On January 30, 2020, the Israeli Ministry of Health began to issue restrictions to the public in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. On March 12, 2020, the Ministry of Health intensified its restrictions by expanding these to include the closure of all educational establishments, the prohibition of gatherings of ten or more people, and the closure of public space in general. These restrictions constituted a serious attack upon the daily lives of all Israeli citizens, but for the purposes of this article, we are most interested in the serious attack posed to the fulfillment of religious commandments, which generally include gatherings for the sake of prayer and study. Religious leaders in Israel were forced to be very creative in how they explained to their public why the latter should uphold the restrictions of the state when these contradicted religious commandments. In what follows, we shall examine a selection of subjects with which Sheikh Badīr engaged during the COVID-19 crisis, with special attention paid to the following aspects: 1) The manner in which Sheikh Badīr crafted his messages in Arabic; i.e., into a form that suited the cultural perspective of his intended audience. 2) The messages that the Sheikh chose to emphasize. 3) The degree to which the Sheikh’s efforts worked in tandem with national and international causes.

Theological Attitude towards the Pandemic

On March 5, 2020, Sheikh Badīr began a series of public lectures on Facebook under the title “Coronavirus in the eyes of the sharīʿa.” The goal of the series was to discuss the various ways in which COVID was influencing our life, be it from a theological, religious, educational, or humanistic perspective. Sheikh Badīr spoke first of an issue pertaining to faith: Was COVID [to be construed as] a divine punishment for human actions? The increase in instances of death from COVID raised the question of divine recompense ~~up onto the spiritual agenda~~: Do good deeds guarantee one a comfortable life, while wicked actions condemn one to suffer? Such a principle is well established in the sacred writings of many religions, including the Qur’ān, which promises reward for those who follow the path of God and punishment for those who do not fulfill His commandments. If this is the case, then the conclusion seems to follow that the COVID pandemic is a divine punishment for the wicked actions of humanity. In the Qur’ān and the Muslim tradition, there are many sources that express this possibility; however, at the same time, there are also sources that view plagues as a sort of trial by which God tests humankind.

Badīr chooses to view the pandemic as a trial. In his opinion, the COVID pandemic is not a divine punishment (‘uqūba), as other religious people in the Muslim world claim. In Badīr’s eyes, COVID is a trial of faith for humankind, as the Quran says: “We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops. But [Prophet], give good news to those who are steadfast” (2:155). That is to say, according to this verse, COVID is a trial of humankind by God (ibtilā*’*) which was sent in order to test the resolve of peoples’ spirit and their faith in God in the face of fear and obstacles to faith. Badīr cites as an example the Quranic story of the trials of Job (21:83–84), who is tested by many severe trials even though he did not sin. So too in our days, Sheikh Badīr contends, people are afflicted by hardships even though they do not sin. As another example of this he cites infants and young children who suffer from serious illnesses. Sheikh Badīr claims that we learn of the obligation to isolate (*al-ḥajr al-ṣiḥī*) in cases of contagious illness from Job. When he becomes ill, Job isolates himself outside of his village, so that only his wife comes to take care of and visit him. Even his two brothers speak to him from a distance. Thus, there is proof that the Qur’ān already taught of the obligation to isolate long before the present day. Sheikh Badīr turns from the Qur’ān to Hadīth. He cites hadīth which seem to signify that it is necessary to isolate people who are ill: When the Prophet Muhammad arrived in Greater Syria, a plague broke out amongst the soldiers and he separated the ill from the healthy. The Prophet Muhammad taught: “flee from leprosy as you would flee from a lion” (*firr min al-majdūm firaruka min al-asad*). Badīr pleads with the public to heed the instruction of the Ministry of Health. What we are speaking of is an issue that affects the lives of *all* people here, Badīr claims, it does not relate to the differences dividing various publics in matters of nation or worldview; [rather] this is a humanitarian and international issue which lies beyond the pale of judgement. Therefore, it is incumbent upon anyone who returns from a trip abroad to uphold the restrictions of the Ministry of Health and enter isolation. Upholding the restrictions of the Ministry of Health *is* upholding the sharīʿa, Badīr teaches, and he reprises this point multiple times throughout the course of the series. Whoever feels unwell, even if he is not sick with COVID, should not attend Friday prayer in the mosque, and should instead pray at home. We must uphold these restrictions to uphold the value of saving a life (*hifẓ al-nafs*).

