

Metzora, pandemics, and us
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This week's Torah portions, Tazria and Metzora, are gross. Really, they are unlike other parts of our sacred text. We have vivid descriptions of rashes, swellings, and skin discolorations. But it's not limited to skin but also how streaky green or red mildew or fungus can spread in cloth and even on walls. And lastly, we have a section dealing with discharge from one's sexual organs such as menstrual blood and seminal emissions. Hmm! That's appetizing!

The main affliction is *Tzarat* that comes to be understood as leprosy. When the Greeks translated our Bible, they gave the word 'lepra' for *tzarat* according to Gunther Plaut's Torah commentary, even though it really isn't clear what *tzarat* is. Plaut writes that "True leprosy is now referred to as Hansen's disease after the nineteenth century Norwegian physician who identified the microorganism that causes it. It is not highly contagious, and it develops slowly. Among its symptoms are changes of color and growths on the skin and a loss of sensitivity to pain. In advanced cases the nose, jaw, and extremities may rot away."¹ Now that doesn't sound appealing.

Regardless of what *Tzarat* is, in our Torah reading, if a person has a skin discoloration that becomes scaly, he goes to the priest. If the patch has turned white and spreads deeper than the skin, then behold the poor guy has *Tzarat*. With this diagnosis, he tears his clothing and is relegated to the outskirts of the community. Whenever, a person approaches him, he must call out, "Impure!" to warn others of his ailment.

Was *Tzarat* an ancient pandemic? Not really, because Leprosy or scaly afflictions weren't especially contagious. If someone suspected that he had it, he would go for a diagnosis and if unsure, he would be quarantined for seven days. Only upon confirmation of his ailment, was he then separated from the rest of the people. Fortunately, though, the Torah recognizes that a person could sometimes recover from it. In such a case, the priest would go outside the camp to evaluate the person. With a positive evaluation, there was an elaborate ritual with sprinkling the blood of a bird, cedar wood, hyssop and fresh water on the healed leper. He would then shave all his hair, bathe, and wait seven days. On the eighth day, he would make an offering and then be considered, 'clean' and able to reenter society.

While leprosy doesn't qualify as a pandemic, there have been a number of them in our history. The oldest pandemic was the Justinian plague in the sixth century of the Common Era. Plague ridden fleas, from black rats, infested Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, killing 30 to 50 million people, perhaps half of the world's population.²

That same plaque rebounded in the Middle Ages as the Bubonic plague or Black Death. Swollen lymph nodes, the size of an egg, appeared in the groin, armpit, or neck. Along with fever and muscle aches, one would have bleeding, and gangrene in the extremities. The Black Death was believed to have killed 200 million in four years thus decimating at least a third of the population of Europe.³

Small pox, us Europeans brought it to the New World, was incredibly deadly. Since we lived with it for centuries, we built up an immunity to it, but the native Indians in South and North American were at its mercy. By some counts, 95% of the population of North American Indians were wiped out by it. Fortunately for us, the Covid 19 is not like the plague, Black Death, or Small Pox.

Towards the beginning of the 20th century, we had the pandemic of the Spanish flu or influenza of 1918. According to the Centers for Disease Control, it caused the deaths of 675,000 Americans over a one to two year period.⁴ And then there's the seasonal flu. Not considered a pandemic but it is deadly. According the CDC between 2010 and 2020, the flu kills on average 37,000 people annually in the U.S and in 2017-2018, an especially deadly year, killed 61,000.⁵

Jared Diamond in his book, Guns, Germs, and Steel, describes how many diseases originated as a result of our close proximity to animals. In his chapter on "Lethal gift of Livestock," he listed some of the deadly illness that came from animals. Measles, Tuberculosis, and Smallpox originated from cattle. The Flu came from pig and ducks. Pertussis arose from pigs and dogs. And Malaria derived from birds and possibly chicken and ducks. Diamond explains that domesticating animals was essential for human development. One reason why societies in Europe/Asia advanced, as opposed to those in the Americas, Africa, and Australia, was because of the use of domesticated animals. We put our horses, cows, sheep, goats, and pigs to use in transportation, pulling plows, providing milk, meat, and hides. Without these animals, our society would not have advanced. However, these same animals were a source of novel virus and ailments. And then with increasing trade and travel, these diseases spread. He writes prophetically over twenty years ago, "The explosive increase in world travel by Americans, and in immigration to the United States, is turning us into another melting pot-this time, of microbes that we previously dismissed as just causing exotic diseases in far-off countries."⁶

Given the global nature of our world, perhaps it's not a surprise that a virus can originate in the far reaching corners of China and spread to the U.S within weeks. Experts say that this won't be the only pandemic. Given our high population centers, the ease of travel, and how interconnected we all are, perhaps, it's not possible to completely eliminate all contagious illness and disease rather we can realistically look at mitigation.

