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LEHRHAUS Over Shabbos

Contents:

Parshat Vayikra

This week's Lehrhaus over Shabbos is sponsored by
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Who Knows? Jewish Leadership in Times of Uncertainty

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In this strange, new dystopian landscape, I find myself repeatedly saying 'Who knows?' – as a rhetorical and practical question, to be sure, but even more as an existential expression of uncertainty. Who knows if I or those I love and care for will avoid this virus? Who knows how many more days my synagogue will be shuttered, our school doors locked, our offices closed? Who knows how many Zoom calls I will have in place of classes and meetings, as we try to convince ourselves that online education works and that parents can replace teachers? Who knows how many memes and funny videos I will share today to block out the tragic new reality that has set in across the globe? Who knows when my head will feel clear enough to do all the thought work this isolating time was supposed to promise? Who knows when I will next feel like myself? My routine, my regular anchors, my life in community has, to use an *Urban Dictionary* word, been cancelled.

Something about the anxiety and pathos of these two words - who knows? - touches a simple, primal, and universal response to uncertainty. As I hear others use this question as today's verbal drumbeat, I find myself simultaneously translating the expression in my head into Hebrew - "*Mi yodea*? *Mi yodea*?" – and then connecting it to places where the expression appears in *Tanakh*. Some of the places were immediately apparent but not all. I took out my worn *Concordancia* and went through the nearly two pages of biblical references to identify each appearance of this expression.

Ecclesiastes did not disappoint:

> So, too, I loathed all the wealth that I was gaining under the sun. For I shall leave it to the man who will succeed me, and *who knows* whether he will be wise or foolish? (2:19)
>
> *Who knows* if a man's lifebreath does rise upward and if a beast's breath does sink down into the earth? (3:21)
>
> *Who knows* what is best for a man to do in life—the few days of his fleeting life? For who can tell him what the future holds for him under the sun? (6:12)

We cannot know if our toil and efforts, the legacy we leave, will continue after us. We cannot know if transcending our base desires and achieving holiness is within reach. We cannot know for certain the best formula for a good life, the *summum bonum*, nor can we know what the future holds. What we can do is learn from past experience, from the wisdom of others, from the laws and expectations of our tradition, and the memetic teachings within our families.

What I also discovered is that the contemplative "Who Knows?" of Ecclesiastes was matched by the action-driven "Who Knows?" of other biblical texts. When King David has an illegitimate child with Bathsheba and the child was ill, David immediately fights the sin of his illicit behavior with religious practices to try to save the life of a child until the infant dies. King David then rises from his place hungry, much to the confusion of his courtiers. David explains: "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought: '*Who knows?* The Lord may have pity on me, and the child may live' (II

Samuel 12:22)." Until we have an answer "no," we need to do all that is within our power to get to yes. But if the answer is finally "no," we must accept the new reality with all of its tragic consequences.

We encounter a similar royal response in a very different biblical narrative: the Book of Jonah. The king of Nineveh got word that his city was about to be destroyed, yet, rather than sinking into despair, he rose, declaring a fast throughout the city and adjuring his constituents to change their ways: "*Who knows* but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish" (3:9). The king's uncertainty made him equally unsure that God was certain. Perhaps God would see the way the city transformed and be Himself transformed. And it was so.

The prophet Joel, in a moment of contrition and suffering, asks the Israelites not to engage in the superficial and external signs of mourning in response to a terrible situation but to introspect, rend their hearts, and use tragedy as an inflection point to change:

> Rend your hearts rather than your garments, and turn back to the Lord your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment. *Who knows* but He may turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind for meal offering and drink offering to the Lord your God? Blow a horn in Zion. Solemnize a fast. Proclaim an assembly! (2:14)

Here, too, the question "Who Knows?" is preceded by a speculation that our change can influence God's change of heart and is followed by a series of actions: horn blowing, fasting, and assembling as a community. Shifting a human mindset to correlate with God's possible repeal of fate is again indicated by the psalmist: *"Who knows* Your furious anger? Your wrath matches the fear of You. Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart" (90:11). Precisely because we do not know what God has in store do we have to teach ourselves to use time well, to work hard, to obtain a wise heart.

I was struck by the two types of "Who Knows?" questions in *Tankah*: the unknowable future is either a shrug of human limitation or the unknowable future is the opposite, a spur to human possibility. If these two responses are both authentic in *Tanakh*, for both individual leaders and for the Israelites as a people, they may also help us formulate a way to move from the personal to the organizational in these dark days, extending the reach of what may be possible. Who knows if the challenges of being a truly global world can also release the gifts of being a deeply connected universal community? Now when we say, in the Talmudic idiom, we are all responsible for one another, we understand its profundity as never before.

