**Rabbi Greenberg transcription**

**[00:05:17]** Thank you very much! I am pleased to join in this program and privileged to appear with Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. Last night, reminiscing with my wife, I remembered about more than a decade ago I’d written a letter to the YU university search committee, unsolicited, suggesting that they try everything to recruit him to come to Yeshiva, because [to quote] “he was one of the most constructive orthodox rabbis of the past century.” And, of course, his record of achievement, which has continued to this day, of course, speaks for itself.

**[00:05:53]** So, I’m very happy to be with him and on behalf of my cultural day school where I have a connection of friendship going back to Rabbi Walter Shachatovich of blessed memory and the city of Stanford, no less, where I had a very strong collegial … and friendship with Rabbi Joan Krantz of blessed memory, Daniel Connor’s successor, and Rabbi Joshua …[indistinct speech]. So, all in all, it’s a privilege to talk with you on a topic that’s very much obviously on all our minds, which is theological responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**[00:06:30]** Since we are talking theology, let me start with listing some of the wrong responses that I believe that I’ve been shown by religious leaders and theological respondents. Number one: the claim that the pandemic is G-d’s punishment of all of us. Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, the *gedol* of Bnei Berak, said the sin for which we are being punished is *lashon hara*. In fact, suggested that if the people will stop speaking *lashon hara*, the pandemic would stop. Of course, it turns out that each religious leader has their own particular version of what sin has outraged the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*.

**[00:07:10]** An evangelical pastor in New Orleans said that it was the fact that New Orleans had a gay pride parade. And, of course, one could go on and on down the list. I was struck by the fact that even New Age pagan theologians, I saw an article saying that it’s Gaia, the goddess of Nature, who is striking back, because we have abused nature environmentally.

**[00:05:17]** Well, of course, my answer to all of the above is that religiously you’re in a very wrong place. COVID-19 is a natural phenomenon. In fact, the virus lives very nicely with bats and pangolins. It’s when human beings take wildlife they shouldn’t be killing, in the first place, kill them and eat them that it jumps species and has unleashed this terrible pandemic on the world.

**[00:08:01]** The main point, of course, being: the key rabbinic teaching, it seems to me, the key rabbinic teaching in terms of explaining the development of the *brit* from biblical time to rabbinic times is simply that G-d has established a world, as the Creator has established a world alone – *“k’minhag ha-noheg,”* says the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah*) – G-d has created a natural order, it’s independent, it is dependable, it is not subject to manipulation and tricks.

**[00:08:41]** And, in fact, as the Gemara says, the fact that something is wrong or evil does not mean that the natural order was going to punish it or go after it. In fact, the Gemara says specifically, “a stolen seed when planted germinates.” An adulterous sperm or in a relationship an adulterous sperm can inseminate it and give birth just as much as a kosher and legitimate intercourse. In short, neither sickness, nor pandemics is a statement of some specific punishment from G-d.

**[00:09:19]** Secondly, another example that I think are mistaken theological attempts is, of course, the adverse of this: because I’m devout, it can’t hurt me. Rav Kanievsky, for example, at that time said: they should not stop learning Gemara in the yeshivot, even though there was a danger of spread. Why? Because *Torah meginah*, again that’s a famous Gemara, *Torah meginah*. In fact, he followed this up with later with an answer from the *kupat ha’ir* – his favorite *tzedakkah* in Bnei Berak – that everybody who gave three thousand shekels would get a letter of a *berachah* from Rav Kanievsky giving them protection against the pandemic.

**[00:10:02]** And, of course, not just Jews – President Bolsonaro of Brazil, an evangelical Christian himself, insisted: G-d is a Brazilian, G-d looks out for those who are faithful to G-d, and, therefore, he felt completely safe, he would go plunging into crowds, he refused to follow the masks and the other kinds of behaviors that were expected. By the way, it also turns out that he came down with the disease, but that’s another story.

**[00:10:28]** In any event, what I’m saying is with that, of course, many Hasidim with weddings even in the recent period time -- all of this based on a simple claim that because I’m devout and because I’m faithful, G-d will protect me. This, of course, is magical thinking. And, in fact, it’s interesting because the Torah is particularly antagonistic and condemns magic unequivocally. Why? Because the very act of magic claims that if I have a particular formula or, in this case, if I have a particular *emunah*, G-d must – and I can *force,* is the word – G-d to protect me.

**[00:11:09]** This is a violation, says the Torah, both of G-d as the Creator who has established a natural process that can’t be manipulated and that can’t be used in this tricky way. And, secondly, it’s a denial of G-d’s freedom. There’s nothing that can force G-d to act, and that’s one of the major points that the *nevi’im* made repeatedly to those who brought *korbanot,* thinking that with the *korban* they had a magic key to force G-d to do what they wanted, even to let them get away with bad behavior or murder.

