



אדר תשפ"ג | March 2023

### חגים ומועדים – Holidays and Occasions

## Purim Exposé: **מַסְכָּה** and **תְּחַפְּשֵׁת** Unmasked

The noun **מַסְכָּה** occurs over two dozen times in the Bible, but not in its contemporary sense ('mask'). What's behind the modern **מַסְכָּה**?

In the Bible the word **מַסְכָּה** usually denotes a cast-metal object – generally an idol, as in **עֲגֹל מַסְכָּה** ('a molten calf,' Ex. 32:4). Other Biblical words with the same root include **נָסַךְ**, 'libation,' and **נָסַךְ**, 'to pour [a libation]; to melt [metal]' (in **מַסְכָּה** the **נ** of the root **נס"ך** has assimilated to the following consonant: \**mansekha*→*massekha*).



In Isaiah 25:7, many understand **מַסְכָּה** as a covering: **וּבִלַע בָּהֶר הַזֶּה פְּנֵי-הַלְלוֹת | הַלְלוֹת עַל-כָּל-הָעַמִּים** ('And He will destroy on this mountain the veil cast over all the peoples and the **covering** spread over all the nations'). However, for a *face*-covering the Bible uses other words, as in **וַיִּתְחַפֵּשֶׁת בְּאַפָּר עַל-עֵינָיו** 'he disguised himself with his/an **אָפֶר** over his eyes' (1 Kings 20:38), and **וַיִּתֵּן עַל-פְּנֵי מִסּוֹה** 'he put a **veil** over his face' (Ex. 34:33).

A 1914 list of Hebrew words for household items published by the Hebrew Language Committee (AHL's precursor) brings **מַסְכָּה** for 'blanket' (alongside **שְׂמִיכָה**, the word used today), as per Isaiah 28:20: **כִּי קָצֵר הַמַּצֵּעַ מֵהִשְׁתַּרֵּעַ, וְהַמַּסְכָּה צְרִיבָה כְּהִתְכַנֵּס; וְהַכֹּסֶה קָצֵר מִלְּפָנֵי הַלְּפָנִים** (JPS: 'The couch is too short for stretching out,/ And the **cover** too narrow for curling up!').

Whence the **מַסְכָּה** of Purim and pandemics? Like several other words of ancient pedigree, **מַסְכָּה** owes its contemporary sense to a foreign word of similar sound and meaning. Use of **מַסְכָּה** for

'mask' dates at least to the late 1800s: an 1879 article mentions a **מִשְׁתֵּה מַסְכָּה** (today: **מָסְכוֹת**) and adds the gloss **מַאֲסַקְעֵנְבַּאָלֶל** (i.e., *Maskenball*, German for 'masked ball,' from *Maske*, 'mask'). In the dictionaries of the Academy and the Language Committee, the word **מַסְכָּה** first appears opposite "mask" in a list of theater terms from 1940.

אחד בן עשרים ושתים שנה התפלץ במשתה המסכה (מאסקענ-  
באלל) לראות מסכה מתחפשת בעור דוב ויוכה בשגעון, ומן

What of **תְּחַפְּסֵת** ('disguise, costume')? A modern coinage in the same pattern as **תְּלַבְּשֵׁת** ('clothing'), it is based on the reflexive verb **הִתְחַפֵּס**, 'to disguise oneself,' as in **וַיִּתְחַפֵּס שְׂאוּל וַיִּלְבַּשׁ בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים**, 'and Saul **disguised himself**, putting on other clothes' (1 Sam. 28:8), and **וַיִּתְחַפֵּס בְּאֶפֶר עַל-עֵינָיו** (above). The innovation **תְּחַפְּסֵת** appears (debuts?) in the 1927 German-Hebrew dictionary by Laser and [Torczyner \(Tur-Sinai\)](#), where it translates *Verkleidung* ('disguise').

**הִתְחַפֵּס** is thought to be related to **חָפַס** ('to seek, search for'), also of Biblical vintage. After all, disguise conceals your identity, requiring others to seek it out or to search for you. In contemporary Hebrew, **חָפַס** also means 'to disguise [someone].'

[להרחבה באתר האקדמיה](#)

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### מנחים לענין – Timely Terms

## הִלְטָה – Cloaking [n.]

The term "cloaking" refers to concealing something by rendering it invisible (the ultimate disguise), whether by means of a magical cloak or a real-world device that causes light to pass around the target object. The Hebrew parallel **הִלְטָה**, from the root **ל"ט**, is related to **הִלִּיט** ('to cover, wrap, envelop, conceal') and **לוּט** ('enveloped, concealed; enclosed'), both of which date to the Bible: 1 Kings 19:13 says of Elijah, **וַיִּלְט פָּנָיו בְּאֶדְרָתוֹ**, 'he **wrapped/covered** his face in his cloak,' in the presence of the Almighty; and in 1 Sam. 21:10 the priest says Goliath's sword is **לוּטָה בְּשִׁמְלָה**, 'wrapped in a cloth.' Credit for the Hebrew term **הִלְטָה**, which the Academy approved last autumn, belongs to the late Danny Gonen (shown below; photo courtesy of the family).

The term came to the Academy's attention in a letter from Moshe Gamliel. He related that in 2015, during his engineering studies, he'd been sitting beside his friend Danny Gonen when a lecturer had discussed cloaking and had remarked, "We don't have a good word in Hebrew for this term." In response Gonen had said to Gamliel, "It should be called **הִלְטָה**," citing Biblical sources such as **לוּטָה בְּשִׁמְלָה**. A few months later Gonen, then 25, was murdered in a terror attack. Gamliel was now contacting the Academy to submit the proposal in Gonen's name, he explained.