Within families, communities, and workplaces, we look to leaders for light in all this confusion. In their book *Primal Leadership*, Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee mention the important role that leaders have to make meaning for us in ambiguous situations that are unprecedented, where there is no right and obvious way to respond:

> Because the leader's way of seeing things has special weight, leaders "manage meaning" for a group, offering a way to interpret, and so react emotionally to, a given situation…group members generally see the leader's emotional reaction as the most valid response, and so model their own on it – particularly in an *ambiguous situation*, where various members react differently. In a sense, the leader sets the emotional standard.[1]

The authors cite research that at such times, we look at our leaders for guidance even when they are not speaking, reading body language and reactions to measure and adjust our own. In "Who Knows?" times, we want to feel that someone knows better than we do and will set strategic directions.

Leaders today, just like their ancient forebears, face not only "Who knows?" questions but many "how" questions: How should we lead in this moment? How should we conduct day-to-day operations in such unusual circumstances and ensure fiscal security in insecure times? How do we assist those most vulnerable? How do we remain true to the values that drive our work, even when it changes dramatically? How can we offer compassionate and honest reassurance?

Russell Reynolds Associates in their report "Leadership through Uncertainty" also advise that leaders balance the urgent short-term issues that demand attention with a focus on long-term strategic goals that can get unsettled and neglected at such times. The report also advises a kind of moral clarity that leaders need to hold onto that is not masked or tarnished by the circumstances: "In the face of uncertainty, weak leaders are guided primarily by concerns over the 'optics' of their decisions; strong leaders are guided by a clear view of the sacrifices required to preserve strategic direction."[2] You need not be in a leadership position to appreciate the difference between optics and sacrifices.

This notion of managing meaning and staying true to one's core values is demonstrated by the most well-known expression of "Who Knows?" in *Tanakh* that, just like today, follows a crisis of confusion. In the Book of Esther, word goes out in the city of Shushan and the 127 provinces of King Ahasuerus' kingdom that the Jews were to be killed, causing utter social mayhem and terror, as reflected in the narrative:

> The text of the document was to the effect that a law should be proclaimed in every single province; it was to be publicly displayed to all the peoples, so that they might be ready for that day. The couriers went out posthaste on the royal mission, and the decree was proclaimed in the fortress Shushan. The king and Haman sat down to feast, but the *city of Shushan was confused*. (3:14-15)

In the very next verse, Mordecai acted, stepping into the public arena at a time of frightening ambiguity, and led the way. He showed his followers a genuine and authentic response to crisis in an unprecedented situation:

> When Mordecai learned all that had happened, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly, until he came in front of the palace gate; for one could not enter the palace gate wearing sackcloth. Also, in every province that the king's command and decree reached, there was

[1] Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 8-9.
[2] https://www.russellreynolds.com/insights/thought-leadership/leadership-through-uncertainty.

> great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing, and everybody lay in sackcloth and ashes. (4:1-3)

Mordecai did not only model despair. Out of confusion, he created a strategy and inspired action with his simple two words, nestled into a short speech to his ward, Queen Esther: "And *who knows*, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis" (4:14). Mordecai did not know the answers, but he knew how to use the ambiguity of the situation to catalyze action. Esther's answer to a question of two words would forever change her life and ours.

'Who knows?' as a question may be followed by the reasonable but ultimately unsatisfying response: no one knows, and, therefore, I will do nothing. But 'Who knows?' can also be followed by the wordless response of positive action: since we do not know, we will do all that we can to change what we can, in the hopes that God will do the same.

GOING VIRAL

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I.

In the beginning was the virus
and the virus was God
and the virus was with God

said the virus said the virus
said God

one of us said.

II.

One of us said
it is neither
living nor dead.

The virus reminds us
now is an afterlife

for which there aren't
enough beds.

III.

The angels cannot afford
more ventilators.

Nephilim hoard sanitizer
one of us said

The virus has spread.

IV.

Heaven would break
from too much righteousness
one of us said.

The wise are condemned
to isolation, goodness placed
in quarantine.

V.

The thinkers, on the front lines
of history, are contaminated

though they only show
mild symptoms.

The trouble with reality
is there's no time
to test it—

thus the lag
between
the measurable

and the true

one of us said.

VI.

Each new movement
refinances the debt
of older movements

one of us said.

Revelation a stimulus bill
to save us from Creation's bust

one of us said.

VII.

One of us said
the virus is a clue
to our ignorance.

VIII.

Our opinions spread like a virus
forcing us to assume each of us
is a carrier of some disease
and some remedy

so that language became a sign
of our herd immunity

and only the silent were outcast.

One of us said.

IX.

In hindsight, the beginning was seasonal.
We developed a cure
and returned to godless normalcy.

But the virus knew we'd return.

One of us said.

Social Distancing in the Rabbinic Tradition

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As many synagogues are closed for Shabbat, and others limit the numbers who may attend, the time seems right to see what our rabbinic tradition has to say about a new phrase that has entered our lexicon: *social distancing*.

