

“GROWING INTO THE MASK”

The wonderful Max Beerbohm once wrote a story called “The Happy Hypocrite.” It tells of a Lord George who fell in love with a performer named Jenny. She avoids him because he has a terrible reputation, which is thoroughly deserved. Moreover, his unpleasant face reflects his dissolute life.

Lord George begins to see himself through Jenny’s eyes and becomes disgusted with his own appearance. He commissions a famous mask maker to make him a mask that will look beautiful and good, so cleverly fitted that no one will realize it is not his real face. Wearing the mask, he proposes, is accepted, and changes his life to live happily with Jenny. At the close of the story, a former mistress exposes Lord George and he is forced to remove the mask. It turns out that his real face has conformed to the mask -- he appears both beautiful and good.

Beerbohm’s fantasy rests on a fundamental principle of Jewish practice. We must act not only out of who we are, but who we wish to become. Each is shaper of his or her own soul. Goodness, as the philosopher William James insisted, can be a habit. The Talmud teaches that often we do something for an external reason -- applause, wealth, ego -- but if it is a good action, it will seep inside and change us, and we will do it lishma, for its own sake. In time underneath the mask of goodness, we do indeed become good.