It is worthwhile to consider how Badīr chose to relate to COVID as a trial and not as a punishment. In my opinion, this choice was one that allowed him to conscript the public’s participation more easily. For in most cases, a man who suspects that God is punishing him although he is innocent will become embittered and suffer, and it will be more difficult to conscript his participation. Throughout the series, Badīr notes the importance of engaging the discussion from a theological perspective, for the believer is certainly unlike the heretic in his relation to existence. One ought to consider how Badīr….hadīth of signs of the Prophet Muhammad in order to show that first and foremost, the restrictions of the Ministry of Health are not instructions of the state government, but rather are the instructions of the Prophet Muhammad. For this reason, upholding the restrictions of the Ministry of Health is, in practice, upholding the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad and the sharīʿa.

What is the purpose of COVID’s coming into the world? Badīr finds an allusion to COVID in a Quranic story about the worm that ate Solomon’s stick (34:14). According to the Qur’ān, Solomon engaged the jinn in constructing the Temple for him. A small worm secretly made its way into Solomon’s walking stick and gnawed its way through it, clandestinely, until the stick suddenly broke and caused Solomon to fall, as a result of which he died. From this story, Sheikh Badīr emphasized, one can deduce that the COVID pandemic is acting in a manner similar to that of the woodworm: Through [divine] wisdom, clandestinely, and without paying heed as it passes from place to place and strikes people unopposed. Solomon’s walking stick is, therefore, a sign/symbol of stability and support. The walking stick, Sheikh Rā’id explains, alludes also to might, power, law, justice, and the economy, all of which were stable in Solomon’s time. Even the jinn, to which the Qur’ān attributes the ability to know secrets, did not know or perceive the activity of this worm. The jinn’s lack of knowledge regarding the worm’s activity and Solomon’s death parallel the lack of knowledge and confusion of modern man, who thinks that he is strong and knows everything. Suddenly, a minor plague occurs that demonstrates his own incompetence to him. Solomon’s death brought a new order to the world, much like the COVID pandemic has brought quiet in place of activity, lack of knowledge in place of knowledge, isolation in place of freedom, depression in place of joy, and the closure of all things, perhaps even bringing about a new world order. Sheikh Badīr wonders whether the Coronavirus has a function identical to the function of the woodworm: Just as the woodworm brought about the revelation of Solomon’s death, so too Coronavirus is revealing the limitations of humanity. If this is the case, Sheikh Badīr is choosing to view the phenomenon of COVID in a positive light, not as the end of the world, but rather as the herald of a new stage, heretofore unknown, in the development of humanity.

Closure of Mosques

Sheikh Badīr was the first who called to close the mosques in Israel. He released this announcement already on March 9, 2020. In the upper portion of the announcement, a photograph of Sheikh Badīr can be found on the right hand side, next to which it is written: Sheikh Rā’id Badīr…. In the title it says: “Legal opinion.” The contents of the advertisement are as follows: “Mosques will be closed to public prayer for a period of two weeks, and [closed] to Friday prayer for the foreseeable future.” In a story released on i24 about his efforts to close mosques in Israel, including the al-Aqsa Mosque, Sheikh Badīr said that his office had been the first to call for the closing of mosques, and from there it had spread to neighboring states in the Middle East. Badīr noted that this restriction was difficult to digest for the Muslim public, who is accustomed, conversely, to increasing prayer in times of hardship, while in this instance precisely the opposite was being asked of them. Sheikh Rā’id reiterated and emphasized in the piece that the restrictions concerning distancing arose from the individual example established by the Prophet Muhammad. He explained how the Prophet Muhammad was forbidden from shaking the hand of a man who came to swear his loyalty to him with a handshake, since that same man had an infectious disease.

In a video that was posted on Facebook on March 13, 2020, Sheikh Badīr spoke on the subject of gatherings, whether for conferences, weddings, or prayer in mosques. Sheikh Badīr explained in the video that while surely the commandment declared that one must pray the Friday prayer in public and in mosque, this law was applied [only] in the general case. However, in the sharīʿa, Badīr explains, there is something called “sharīʿa ordinances in times of emergency” which apply to both the individual and the community as a whole. For example, according to what is stated in the Qur’ān, it is forbidden for a Muslim to eat pork. However, the Qur’ān goes on to say that if a Muslim finds himself in a situation in which his life would be endangered were he not to consume pork, it is of course permissible for him to eat it. Such an instance is called in Islamic law *darūra* (necessity); that is to say, it is necessary for the sake of life, since without it, man would die. Badīr demonstrated this principle with additional examples from the Qur’ān and hadīth: The Qur’ān (2:183) commands a Muslim to fast on Ramaḍan, but in the following verse (2:184), it is written that anyone who is ill or traveling is free of the obligation to fast. “Pray while standing,” says the Prophet Muhammad. “But if one is not so able, pray while sitting.” Whoever is at home should pray the entire, complete prayer, but anyone who is traveling/on the road is permitted to shorten his prayer. All of these are examples of laws applying in times of emergency.