We already know what that looks like. As the pursuit of a vaccine and treatment options continues, we are trying to limit the spread of the Covid 19 virus through washing our hands, social distancing, wearing face masks, and sanitizing surfaces. And in the meantime, we wait. For me, I strive for perspective during this time of uncertainty. There was an interesting article in the LA times last Saturday by Joe Mozingo. In it he writes, “From the Plague of Justinian and the Black Death to polio and AIDS, pandemics have violently reshaped civilization since humans first settled into towns thousands of years ago. While the outbreaks wrought their death tolls and grief, they also prompted massive transformations — in medicine, technology, government, education, religion, arts, social hierarchy, sanitation. Before the cholera epidemics of the 19th century, cities thought nothing of mingling their sewage and water supply.”⁷

How interesting it is to think that keeping our water supply clean only came as a result of cholera in the 1800’s. What will we learn from this time around? I’m sure there will be medical breakthroughs. Mozingo suggests in his article that past epidemics, “led to advances in public health that allowed cities and civilizations to grow and prosper: germ theory, urban sanitation, vaccination, penicillin, better hygiene, isolation wards and the scientific method, which brought rationality to modern medicine.”

I believe that there will be changes as well that we won’t be able to analyze for some time on the global stage and well as within our governmental and economic system. I was especially intrigued, though, by Mozingo’s suggestion that how we live may shift as well. He writes,

“On another level, the abrupt disruption of routines that were so long considered by many unalterable — the long daily commute, the business meeting that requires a flight or two, the need to schedule children’s every hour, the go-go-go mentality — opens the possibility of a behavioral reset, for those who can afford it. Millions have stumbled onto the ancient simplicity of an afternoon walk, and many wonder if there might be a way to reduce some of the noise in their lives, keep the freeways a bit more open and the air a bit more clear.”

For many of us, our lives have slowed down but the question is what will we carry with us afterwards? Do you think that you will continue to take more walks, leave more time unscheduled for yourself and family, and forgo regular long commutes? Mozingo quotes Marlon G. Boarnet, professor and chair of USC’s department of urban planning and spatial analysis, who says, “People tend to need a big shock to change their behavior.” I think we are all experiencing a big shock. No one I know has lived through what we are experiencing today.

Leprosy for our ancestors was terrifying but they developed ways of dealing with it and still to embrace the gift of life. Our people developed ways to diagnosis, cope, and even reintegrate

people back into their communities. And *Tzarat* didn't impede their ability to live fully. Today, I am thankful for modern medicine that has the capability of analyzing this Covid 19 virus, finding treatment for it, and ultimately develop a vaccine for it.

In the meantime, I like to look at opportunity in adversity and to focus on how to live even when we are fearful and unsure. Because the truth is, pandemic or not, we don't know the length of our days and there is no guarantee of longevity for any of us. And so, I like to focus on how to live, day by day, week by week, and month by month, even during a time like this. It is in our interest to focus on what we can do and to utilize our days with purpose.

You are actually doing it right now. You are joining us on a live stream on your computers, phones, and TV screens to reflect, think, and pray. Collectively, we are observing Shabbat and tapping into our people's ancient wisdom. We are together, even as we sit in our living rooms, kitchens, and patios. Even during this pandemic, we can still forge deeper connections with one another. We can step outside, even now when it's dark and look up at the sky above. We can go for a walk, garden, write, read, cook, sew, talk, love, and even go for a drive. We can help, assist, and care for others through tzedakah, calls, and acts. We are far from being helpless because we can be helpful. We can be good neighbors, friends, and love our family. And we can use this as a reset moment for us. We can use the time to look at how we can be the best version of ourselves so that we can come out of this confinement with more enlightenment. We can utilize our self awareness to live even more fully and meaningfully than before.

Just as our ancestors didn't let *Tzarat* get in the way of their community, we can choose to live as fully as possible, under any circumstance, and at any time.

My notes:

¹ The Torah by Plaut pg. 828

² History <https://www.history.com/news/pandemics-end-plague-cholera-black-death-smallpox>

³<https://www.britannica.com/event/Black-Death/Effects-and-significance> Jean Froissart's statement that about one-third of Europe's population died in the epidemic may be fairly accurate.

⁴ 1918 influenza (H1N1 virus) <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>.

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden/index.html>

⁶ Jared Diamond in his book, Guns, Germs, and Steel pg. 206

⁷ LA Times April 18, 2020 by Joe Mozingo

https://enewspaper.latimes.com/infinity/article_share.aspx?guid=20dd0e9c-ae5e-4f42-b7da-4371289ff8e7