some verses of the Megillah,
Carrying a baby, quietly, in my womb.
I was thinking about the mitzvah of drinking—declined;
I also said no to the pizza, somewhat awkwardly—I did not really want to articulate why,
Not yet ready to be that weirdo, that germaphobe--
And woke up my future husband that night,
Saying, in my sleep, loud and clearly: “Corona!”
I was dressed up as a prince,
Dreaming to take a trip to a different country—
Still
Here.

R. Sonja K. Pilz, PhD

LAST PURIM (6)

We didn't attend Purim last year. I remember hemming and hawing, grateful for a reason to pass on the loud noise and the drive to the synagogue after a long day of work. I remember thinking to myself, “Is it safe to go,” for the first of hundreds of times. I remember hearing people be dreadfully sad about missing costumes and a party, unaware of the heartache and heartbreak that would follow. I remember thinking to myself, “It will all go back to normal soon,” for the first of hundreds of times. I remember feeling a heavy blanket of loss—albeit a light one then—that was a foreshadowing of our future, fully unaware of how heavy that blanket would become.

R. Allie Fischman

LAST PURIM (7)

Last Purim we read the Megillah in the chapel of the synagogue, sixty joyful costumed people in a space for sixty people. Families, elders, young people swinging groggers taken from a community box, yelling BOO! whenever Haman's name was mentioned. No one was burdened with thinking of how we would say "Hag Purim Sameach" this year.

Steve Silbert

Purim masks #1



Illustration by R. Allie Fischman

Hilchot Purim

Anoint yourself
Take baths and showers
Let no one you love come close
For twelve months
Or more

Turn the world upside down
Let inside become outside
Let outside disappear
For twelve months
Or more

Cover your face,
Stop whistling, kissing, and singing
Speak calmly
For twelve months
Or more.

Put ash on your head
Bend over in mourning
Demand justice, give names to the loss
For twelve months
Or more

Send support and care
Carefully packaged
By essential strangers
For twelve months
Or more

Drink, even drink too much
Forget your sorrow
At least sometimes
For twelve months
Or more

Sit down, eat, and rest,
Let the sunbeams find you
Let food be a comfort
For twelve months
Or more

Dare to step into the closed chambers
Guarded spaces of the inner palace
Dare to reach out and touch
After twelve months
Or more.

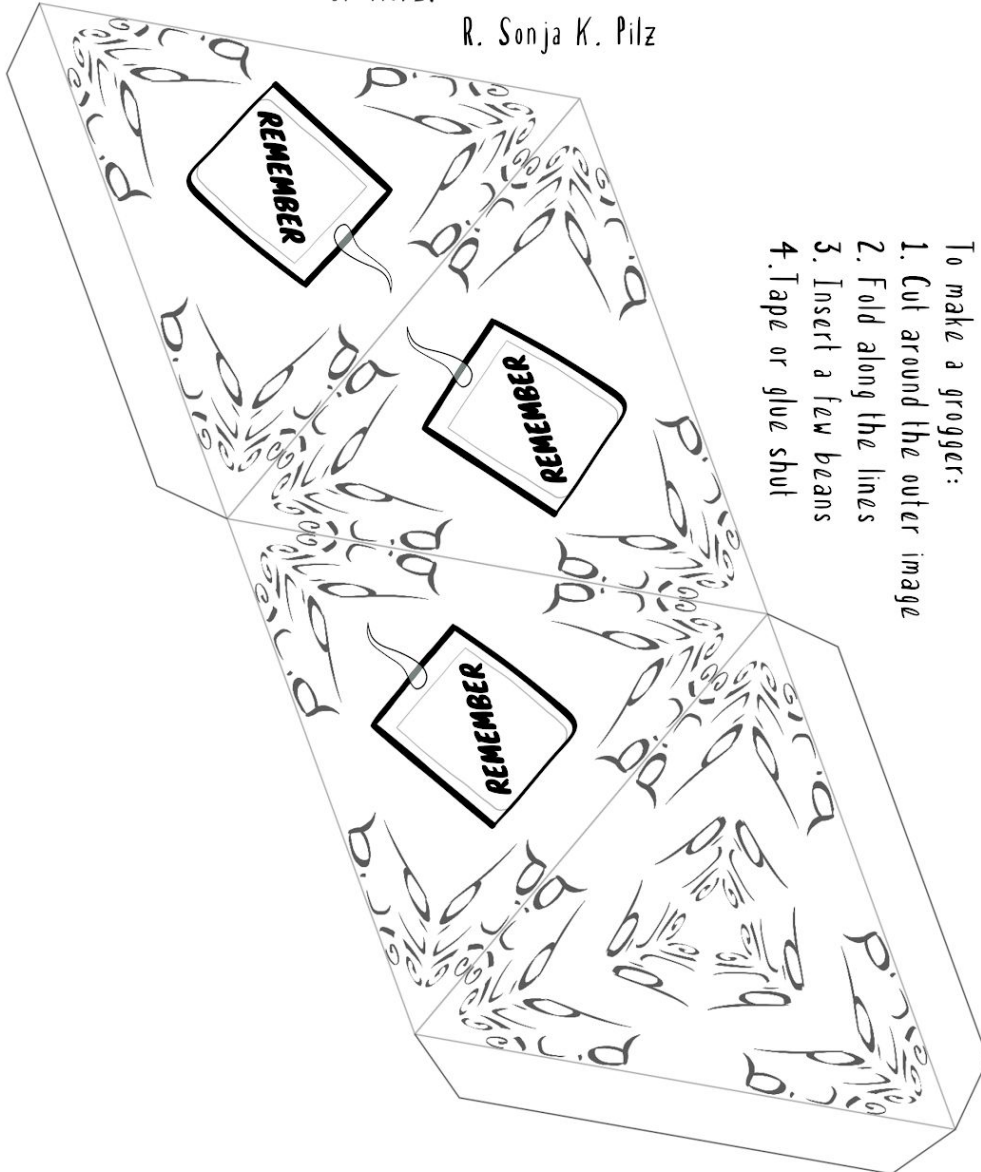
Remember that one day
The last day of the days before
Light a candle each year
For twelve months
Or more.

