

Purim Masquerade: Unmasking the Origins

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Purim is our holiday of dressing up and having fun. We all associate the day with images of masks and costumes. Parents and children spend time deciding upon themes around which to base their colorful and creative attire. What is the source for costume wearing and does it pose any halachic issues?

Surprisingly, the practice of wearing masks and costumes on Purim is not mentioned in the Talmud, Midrash or Geonim. The first to record the custom is R. Yehuda ben Eliezer ha-Levi Minz, (c. 1405-1508) *Teshuvot Mahari Minz* no. 15; however, he does not provide the origin or reasons for dressing up in costume.

There are those who find allusions in the custom of masquerading to the Purim story. R. Eliyahu Shapira (1660-1712), *Eliya Rabba*, O.C. 696, assumed that by wearing costumes, we commemorate the moment that Mordecai was dressed in regal clothing and led by Haman through the city. R. Menashe Klein (1924-2011), *Teshuvot Mishne Halachot*, 7:92, says that dressing up is a way to remember the miracle of Purim. When Achashverosh agreed to Haman's plan of Jewish genocide, many Jews dressed as non-Jews. When the plan was reversed and the Jews were permitted to attack their enemies, many of the non-Jews disguised themselves, pretending to be Jewish in order to evade death. This idea is alluded to in Megillat Esther:

... And many of the people of the land professed themselves to be Jewish, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

Esther 8:17

... וְרַבִּים מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ מִתְיַהְדִּים כִּי־נִפְלַ
פְּחַד־הַיְהוּדִים עָלֵיהֶם.
אֶסְתֵּר ח:יז

They pretended to convert to Judaism, but didn't actually. Since they hid their identity and masqueraded as Jews, we commemorate this miracle by wearing costumes and hiding our identity. Another reason is given by R. Ephrayim Greenblatt (1932-2014), *Teshuvot Revivot Ephrayim*, 6:386, who assumed that the tradition is based on a halacha found in the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*, 694:3, that whoever stretches their hand out on Purim to ask for charity is given money. On Purim we mask our identity so that the poor who go around collecting will not be embarrassed.

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Costumes: Permitted or Prohibited?

While Ashkenazic *poskim* permit one to wear costumes on Purim, many Sephardic *poskim* were against dressing up of any kind on Purim. R. Yosef Messas (1892-1974) and R. Meir Mazuz (b. 1945), *Sansan L'Yair*, no. 12, believed that it is prohibited based on *chukat hagoyim* (following in the ways of the gentiles). They concluded that the origins of this custom stem from the pre-Lent festivity of Carnavale. [R. Yaakov Kanievsky (Steipler Gaon) (1899–1985) *Orchot Rabbeinu*, 3:104, disagreed with this notion and to the contrary said it was the gentiles who got it from the Jews.] R. Messas speculated that the Mahari Minz allowed it only for young children and thus it is completely prohibited for adults. Nonetheless, R. Messas concluded that even young children should not dress up in costume. The notion of wearing costumes on Purim is not mentioned in the works of the famed Sephardic rabbi, R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (1832-1909). What is mentioned in his *Ben Ish Chai* (*Parshat Ki Tisa*, no. 22) is that the common practice on Purim is to wear Shabbat clothes. However, R. Ovadia Yosef (1920-2013), *Chazon Ovadia, Purim* p. 199, upholds the tradition to wear costumes on Purim and does not see any reason to prohibit it.

May One Wear Clothes of the Opposite Gender?

At first glance, there seems to be a biblical prohibition against wearing clothes or costumes of the opposite gender, as the Torah states:

A man's attire shall not be on a woman, nor may a man wear a woman's garment because whoever does these [things] is an abomination to the Lord, your God.

Devarim 22:5

לא יִהְיֶה כְּלֵי גֵבֶר עַל אִשָּׁה וְלֹא יִלְבַּשׁ
גֵבֶר שְׂמֹלֶת אִשָּׁה כִּי תוֹעֵבֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
כָּל עֲשֵׂה אֵלֶּה.
דְּבָרִים כ"ב:ה

The scope of the prohibition is a matter of debate recorded in the Talmud, *Nazir* 59a. According to the Tanna Kama, one violates the prohibition only if the intent is to blend in and intermingle with the opposite gender. R. Eliezer ben Yaakov says that wearing any article of clothing from the opposite gender violates this prohibition, regardless of intent. The Rambam, *Hilchot Avodah Zara* 12:10, and *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 192:1, follow R. Eliezer ben Yaakov's opinion that wearing women's clothing of any kind is completely prohibited.

The Mahari Mintz (*ibid*) witnessed that on Purim people dressed up as the opposite gender and that the great rabbis of his time did not protest against such behavior:

It was seen by the great and pious people whom I was raised with, who saw their sons, daughters, grooms and brides wearing masks and cross-dressed. Heaven forbid if they violated a prohibition, heaven forbid they would keep quiet and not protest, but they must have been based on evidence to completely permit this...

מה ראו על ככה גדולי' וחסידים עולם שנתגדלתי
אצלם אשר ראו בניהם ובנותיהם חתניהם וכלתיהם
לובשים אותן פרצופים ושינוי בגדיהם מבגדי איש
לבגדי אשה וכן להיפך. ואם היה ח"ו נדנוד עבירה
חלילה וחס להם לשתוק ולא ימחו וק"ש וק"ו
באיסור לאו אלא ודאי היה להם ראייה וסמך שהיתר
גמור הוא ...

The Mahari Mintz justified the custom by inferring from the *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* that the violation to cross-dress is intended to prevent licentious behavior. Therefore, cross-dressing on Purim which is done only for amusement and has no illicit intentions would not be prohibited.

