Costumes and Customs
Timely Torah, Sunday 10 March, 5779

Purim and Fat Tuesday

1. "Why Do Jews Dress Up for Purim?"
Haaretz, Haaretz, Mar 01 2015

Something borrowed, something Lent? The custom seems to have arisen in 13th century Italy, as festivities and masquerading escalated towards Shrove Tuesday.

The most visible sign that Purim has arrived is that Israelis go to work wearing costumes. They dress up to synagogue, the kids dress up for school and everyone dresses up for costume parties. Haaretz employees take this custom quite seriously, showing up at the news desk wearing anything from silly wigs to Batman ears and cape. But why?
Dressing up, costumes, and masks aren't mentioned in the Book of Esther. There is no indication that anyone ever dressed up for Purim in the Mishnah, Talmud, or in the literature of the Gaonim. Nor is the practice so much as mentioned in the writings of Rashi and Maimonides in the High Middle Ages. So where did it come from?

The earliest reference to dressing up on Purim is in a poem by Provençal Jewish writer Kalonymus ben Kalonymus in the 14th century. Kalonymus had strong ties with Italian Jewry and evidently learned of the practice while living in Rome. He seems to be critical of the practice, though he does not specify why.

As for masks on Purim, we find the first record in the 15th century, by the Paduan rabbi Judah Minz, who is also critical of the practice.

So, it seems that the tradition originated with Italian Jews in the 14th century. But why actually would they start dressing up on Purim?
The custom seems to have originated in the Italian practice starting in the 13th century, of holding carnivals in the days leading up to Lent. They were especially festive on "Fat Tuesday," (also called "Shrove Tuesday"), the day before Lent began.

These wild pre-Lenten carnivals included masquerading, and happened to take place more or less on the same time as Purim, give or take a few weeks, due to differences between the Catholic solar calendar and the Jewish Lunar calendar.

Since Jews were already holding banquets on Purim since the time of the Talmud, banquets that included heavy drinking, it isn’t surprising that some of the carnival atmosphere got infused into the merrymaking of Purim. And with time, the tradition of dressing up on Purim spread from Italy to other Jewish communities around the world - despite the fact that rabbis often remained critical of the practice.

Rabbis were especially appalled by men dressing up as women and vice versa, since cross-dressing is explicitly forbidden in the Bible (Deuteronomy 22:5): “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment.” Yet some Jews continued to cross-dress on Purim, leading some rabbis to allow the practice on Purim despite the biblical censure.
2. Jewish Encyclopedia, “PURIM” - Masquerading

Observance of Purim in a German Synagogue of the Eighteenth Century.
(From Bodenschatz, "Kirchliche Verfassung," 1748.)
One of the strangest species of merrymaking was the custom of masquerading, which was first introduced among the Italian Jews about the close of the fifteenth century under the influence of the Roman carnival. From Italy this custom spread over all countries where Jews lived, except perhaps the Orient (Steinschneider, l.c. p. 181; xlvi. 469, No. 9). The first among Jewish authors to mention this custom is Judah Minz (d. 1508 at Venice) in his Responsa, No. 17, quoted by Isserles on Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 696, 8. He expresses the opinion that, since the purpose of the masquerade is only merrymaking, it should not be considered a transgression of the Biblical law regarding dress. Although some rigorous authorities issued prohibitions against this custom (comp. Isaiah Horowitz, "Shene Luḥot ha-Berit," 261b, Amsterdam, 1653), the people did not heed them, and the more lenient view prevailed (comp. Isserles, l.c., and Lampronti, l.c.). The custom still obtains among the Orthodox Jews of the eastern parts of Europe. Boys and girls walk from house to house in grotesque masks and indulge in all kinds of jollity. As a rule, they sing some comic doggerel, e.g., "heut' is Purim, morgen is aus, gebt mir a Kreuzer, und werft mich hinaus"; and they are often given a few coins (comp. Steinschneider, l.c. xlvi. 176, 182).

Looking at the Sources

3. Even Bochan, page 30
Kalonymus ben Kalonymus ben Meir Arles, 1286 – died after 1328, 1314 Kalonymus settled at Avignon, France
4. Responsa, R. Yehuda Mintz (Mahari Mintz), Responsum 15
1405 – 1508 Was the Rabbi in Mainz, Italy to Padua

Lehalacha

5. Darchei Moshe, OC 696

6. Bach, YD 182
7. Ramo, OC 796

Other Sources
8. Maharil - we see it isn’t just cross dressing. It seems to be garment focused.
Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin, 1365 – September 14, 1427, Mainz, Germany
Grave of Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin in Worms, Germany
9. Maaseh Rokeiach, Introduction - We see it is in Egypt in the 11th century and this isn’t Catholic areas.
Mas’ud Hai Rakkach, 18th century Sephardi Chacham and spiritual leader of the Jewish community in Tripoli, Libya.
This section is quoted in the name of Rav Avraham ben HaRambam

10. Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 64b

אמר רב יהודה אבינו: חAppDelegate מ namoro היהודים... והدور הקצרים והמלים郑州 החכים ארבע עשרהגלעד נמי אמירות דבוריא
 gemara

§ Rav Yehuda says: One is not liable for passing his child through fire to Molekh unless he passes him in the typical manner of passing. The Gemara asks: What is considered the typical manner of passing? Abaye says: The child is taken by foot along a latticework [sirega] of bricks in the middle, between the fire on this side and the fire on that side.

Rava says: The typical manner of passing is like the leaps of children on Purim. It was customary to light a bonfire on Purim inside a pit, and children would amuse themselves by leaping over the bonfires. Passing one’s child over a fire in such a fashion is the typical manner of passing a child over to Molekh.

11. Rashi, ad loc.

12. Aruch, Erech

R. Natan ben Yechiel of Rome, c. 1035 – 1106
13. Ohr Yisrael Journal, Volume 7, Rav Gedaliah Oberlander

Rav Yaakov Trump
Clothes and the Megillah

14. Esther 4:1

When Mordecai learned all that had happened, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly,

15. Esther 8:15

Mordecai left the king’s presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries.

16. Minhag Yisrael Torah
R. Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, was born in Żmigród, Poland in 1748 and died in Mezhbizh, Russian Empire (now Ukraine) in 1825.