One day, some day,
We will make noise again
In the meanwhile, let's change the world quietly
For twelve months
Or more.

R. Sonja K. Pilz , PhD

Remember that one day
The last day of the days before
Light a candle each year
For twelve months
Or more.

R. Sonja K. Pilz



- To make a grogger:
1. Cut around the outer image
 2. Fold along the lines
 3. Insert a few beans
 4. Tape or glue shut

Illustration by Steve Silbert

AL HANISIM: UNMASKING THE FUTURE'S PAST

From the Year 2050 looking back on this time, for the children of our children.

על הנסים ועל הפְּרָקוֹן ועל הגְּבוּרוֹת ועל
הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת ועל הַנְּפִלְאוֹת שְׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ
בְּיָמֵי הַהֵם בְּזַמַּן הַזֶּה. We thank You for the miracles, redemption,
strengths, salvations, and wonders that You did for
our ancestors in those days at this season.

בְּיָמֵי אֲרָגוֹן הַנְּעָרִים הַגָּאִים וּשְׂבִיטוֹת שְׁנֵאָה
שֶׁבָקְשׁוּ לְהַשְׁמִיד בְּרַחוּבוֹת בְּבֵתַיִם וּבְאַמְנוֹת
הַשְּׁלֵטוֹן, לְהַרְגֹּ וּלְאַבֵּד אֶת אֲמַת הַמַּדְעָה,
הַמְּגוֹן, וְהַדְּמוֹקְרַטִיָּה. עַל דְּבַר הַמְּנַהֲיָנִים
לְעַגּוֹ וְהַתְּהַדְּרוֹ בְּלִבִּישֵׁת מַסְכוֹת שֶׁהֲצִילוּ
חַיִּים מִנְּעַר עַד זָקֵן, וְהַנִּיעוּ אֶת הַמַּגָּפָה
בְּאַרְצֵנוּ כְּיַד הַמָּוֶת. In the days of the Proud Boys and hateful tribalism
that sought destruction in our streets, homes and
halls of power – to murder and slay the truth of
science, diversity and democracy – at the word of
their leader, they mocked the wearing of masks
that saved lives both young and old, and propelled
plague through our land like the hand of death.

