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To Bernie on reaching the ripe old age of 80.

The Jewish Response to The Plague

I suspect that most of the contributors to this book will develop new ideas in the realm of math, science and halacha. Since my love, although not my profession, is history, I decided to take a different tack and write about a current event and how it is viewed through the prism of Jewish History

For the first time in my life and therefore in yours as well, we as individuals, as Jews, and as humans, have been confronted by a plague that became a pandemic and struck the entire world; from America to Russia, from Australia to Alaska no one was shielded from this plague.

Although Israel may have been one of the first to get the vaccine, many Israelis died. Leading Rabbis and notorious non-believers died; no one was spared. The pandemic spread in the Bet Midrash and in the bars, at weddings and at funerals. Suddenly, *minyanim* were sprouting in parks and playgrounds, anywhere people could congregate outdoors. While the dangers of contagion are now greatly reduced, I came to wonder how our progenitors in earlier times responded to pandemics, or as they were then called, “plagues”.

The earliest references to plagues in the history of the Jewish people occur in the Torah and they are, in each and every case, as divine punishment for the sins of the Jewish people.

We have the following incidents:

a) The first time that a plague appears as divine punishment in the Torah is the sin of the spies mentioned in Bamidbar chapter 14. Here it is stated that the ten spies who sinned died in the plague that itself struck as a consequence of their sins. There is, however, no further description of that plague in that chapter.[[1]](#footnote-1)

b) The next reference is as a consequence of the Korach incident. The Israelites claimed that Moses and Aaron had usurped leadership for themselves and their descendants. This angered Hashem, who inflicted a plague on the people. At Moses’ direction, Aaron then acted to atone for Israel’s sins and the plague was stayed – but only after 14,700 Israelites had died.

c) Finally, we have the sin of Baal Peor. Again, Hashem was angry at the Israelites for their immorality and idolatry, and it is only the intervention of Pinchas that stayed the plague. Again, no details are provided about the plague except that 24,000 people died.

What is common across all three incidents is the component of divine choice: Israelites were stricken because of God’s dissatisfaction, and after atonement in one form or another, the plague was ended.

d) We next read about a plague when King David determines to take a census of the Israelites, apparently driven by his own ego. Again, the plague strikes the Israelites and is only stayed by David’s atonement.

e) Skipping about 1,200 years we come to the final and most catastrophic incident of plague striking only the Israelites. This is when the students of Rabbi Akiva were struck by a plague during the Omer period following Pesach. The exact number and reason for their deaths may be open to debate. It appears that whatever efforts were made to atone for the apparent sin were unsuccessful.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since that time there are no historical references to a plague which was limited to the Jewish people.

The most notorious plague of the Middle Ages occurred between the years 1348-1350. Unlike the earlier tragedy of the first Crusade in 1096, the plague of the fourteenth century failed to receive considerable attention in Jewish literature. It is not clear why there is this distinction: Over 200 communities were destroyed, either by the plague or the pogroms that followed them when the Jews were accused of poisoning wells and causing the outbreak. This was despite the fact that Jewish communities were not in any way immune from the ravages of the disease.

There are *kinot*, *slichot* and some halachic literature, but no historical or descriptive literature about the events and their impact on the Jewish communities. Likewise, a variety of writings by Jewish physicians in both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities at this time contain prescriptions for preventing the plague, mostly through diet and other similar means. These recommendations are common between Jewish and non-Jewish doctors of the time and there is nothing uniquely Jewish about the medical literature.

The pogroms and anti-Jewish riots are documented extensively in non-Jewish writings of the period, but there is little reference to how the Jewish community dealt with either the plague or the pogroms that followed. The one exception is the tale of the resistance by the Jewish community of Worms, which is recounted 300 years later in a collection of stories about the history of that community. But even that tale does not differentiate between those Jews who died in the plague and those who were killed in the pogroms. Nor is there reference to any special measures taken by the Jewish community to ward off the plague. The Jewish literature of the period makes no suggestion of any real attempt at atonement, or of any other action that might apply exclusively to the Jewish community. Instead, there is almost universal recognition that the plague struck all communities equally and the only remedies there were applied equally across all populations.

On March 18th 2020, a wedding was “celebrated” at the Ponevezh cemetery in Bnei-Brak. The wedding was reported in the Israeli press, and drone footage recorded the ceremony under a *chuppah* next to the wall of the cemetery. Several dozen onlookers weaved their way among the fresh graves, some of which may have been for recent casualties of the COVID pandemic. The ceremony was reported widely among the world press including The New York Times and other widely read publications.

This wedding ceremony was not unique. It was a continuation of a custom that was recorded since at least the 18th century. A similar ceremony was reported as having taken place during the flu pandemic of 1918 and of course at earlier times; in Yiddish it is called a “*svartze chassena*”, a black wedding. Similar ceremonies were recorded as having taken place in Safed in 1866 when a plague struck the Old Yishuv and killed a significant number of the Jewish population of Jerusalem, Safed and Tiberias. The religious leaders there took several orphaned boys and girls and married them off in the cemetery between the graves of the Arizal and the Beit Yosef; similar ceremonies were performed in Jerusalem.

There are many theories as to the rationale for this practice. The one that makes the most sense combines two separate approaches to combating a plague: 1) that being happy and celebrating happy events was from ancient times thought to ward off the plague and make a person less likely to fall seriously ill; and 2) atonement, which in this case is thought to be accomplished by taking those living on the fringe of society, clearly poor and most likely to have suffered poor treatment by the community, and celebrating a lavish wedding ceremony for them. They are also given wedding gifts by the community in the hope that the celebration of a happy communal event and the atonement for past wrongs will ward off the plague or at least soften its impact.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the celebrations achieved this goal. Indeed, some would suggest that these weddings became super-spreader events. Thus, the sole Jewish solution to a modern plague appears to be modern science.

1. Some commentaries suggest that in this case it was not a disease but sudden death. A closer reading of the verse does not support this since the verse clearly refers to a “plague” in the broader sense, suggesting it was prevalent in the general population (See Seforno on this verse). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Talmud explains that the cause of that plague was the failure of students to respect one another. Instead they treated one another harshly and arrogantly. Why this justified Divine anger and a death sentence is not really explained. In later periods it was suggested that since Rabbi Akiva supported Bar Kochba, his thousands of students joined the rebellion and were either killed by the Romans or died from disease in the army camps. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)