The Academy took up the gauntlet and convened a group of experts to recommend a Hebrew term for “cloaking.” After considering הלטה and a few other suggestions, the experts decided upon הלטה. At the plenum session in November 2022, the Academy voted to adopt הלטה for “cloaking,” making it official.

Gonen’s mother, after learning of the decision, told an interviewer that she was “moved to tears” and full of gratitude to Gamliel and to the Academy. “For us Danny has made it into the history books.”

[להרחבה באתר האקדמיה](#)



### Idioms and Expressions – מטבעות לשון

#### בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי



### שמות ומשמעויות – What's in a Name?

#### Simḥa – שמחה



The Aramaic idiom **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי** (literally: **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי**, 'with bared head') goes as far back as Targum Onkelos, an ancient translation of the Pentateuch into Aramaic. How does contemporary Hebrew usage of this expression compare to its use in the Targum?

In the Targum, **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי** parallels the three instances of the Hebrew idiom **בְּיַד רָמָה** (literally: 'with a high hand'), exchanging the metaphor of the high hand for that of the bared head. Ex. 14:8 and Num. 33:3 say that the children of Israel left Egypt **בְּיַד רָמָה**, understood variously as 'boldly,' 'defiantly,' 'fearlessly,' 'triumphantly.' Some of these interpretations seem plausible for **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי** as well: in a culture that regarded covering the head as normative and respectful behavior, a bared head could represent boldness or defiance. Num. 15:27–31 contrasts the case of someone who transgresses by mistake with that of someone who acts **בְּיַד רָמָה** – i.e., breaks the law intentionally, deliberately. Here we may understand **בְּיַד רָמָה** as 'defiantly' or 'brazenly' – also plausible as a reading of **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי**.

In the book of Esther we find a rough antonym of **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי**. After being compelled to parade and honor his nemesis Mordechai, Haman returns home, morose and **חָפוּי ראשׁ** (literally: '[with his] head covered,' 6:12). Here the covered head apparently signifies humiliation or the like, the opposite of the brazen or defiant stance symbolized by the bared head in **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי**.

Fast-forward to the present. In modern Hebrew, **בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי** serves primarily for 'publicly' or 'openly.' Although this usage differs from that of the Targum, we can see a connection between the two: one who behaves defiantly or brazenly generally does so openly, if not publicly.

The noun **שְׂמֵחָה** ('happiness') occurs more than 90 times in the Bible, and its corresponding verb **שָׂמַח** ('to rejoice, be happy, be glad') – over 150 times.

Comparison to cognates of **שָׂמַח** in other Semitic languages suggests that the verb's meaning evolved from one related to rising and flourishing (a meaning reminiscent of the similar-sounding verb **צָמַח**, 'to grow'). For example, the Arabic verb **شَمَخَ** (*shamakha*) means 'to be tall,' and Akkadian **šamāhu** means 'to grow, flourish.' Proverbs 13:9 provides evidence of this meaning in Hebrew by placing **שָׂמַח** in opposition to **דָּעָר** ('to go out, be extinguished'): **אור צְדִיקִים יִשְׂמַח וְנֵר רְשָׁעִים יִדָּעַר** – 'the light of the righteous **flourishes**, whereas the lamp of the wicked **goes out**.'

Though used as a given name for both genders, **שְׂמֵחָה** is typically a boys' name among Ashkenazi Jews and a girls' name among Sephardic Jews. The girls' name enjoyed moderate popularity in Israel during the 1950s and 1960s but subsequently dropped in frequency and continued to decline over the following decades. The boys' name, formerly not so common, experienced a four-year heyday starting in 1992 – the year of the death of Gerrer rebbe Rabbi Simcha Bunim Alter – and remains a fairly popular choice to this day.

Before Esther foils Haman's plot, he is **שָׂמַח** ('happy,' Esther 5:9); afterwards (8:16, 17) **שְׂמֵחָה** shifts to the Jews (**לְיְהוּדִים הַיְתֵה אוֹרָה**) and becomes a permanent fixture of the Jewish calendar through the establishment of Purim and Shushan Purim as **יְמֵי מְשֻׁתָּה וְשְׂמֵחָה** ('days of feast and happiness,' 9:22). A Talmudic sage says we increase our **שְׂמֵחָה** from the beginning of Adar (Bavli Ta'anit 29a). Happy Adar!

כנוס על מפעלות אליעזר בן-יהודה

Conference Examines Work of Ben-Yehuda



AHL joined forces with the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities to cosponsor a conference examining the work of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (who spearheaded the revival of spoken Hebrew) and his contemporaries. The talks explored topics such as Ben-Yehuda's opponents, his monumental dictionary, and the language of Bialik and Yellin; the speakers included several AHL members, including AHL president Prof. Aharon Maman. The event, held on February 20, 2023, marked the centennial of Ben-Yehuda's death.

[לתוכנית המלאה ולצפייה](#)

מרכז התרבות וההדרכה החדש פתח את שעריו

AHL Opens New Educational Center



The Academy's new Eliezer and Hemda Ben-Yehuda Cultural and Educational Center opened its doors in January 2023. It offers guided tours, talks, and a variety of activities aimed at cultivating interest in the Hebrew language, increasing knowledge of its history and development since Biblical times, and stimulating reflection upon issues of language and identity. The Center is accepting reservations for groups of students in grades 8–12 as it gears up to host a wide range of audiences. In February it welcomed a contingent from the 2023 convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Contact the Center to inquire about a visit.

[למידע נוסף על מרכז התרבות וההדרכה](#)

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