וְאַתָּה בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּים הַפְּרַתְּ אֶת עֲצָתוֹ,
וְקָלַקְלַתְּ אֶת מַחְשַׁבְתּוֹ, וְהִשְׁבֹּתְךָ צָדֵק
בְּאַרְצֵנוּ. לְמַדְתָּ אוֹתֵנוּ שֶׁכְּלָנוּ תְלוּיִים זֶה
בְּזֶה, שֶׁכְּלָנוּ עֲרָבִים זֶה בְּזֶה. בְּזָכוֹת זֶה,
תְּהִיא שְׂאֵנְחָנוּ מְזִינִים אֶת עֵץ הַחַיִּים
הַמְּשַׁתֵּף שְׁלָנוּ עִם אֲמַת הַמְּרַפָּא וְעִם שְׂמַחַה
לְזוֹן כָּל חַי. But in Your great mercy, You nullified his counsel
and frustrated his intention, and caused justice to
return to our land. You taught us that we all hang
together, that our fates are mixed together. In that
merit, let us nourish our shared Tree of Life with
healing truth and joy to sustain all life.

R. David Evan Markus

Part Two

Introduction: When the World Turned Upside Down on Us

One year ago, our lives changed.
Purim, holiday of role-reversals and subversion,
of play, carnival, and tipsy hugs,
Turned into the day we took up masks and veils—
not to show what we usually hide,
but to hide what we usually share.

Loneliness, addiction, open hatred, bigotry, and violence
have shattered for many the fundamental beliefs of our former lives.

Now we are looking at the ruins this year has left behind.
And we wonder: What kind of world will we build together now—
and how?

R. Sonja K. Pilz, PhD, for the [Bayit Liturgical Arts Working Group](#)

PURIM MASKS

My son thinks that people put masks on
Just as we put on jackets
My son still knows that it's us
No matter the cloth.

These days, I walk almost blindly
Watching the world
Through foggy glasses
Bumping and slipping on wintery roads.

I still put on make-up
Below my nose
I don't know if it's a habit
Or an attempt to cope.

One day, we will shed our apartment,
Like a layer of skin, dead and old.
Until that day comes,
We shall remain

Behind the veil.

Rabbi Sonja K. Pilz, PhD

Purim Masks #2



Illustration by R. Allie Fischman

WHEN ESTHER WENT IN

Esther moved to the palace.
When she went in, she left behind
the creek where she used to splash
and the friends who leapt with her

from rock to rock; the market, bustling
with spice merchants' songs
and the women selling bolts of cloth
with bangles up and down their arms.

Even the girls she used to know
became off-limits. Even Mordechai:
they speak now from opposite sides
of the carved harem wall, ornate

curlicues in golden stone. It's better
than nothing, but sometimes hearing
his voice from afar hurts more
than being apart in the first place.

When she went in, she didn't know
how she would miss the coffee shop
with its all-day backgammon players
and hum of conversation

or the casual way beloveds embrace,
togetherness so ordinary
she'd taken it for granted,
like air for breathing.

When she went in, she didn't know
that hiding herself away
was her path to saving lives: parents
and children, strangers and friends.

Esther found the resilience
to stay in, stay masked, stay hidden
until the time was right to shine.
So may it be for us.

R. Rachel Barenblat

PURIM POEM #2

I sat at the back of your throat
And you took my hand
It was dark
and after midnight
and stumbling up
from the table
I could not tell
your name from the one you gave me
My breath smells of wine
My pockets are filled with
Bad long sentences and
Some ancestor I don't know's old crumbs
Lock down is a lock Up
And I have a confession
I am begging You
to
Beat me down into submission
So I don't have to say the words everyone feels and doesn't say
My name is
Rabbah
I mean Rava
And
I am not alcoholic
I am a polemic
I hope my name rises with me in the morning

Devon Spier

ZERESH, THE KAREN OF SHUSHAN

Zeresh, Haman's wife,
Egging on her vile spouse,
Screaming, Kill the Jews!
The Shushan equivalent of Karen,
Screaming, Black men!
Dialing 911

About the bird watcher
Or the candy buyer
Or the driver
Or the walker
Or the swimmer
Or the runner
Or the sleeper
Or the voter.

Hag Purim Sameakh.

Trisha Arlin; illustration by Steve Silbert



THE 9TH CHAPTER: WE WON AND THEY LOST

And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, when the king's command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the opposite happened, and the Jews got their enemies in their power.