**[00:11:44]** So, the answer again remains that we have to turn our back on magical thinking to be faithful to G-d. The third response I’d like to give an example [of] is, in fact, a right response, but I would say inadequate. What do I mean? That leading religious thinkers – I’m thinking particularly Catholic, but others, as well – responded to the pandemic and to the suffering and to the widespread death by saying: This is a mystery. How can a loving, we believe, a loving omnipotent G-d allow innocent suffering, allow death for people who have done nothing wrong and who are innocent victims of the spread of this pandemic?

**[00:12:29]** And, of course, their answer, correctly, is there is no answer. We have no answer for the suffering of the innocent. But, what do we do religiously? The answer is we accept the suffering in silence, we understand that we are with G-d, and the victims are with G-d and, therefore, far from offering shallow explanations, we accept that mystery. But, what we can do is show solidarity with the sick, with the isolated, with the poor who have no income, with the elderly who need errands – that that is the proper religious response.

**[00:13:08]** And now I would say, on the one hand, that’s correct, that, in fact, in imitating G-d we have to be *nosein lechem l’reevim* or *bikur holim* or *ozer dalim* – that is absolutely correct. But, I think the response is inadequate, because it focuses primarily on the classic trope of the religion – that religion exists to console those who can’t help themselves. Particularly strong in Christianity in the images of the crucifixion that there’s innocent suffering in the world, and G-d simply embraces that suffering or shares it.

**[00:13:48]** But, *Yahadut* – covenantal Judaism – teaches that that is not the whole story or not enough. We are, in fact, partners with G-d – that’s the whole point of *brit.* And G-d has called humans into partnership for *tikkun olam*, that is to say, to repair the world. Or, to put it in our terms today, it means that we have to take power as partners to cure disease. So, at this moment, if you ask me: What’s the religious theological response? The most important one? My answer is the search for vaccine and for cures, because G-d has asked humans to join in the process of making G-d’s world whole. That is what the *nevi’im* described as the messianic vision, that before we’re done, we’ll overcome all the flaws and all the *hesronot* of this world: poverty, which is the enemy of quality of life, hunger, oppression, inequality, and unfair injustice, war – they’ll beat swords into plowshares – and, yes, sickness.

**[00:14:55]** Yeshayahu predicts that in the messianic age we will cure sickness, so that the deaf will hear, the blind will see, the lame will jump and dance. In short, that part of the vision of messianism is to repair all the flaws, and not just simply G-d doing it for us, but out of *brit* we do it together. So, my answer is the first and primary contribution should be religious people to take that responsibility, to take that power. I would add to that a second dimension, because it’s not just the question of the cure.

**[00:15:33]** In the meantime, we have the fundamental commandment: *U’vacharta b’chaim*. That, in fact, the *halachah* teaches us that every aspect of life involves looking out for our health, looking out for cures, every aspect of life, including how little day-to-day behavior should be on the side of life. How does that apply to the COVID? The answer, of course, is social distancing. I would say that is the *halachah* of this moment. That is the overriding *halachah* of this moment. Social distancing, which protects people from the spread, to wear masks. I would say, for an orthodox Jew or for a traditional religious observant Jew wearing a mask is just as essential as wearing *tzitzit,* as washing our hands regularly. This is not actual preparation for eating – this is a fundamental act of *nishmartem* – looking out for one’s own life.

**[00:16:32]** Not to go into crowds, not to be thoughtless in exposure, not to be indifferent to a responsibility to fight the transmission and spread of COVID in every sort of way. I’m just finishing a book that sort of tries to describe the development of the *brit*, but what I wanted to stress in that and it’s the central theme of the book, is that every *halachah,* every *mitzvah* boils down to choosing life and maximizing life and health as against death and sickness.

**[00:17:08]** Rambam puts it best in the classic passage in the *Moreh Nevuchim.* He says – he quotes, of course, from *Devarim* Moshe’s summary of the Torah: *Reah natati l’fanecha hayom* / I put before you today. *Ha-chaim v’et ha-tov* / life and good. *Et ha-mavet v’et ha-ra*. Says Maimonides, notice, how the Torah is put as by Moshe: on one side, is “chaim” and “tov” – life and good, on the other side, is “mavet” and “ra” – death and evil. And we must choose between them – *U’vacharta b’chaim.* Says Maimonides: every mitzvah, every definition of a good act, every act of commandment, positive, is a choice of life. And every *averah* – every sin, be it ritual or be it ethical – is some choice of death.

**[00:18:02]** Well, in our whole life, in our time, in this moment we have that expansion of the *halachah* *U’vacharta b’chaim,* exactly, to wearing the mask or washing the hands or avoiding the exposure. And this is our way of fighting sickness and fighting on G-d’s side to fill His world with life. Of course, that is not enough by oneself, then one turns to the other aspect to help the poor, to look after the old, to stay in touch with the isolated, to make the phone call, to run the errands. And, of course, if we do all this together, we have the power to roll it back.