In addition, the Mahari Mintz argued that garments of the opposite gender is considered normal clothing on Purim and would not fall under the prohibition of cross-dressing. This idea is based on a comment of Tosfot (cited in *Orchot Chaim, Hilchot Avodah Zarah* no. 6) that discusses the permissibility of a man looking in a mirror. They note that the Yerushalmi prohibits this for being in the category of “wearing women’s clothing,” that is engaging in an activity usually perceived as a women’s activity. They claim that it would be permitted, however, in a city where the norm for men is to look in a mirror as well. Since on Purim people cross-dress to add joy and laughter, it would be considered normal to do so on Purim and therefore permitted.

The Rama (1520-1572) in *Orach Chaim* 696:8, codified the Mahari Mintz’s position as halacha and permits one to cross dress on Purim:

And the custom to wear masks/costumes on Purim, and a man wearing a woman’s dress and a woman wearing man’s clothing, is not prohibited since the intention is for mere joy; [and for this reason] also rabbinic sha’atnez (a prohibited mixture of wool and linen) [is permitted]. And there are those who prohibit this and the custom is to follow the first opinion.

ומה שנהגו ללבוש פרצופים בפורים, וגבר לובש שמלת אשה ואשה כלי גבר, אין איסור בדבר מאחר שאין מכוונין אלא לשמחה בעלמא; וכן בלבישת כלאים דרבנן. וי”א דאסור אבל המנהג כסברא הראשונה.

Despite of the Rama’s leniency, the *Mishna Berura* 696:30, cited the *Pri Migadim, Mishbetzot Zahav* 696:4, that while dressing completely like a member of the opposite gender is prohibited even on Purim, one should not protest against those who put on only a single article of the opposite gender’s clothing since people can still tell the gender of the wearer. But the *Mishna Berura* stated that the *Shlah* and *Kenneset HaGedolah* were against such a compromise and prohibited wearing even one article of clothing.

There was clear opposition to the position of the Mahari Mintz and the Rama. R. Shlomo Efraim Luntschitz (*Kli Yakar*, 1550-1619) was a contemporary of the Rama and lived in Prague. In his book of sermons, *Olelot Efraim*, no. 309, R. Luntschitz decried what he saw as a faulty practice of men dressing as women and questioned the source for such a practice. [Presumably either he did not see the Mahari Mintz or he disagreed with him and chose not to address it.] R. Eliezer ben Samuel of Metz (12th c.), *Sefer Yereim* n. 96, prohibited dressing like the opposite gender even if done temporarily and for entertainment purposes. R. Dovid ha-Levi Segal (1586-1667), *Turei Zahav Yoreh Deah* 182:4, after citing the Rama’s lenient view quotes his father-in-law, R. Yoel Sirkis (1561-1640) the *Bayit Chadash* who was against the practice of cross-dressing on Purim. The *Taz* writes:

And my father-in-law [Bach] wrote that it is prohibited ... and one who listens [to the Bach] will be blessed because many problems are created G-d forbid when one cannot differentiate between man and woman.

ומורי וחמי ז”ל כתב שיש לאסור את זה... והשומע לאסור תבוא עליו ברכה כי יש הרבה מכשולות חס ושלום מזה כשהולכין ביחד בלי היכר איש או אשה

The *Bayit Chadash, Yoreh Deah* 182, went so far as to say that had the Mahari Mintz seen R. Eliezer Metz’s strong opposition to any form of cross-dressing then he would have also prohibited it, even if worn on Purim.

R. Ovadia Yosef, *Teshuvot Yechave Da'at* 5:50 was adamantly opposed to wearing clothes of the opposite gender and maintained that the prohibition cannot be ignored even in order to bring more joy to the Purim celebration. He noted that the Chida, *Shiyurei Beracha*, Y.D. 182:3, cited a *Teshuvot ha-Rambam* who prohibited a common practice in Egypt to cross dress at weddings for amusement and laughter. Even though it was done to increase joy at a wedding, the Rambam succeeded in abolishing it completely. Thus, R. Ovadia Yosef concluded that this practice should not be brought back even if it will add joy to the Purim festivities.

R. Ovadia Yosef (ibid.) was also strongly opposed to children wearing clothes of the opposite gender as it sends a bad message to the children. R. Ovadia noted that both the Rambam, *Hilchot Ma'achalot Assurot*, 17:27, and the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 343, wrote that as part of *chinuch*, a parent is prohibited to give a young child non-kosher food even if the food is only rabbinically prohibited. According to R. Ovadia Yosef, cross-dressing is prohibited for adults and therefore is also extended to children of any age. However, R. Yaakov Kanievsky in *Orchot Rabbeinu* volume 3 pg. 60 and R. Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986), *Iggrot Moshe* E.H. 4:62:4, allowed young children who have not reached the age of *chinuch* to wear clothing of the opposite gender.

Conclusions

The custom of wearing masks and costumes and people dressing up as the opposite gender is first recorded in the 15th century. The Talmud Yerushalmi, *Baba Metzia* 7:1, states “*minhag mevatel halacha*,” that a *minhag* (custom) overrides halacha. R. Ovadia Yosef (ibid) noted that this statement only applies to a *minhag* that has consistent rabbinic approval throughout every generation. As noted, despite the Rama's leniency, rabbis throughout the centuries were reluctant to approve this *minhag* and override the prohibition of cross-dressing. While Ashkenazic poskim have allowed costumes, few permitted cross-dressing for adults and even for children who have reached the age of *chinuch*. Even if one relies on Rav Ovadia Yosef's conclusion that costumes are permitted for Sephardim, it is clearly prohibited for Sephardim to cross-dress, whether they are adults or children.