So what happens when we win?
Not by much
And in the nick of time
It so easily could have gone the other way
And though there's more of us
There's plenty of them
And they are cruel.
What to do?

For Mordecai was now powerful in the royal palace, and his fame was spreading through all the provinces; the man Mordecai was growing ever more powerful. So the Jews struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will upon their enemies.

Do we forgive and forget?
Do we try to change hearts and minds?
Or do we strike at our enemies with the sword?
Do we slay and destroy
Just like they were going to slay and destroy us?

*The king said to Queen Esther, "In the fortress Shushan alone the Jews have killed a total of five hundred men, as well as the ten sons of Haman. What then must they have done in the provinces of the realm! What is your wish now? It shall be granted you. And what else is your request? It shall be fulfilled."
"If it please Your Majesty," Esther replied, "let the Jews in Shushan be permitted to act tomorrow also as they did today; and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on the stake."*

Shall we be cruel?
Shall we impale their children on the metaphorical stake?
It's very tempting.

The same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another.

Weren't they stupid?
Aren't our comedians clever?
So do we laugh in the face of their grief
And celebrate their deaths and their disgraces?
But what is the line

Between satire and derision?
Between defense and revenge?
How do we resist answering hate for hate, violence for violence?
Do we try to reconcile?
Do we try to be nice no matter how awful they've been?
What if they're not interested in being nice, ever?
Can't it be enough to laugh at them,
Do we also have to slay and destroy them?

Blessed One-ness
What are our obligations here?
We won and they lost and we are glad.
Help us to remember their humanity,
Even if they can't remember ours,
While we party.
Hag Purim Sameakh.
Amen.

Trisha Arlin

All lines from the megillah cited above are from the JPS translation.

PURIM POEM #1

My clothes don't fit
(I'm told quarantine does that)
Except my grandfather's hat
Not the real one
I don't know my real one
My Jewishness rests
In the middle
Between the three points
of Haman's hat
Chosenness
Having others choose for me
and
Freely choosing

The miracle of
calamities
converting
converging

Yay.
Yay?
Boo.

Devon Spier

ON MASKS AND REVELATION

Torah begins בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים

In the beginning Elohim¹ created

God was the first to use they/them pronouns

And Elohim said, let us make people, in our own image²

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ

And the first people, created in the Divine image

Shone divine light

And didn't have to hide or mask or conceal their rainbow selves.

Prisms refracting holy hues across the spectrum of diversity.

But once we had skin and sex and then gender and clothes

We organized into roles

That became rigid and unforgiving

All of us, divine light, now hidden, concealed

Under the burden of the masks we wear

To live in our world

Labels covering us

To conceal and protect

And I'm not talking COVID

And the Divine was used

To justify the rules

For the labels and roles

To keep us in our places

But that isn't the whole story

At the full moon of Adar

We read a tale

Of hiding in plain sight,

About Esther אֶסְתֵּר, the concealed

In a מגילה *megillah* of revealing.

It opens at a huge party thrown by a joke of a king

Merriment all around

The king sends for his wife, who was entertaining her own delegation

Vashti was her name, another word play³

She turned him down

¹ Elohim - is in plural

² Genesis 1:26.

³ (ושתי- and drink)

That woman didn't mess around

Enter Esther, a replacement queen.
Her Jewishness hidden under her concealer
Until she had to come out
Throw off her mask
Reveal!
To save her people

Tradition teaches
"It is permitted [for a man] to dress as a woman on Purim."⁴
Moses Isserles⁵ got it,
*'dressing up in masks on Purim, he said,
a man wearing the attire of a woman,
and a woman wearing the accessories of a man—
there is no prohibition of this,
since what they are intending is merely joy.'*

Though I wouldn't say merely
We take it to the next level

On Purim our masks reveal
That masks are just that, masks
That we are more than our masks
That we are all Divine light
Divine image
Divine.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה יְהוֹ"ה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם חָכֵם הַרְזִים

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, chacham harazeem.

Blessed are You, Yah, our Elohim, Sovereign of all, knower of secrets.

Rabbi Dara Lithwick

⁴ Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayyim 696:8).

⁵ 16th century Polish rabbi.