**[00:18:40]** We have seen, in fact, in the last few months exactly that. Countries well-led that carried it out were able to roll back the COVID and save lives. And those that were poorly led, that made the wrong choices, that did not choose life, the spread of the pandemic has been devastating. In short, this is the major theological response of this moment that we as religious Jews, as covenantal Jews, have to take.

**[00:19:09]** I want to add one other story if I could. And, that is, in 1861 Rabbi Israel Salanter, great figure of 19th century Jews, the founder of the *mussar* movement, he actually preceded this, he wrote a letter in 1861 to a student. It was during a cholera epidemic, and a student wrote him a heartbroken letter saying he was devastated by the epidemic and, particularly, depressed by the death of his friend who was a righteous person, totally innocent, he couldn’t understand how G-d could let him die from an innocent person like that from such a terrible disease.

**[00:19:51]** Salanter wrote a letter. But I want to say, before he wrote the letter, 12 years earlier in 1848 in Vilna there was a terrible cholera epidemic. Rav Israel lived in Vilna, he organized the yeshiva service corps recruiting students from every yeshiva to go around and look out for the sick, to help feed them, to help avoid dehydration which was the killer in cholera, take care of them, particularly, on Shabbat and so on and do all that’s necessary, and that was as an advance signal of what he did in 1861. He wrote back to his student as follows:

**[00:20:28] “**Of course, it’s sad to lose such a person, he said, but you as a human being you have the choice. Do you respond to setback and death by depression and giving up? Or, you respond as you’re supposed to, by saying what is the positive spin, what is my positive response religiously to this moment?” And then he gives him the following three guidelines.

**[00:20:56]** Number one, he says, at this moment, *zo torat ha adam, ze sechel yashar liluli lefached b’inyinei emuna,* we should not be intimidated, not be afraid, not run for cover, he said. After all, he said, what is a life? [The] human being is vulnerable. In fact, you couldn’t even save yourself: even this *tzaddik,* who knows if he had lived what might have gone wrong. So, the approach is not to be afraid, G-d is with us in life, but what do you do instead of being afraid? *Gam lishmor hanhaga shel yaron v hachmeyerotem.* Carefully follow exactly the *hanhaga*, the proper procedure and behaviors, which the *hachmeyerotem,* the medical experts are telling us to do.

**[00:21:48]** *Asher le’or divreihem nelech, gam al pi ha’daat.* Because in a moment of pandemic, medical directions, we have to walk in their footsteps in the exact directions. *Gam al pi ha’daat*, this becomes the religious requirement of the religious folk. And, of course, he said you should know, *ha’nisayon haranu,* from experience in the past, *asher garelach mah lo natza ha’machlo*, when the epidemic was very widespread, *kol asher naasa shichmo lisbol,* whoever took on his shoulders, *hanhaga le’rofim,* to follow the directions of the doctors in every way, *b’achilato*, in his eating, in his daily behaviors – *k’chochom ve’lo k’ksil*, of course, wisely and not like a fool – then, *lo nire lo nega machlo*, the truth is most of those people escape without the disease.

**[00:22:40]** OK, *asher kol hanhagat hadat mishtane,* and therefore, all our normal religious behaviors are shifted, *al pi din b’eit al ha zu*. For example, again in 1848 in Vilna Rav Israel *poskin* that it was forbidden to fast on Yom Kippur, because the doctors said that on that Yom Kippur fasting would make them vulnerable to the cholera. He also [had] a famous story, [he] got up in the Great Synagogue of Vilna and commanded people to make Kiddush and to eat to break the fast, because their life was at stake.

**[00:23:15]** Secondly, *ein lerabot beneirot beyamim hakdoshim,* you’re not to have sad or extended prayers, this is a time to shorten prayers, go out get fresh air, *v’et lishmor vlavod et Hashem*, and, instead, serve G-d, *b’chedra*, with joy, cut back on the *piyyutim*, the prayers of sadness and of agony, and emphasize the joy and celebration that we are alive and that G-d has given us a life to stand before G-d at this moment. I finish with one last comment, which is that that is one of the great qualities of Jewish religion – not that it only puts life first, insists all of life is a struggle of life against death – *U’vacharta b’chaim* is the overriding carol. That it’s deeper than that.

**[00:24:04]** It says, when there is an outburst of death, one has to increase the outburst of life to match it. In the age of the Shoah, the most intense outburst of death against Jewry and against humanity in history, Jewish people responded religiously with an intense outburst of life, the creation of the state of Israel, the recreation of yeshivot, and of the religious life of the Jewish people. Well, I would say in the age of COVID with this victory for death in which hundreds of thousands that by now that the numbers passed 800,000 around the world have died, this is a moment when Jews are called religiously to increase health, to increase *hessed* to help those who are vulnerable, to intensify our love, our *hessed*, our responsibility, so that we can literally overcome death. That is the view of Yeshayahu and of the *nevi’im*. That if we fight on G-d’s side, if not in our lifetime then eventually we will get the upper hand for life itself. That’s my comment.