

## Purim: Hidden Identities

### Introduction

One of the central ideas in the book of Esther is the concept of concealed identities. The Jews are spread out amongst the Persian Empire, Haman calls for their destruction, and little does he know that the queen herself is a Jew. It is a story of overcoming a tyrannical empire and using identity to bolster and empower the community; very similar to what the Soviet Jews faced.

### Objectives

Explore how the themes of Purim are reflected in the plight of Soviet Jewry.

Big Ideas	Jews are responsible for one another (solidarity).
	You can make a difference.
Content	To explain the Jewish values that led Jewish people to fight for Soviet Jewish rights.
Meaning	To reflect on the power of a common (Jewish) voice.

**Duration:** one class

### Materials

- Purim Celebration Pictures
- Text Study Work Sheet



**Procedure:** Use the photos as a trigger to begin discussing Purim in the Soviet Union as well as outward versus concealed identities. Then, with those topics in mind, read the texts below to make the connection to Esther's actions in the Purim story.

**1.Trigger:** In Refuseniks photos archives, there are many pictures of Purim celebrations. Take a look at some of this pictures from different cities found on the "Purim Celebration Pictures"

- What are common features of the celebrations?
- What is different in the pictures?
- Why do you think Purim is a holiday that was so inspiring to Refuseniks?

**2. Text Study:** Read the Text together on the "Text Study Work Sheet"

**Guided Discussion:**

**The role of clothing in masking and revealing identity in the Scroll of Esther**

- What does it mean for Mordecai to wear royal robes? Sackcloth?
- What does it mean for Esther to hide her identity and to wear royal robes?
- What does Mordechai say to Esther to get her to take action?
- What themes do you see in the book of Esther that are reflected in the movement to free Soviet Jewry?
- What themes do you see in the book of Esther that are reflected in the conditions under which the Refuseniks lived?
- Do you think that the people in the photos are truly full of the joy of Purim? Or are they masking something?
- Is it ok to hide behind our troubles once in a while or is this outward celebration of joy a farce?
- Who is Purim for, according to the photos?
- Do the celebrations in the photos look similar or different from what you know or do?

## Purim in Real Life

- When do you choose to wear outward symbols of being Jewish, like a kippah or a Star of David necklace? Is it important to you to be identified as a Jew?
- Do you ever feel like you don't want other people to know you are Jewish? Why not?
- Have you ever taken on a cause because you felt that you were in the right time or place? What was that experience like?
- Have you ever advocated for something, knowing that it put you in danger or in an awkward or uncomfortable position? Why did you do it? How did you feel inside? What was the outcome? (examples: standing up for someone who was being bullied, defending a cause or opinion when you know you are in the minority)

### 3. **Concluding Text:** Read the following text to conclude the lesson:

"On Purim, Jews dress up and wear masks that change faces etched in pain and suffering into joy and frivolity. On the surface, it seems that Purim involves an escape from reality, one moment in which we can mask the pain and difficulties we experience and don fanciful carnival masks and costumes. All is turned on its head on Purim; even gender roles are ignored, and men and women can dress up as the other.

Yet in a deeper way, this Jewish carnival experience allows us to challenge the inevitability of things as they are inherited identities and fates. And in so doing, Purim provides us with the hope that the garments we put on that seem only to mask our present realities can reveal the deep-seated consciousness of our potential for change, our ability to bring happiness and fulfillment to our lives.

Purim's masks may seem to conceal, if just for a moment, the chaos and pain of our present lives and enable us to escape this reality, but they may really offer us the chance to don serious masks of conscious determination to bring the light of the Divine into our world. Yes, God may not be mentioned in the entire book of Esther, and some have seen this as an intimation of the existence of sheer chaos in the world, where anarchy is at play. Yet, we may ask what lies beneath a story that intimates the absence of God and meaning, and the holiday of Purim, which is about frivolity and play.

Underneath the garment of the story is perhaps a glimpse of the existence of a force in the universe that can help us move beyond who we are and what our lives presently are, and enable us to become who we aspire to be." Cohen, D. N. J. (2012). *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves: Interpreting Biblical Texts on Clothing & Identity* (1 edition). Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights.



**4.Extension:** The Purim Spiel is a time honored tradition where people dress up and satirize the world around them. If you look carefully at the pictures included in this unit, many of them are from Purim Spiels.

Were they mocking their own community, life behind the iron curtain, or simply retelling the story of Esther?

It is hard to know. But you can write your own Purim Spiel too.

Look at this site for inspiration: <http://www.jewishagency.org/purim/content/24414> .

You can record your Spiel and share it with others to increase Purim cheer around the world.