

Blessings and uncertainties

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

May 15, 2020

This week's Torah portion, Behukotai out of Leviticus, details the many blessings and curses that can befall the Israelites. Moses is preparing our people for life in the Promised Land and our success hinges on following God's commandments. If our people stay loyal to God and follows the laws, then we will have rain, ample produce and grains, many animals and children, prosperity, peace, and wellbeing. On the other hand, if we don't obey God and follow the commandments then, there will be drought, famine, war, misery, disease, and death. So simple really. Our people can easily choose a good life by just following the teachings of the Torah.

With such guarantees, we would all sign up. Who is not in favor of an overabundance of good things? Unfortunately, there is no easy path especially today as we live with great uncertainty, as much of our lives continue to be in shut down mode, due to Covid 19. While there has been progress on testing capability, PPE (personal protective equipment), and increased hospital capacity, a vaccine is quite a time off and we don't know when effective treatments will be developed. If only it was as easy as keeping six feet away from others, washing our hands, and wearing face coverings that we could be guaranteed health, economic success, and overall wellbeing. But there is no guarantee of anything. We are living in a time of uncertainty and fear. We are scared of catching the virus and dying. We are terrified someone we love will succumb to this pandemic. We are worried of how we will work and pay for our mortgage, rent, food, and gas. We wonder how our children will learn what they need from school. And we are anxious over the loss of time with friends and the loss of living in general. It feels in some ways that no matter what we do, no matter how conscientious we are with precautions, we are still stuck.

It's hard not to feel helpless and demoralized. When we started, 'sheltering in our homes,' eight weeks ago, many of us thought we would be back to normal life within weeks. I envisioned what it would be like to have you here in the sanctuary with a glorious one celebrating that we can congregate, get together, and reconnect in person. As the weeks turn into months, and more things are canceled over the summer and even into the fall, it's too easy to feel despondent. The question that keeps arises is, when will it end?

In the New York Times on Sunday, May 10, there was an article entitled, "How Pandemics End." It suggested, according to historians, that there are two types of endings, one is medical and the other one is social. "The medical, which occurs when the incidence and death rates plummet, and the social, when the epidemic of fear about the disease wanes." We can see that our infectious disease experts focus on when the virus will be restrained. Crucial elements to

containment are treatments so that if a person has a severe reaction then there's reasonable hope that he can recover. And of course, the development of a vaccine so that the Corona virus becomes like to our ordinary, annual flu. However, the ending of pandemics to quote, Dora Varha, a historian at the University of Exeter, "are very, very messy."

They are messy because the ending of pandemics in history were never clear cut and even the idea of an epidemic could cause great harm. In 2014, fears of Ebola racked Ireland even though, according to Dr. Susan Murray, there were no cases of Ebola at the time. She notes that an epidemic of fear can occur even without the illness. Despite the absence of Ebola in Ireland, hospital workers and the general public were very fearful. There was a young man in the emergency room from a country with Ebola patients, and none of the medical workers wanted to go near him. Dr. Murray tended to him but his cancer was too advanced. She later wrote, "If we are not prepared to fight fear and ignorance as actively and as thoughtfully as we fight any other virus, it is possible that fear can do terrible harm to vulnerable people, even in places that never see a single case of infection during an outbreak." She continues almost prophetically, "And a fear epidemic can have far worse consequences when complicated by issues of race, privilege, and language." Apparently, days later, the World Health Organization declared the Ebola epidemic over.

The Bubonic plague or Black Death terrorized humanity three times in our history. The first one in the sixth century was known as the Justinian Plague. Then it arose viciously in the Middle ages, where a third of the European population was decimated. And then again the late 19th and 20th century. It was a terrible, grotesque disease. If we had the equivalent of the plague here in the US, I guess we would be looking at over 100 million people dying in our country. It is unclear what made the bubonic plague die down since antibiotics weren't developed until the middle of the 20th century. Was it the cold weather or change in the rats? Regardless, it did wane.

When we look at epidemics, Small Pox was, despite its name, a big deal. While we now have an effective vaccine, in the past, it killed for thousands of years. The disease is also terrible and wiped out much of the Native American Indians. Some historians would put it at 95%. And then there's the Spanish Flu of 1918 leading to the deaths of 50-100 million people worldwide. Oh lastly, there's a flu we never talk about, the Hong Kong flu of 1968. According to the article, one million people died worldwide and in the US, 100,000 people, mostly over the age of 65. I don't know if any of you remember that.

I share these historical pandemics or epidemics for the sake of perspective and also because their ends were never abrupt and didn't necessarily correspond to a vaccine. And so we come back to the medical end or social end of an illness. Yale historical Naomi Rogers says, "I think there is this sort of social psychological issue of exhaustion and frustration... We may be in a

moment when people are just saying: ‘That’s enough. I deserve to be able to return to my regular life.’ And so, when will this pandemic end in our country? Well, Dr. Allan Brant, Harvard historian, says, “There will be no sudden victory. Trying to define the end of the epidemic, “will be a long and difficult process.”

And so, given that there is no easy end in sight, we are left with the difficult decision as to how to live in the meantime. Do you go and visit mom or grandpa? Will you share a meal together? Should you hug your friends and relatives or not? How do we acquire our needed grocery items and other necessities? Do we go to parks, beaches, and trails? How do we interact with our neighbors and friends? There is a calculation that each of us is making, changing, as we acclimate to the world around us. I believe we need to be respectful, understanding, and forgiving of people who make different choices than we do. And even as we strive for kindness, despite our fear and level of restrictions, we each have to live. I mean really live.

What that means for each of us is different but it involves some central themes. Firstly, taking care of ourselves. Eating, exercising, and sleep are important. Taking care of our health in general and not holding off on medical care. Taking care of our mind. We all need to think, read, learn, and grow. And our spirit, cannot be neglected. You are here with me now and so you are engaged. We have to remember that we are not alone, we are connected with one another, we are linked through the generations of our history, and our lives have purpose. And we all need one another. However, we chose to relate and connect, it is so important for our wellbeing. And so, it’s crucial to see love ones, talk to friends, and reconnect.

Our Torah portion speaks of consequences to our acts. While following God’s commandments cannot vanquish the Corona virus, it can help strengthen our sense of self. This is a time when we need to be anchored by our values, tradition, and one another more than ever. We need to look at each day as an opportunity. It’s a chance to do experience or learn something new even its appreciating something we never noticed before. We have to cut ourselves some slack and find ways to enjoy our days. With a sense of purpose, we can make our days fulfilling and meaningful. And let’s not wait till we are on the other side of this, let’s live the best we can, right here and now, and open up our hearts to one another. And may we be able to count our blessings.

New York times article

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/health/coronavirus-plague-pandemic-history.html?smid=em-share>