There is a long history of isolating those with disease, beginning with our own Bible:

> As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp. (Lev. 13:46)

> Command the people of Israel to remove from the camp anyone who has a skin disease or a discharge, or who has become ceremonially unclean by touching a dead person. (Num. 5:2)

These are examples of *social isolation*, that is, individual and community measures that reduce the frequency of human contact during an epidemic. Here, for example, are some of the ways that social distancing was enforced during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-1920, an outbreak that killed about 40 million people worldwide:

> *... isolation of the ill; quarantine of suspect cases and families of the ill; closing schools; protective sequestration measures; closing worship services; closing entertainment venues and other public areas; staggered work schedules; face-mask recommendations or laws; reducing or shutting down public transportation services; restrictions on funerals, parties, and weddings; restrictions on door-to-door sales; curfews and business closures; social-distancing strategies for those encountering others during the crisis; public-health education measures; and declarations of public health emergencies. The motive, of course, was to help mitigate community transmission of influenza.*[3]

The Talmud emphasizes not the isolation or removal of those who are *sick*, but rather the reverse - the isolation of those who are *well*:

> Our Rabbis taught: When there is an epidemic in the town keep your feet inside your house. (*Bava Kama* 60b)

Of course the effect is the same: there is no contact between those who are ill and those who are well, but since there are usually many more well than there are sick, the effort and social disruption of isolation of the healthy will be much greater.

It is not hard to see a relationship between expelling those who are ill and denying entry to those whose health is in doubt. In the 14th century, when Europe was ravaged by several waves of bubonic plague that killed one-third of the population, many towns enacted measures to control the disease. Around 1347 the Jewish physician Jacob of Padua advised the city to establish a treatment area outside of the city walls for those who were sick.[4] "The impetus for these recommendations," wrote Paul Sehdev from the University of Maryland School of Medicine, "was an early contagion theory, which promoted separation of healthy persons from those who were sick. Unfortunately, these measures proved to be only modestly effective and prompted the Great Council of the City to pursue more radical steps to prevent spread of the epidemic." And so the notion of quarantine was born. Here is Sehdev's version of the story:

> In 1377, the Great Council passed a law establishing a trentino, or thirty-day isolation period. The 4 tenets of this law were as follows: (1) that citizens or visitors from plague-endemic areas would not be admitted into Ragusa until they had first remained in isolation for 1 month; (2) that no person from Ragusa was permitted go to the isolation area, under penalty of remaining there for 30 days; (3) that persons not assigned by the Great Council to care for those being quarantined were not permitted to bring food to isolated persons, under penalty of remaining with them for 1 month; and (4) that whoever did not observe these regulations would be fined and subjected to isolation for 1 month. During the next 80 years, similar laws were introduced in Marseilles, Venice, Pisa, and Genoa. Moreover, during this time the isolation period was extended from 30 days to 40 days, thus changing the name trentino to quarantino, a term derived from the Italian word quaranta, which means "forty."
>
> The precise rationale for changing the isolation period from 30 days to 40 days is not known. Some authors suggest that it was changed because the shorter period was insufficient to prevent disease spread. Others believe that the change was related to the Christian observance of Lent, a 40-day period of spiritual purification. Still others believe that the 40-day period was adopted to reflect the duration of other biblical events, such as the great flood, Moses' stay on Mt. Sinai, or Jesus' stay in the wilderness. Perhaps the

[3] Institute of Medicine (IOM),*Ethical and Legal Considerations in Mitigating Pandemic Disease, Workshop Summary* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2007).
[4] Susan Mosher Stuard, *A State of Deference. Ragusa/Dubrovnik in the Medieval Centuries* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 46.

> imposition of 40 days of isolation was derived from the ancient Greek doctrine of "critical days," which held that contagious disease will develop within 40 days after exposure. Although the underlying rationale for changing the duration of isolation may never be known, the fundamental concept embodied in the quarantino has survived and is the basis for the modern practice of quarantine.[5]

In addition to staying indoors, the Talmud recommends two other interventions during a plague:

> Our Rabbis taught: When there is an epidemic in the town, a person should not walk in the middle of the road, for the Angel of Death walks in the middle of the road…
>
> Our Rabbis taught: When there is an epidemic in the town, a person should not enter the synagogue alone, because the Angel of Death deposits his tools there… (*Bava Kama*, ibid.)

It probably won't surprise you to learn that neither of these two measures is discussed in the medical literature, and in fact if there's an epidemic in town, you probably shouldn't go to *shul* at all. Jewish behavior during an epidemic is even regulated in the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Yoreh De'ah* 116:5):

> In addition, it has been written that one should flee from a city in which there is an epidemic. You should leave the city as soon at the start of the outbreak, rather than at the end. All these issues are a matter of life and death. To save yourself you should stay far away. It is forbidden to rely on miraculous help or to endanger yourself…

The suggestion made by the rabbis - to isolate yourself from others during an epidemic - is a basic part of public infection control. We'd be wise to listen. And as we sit in relative isolation, perhaps now is the opportunity to recite this long-forgotten Talmudic prayer, originally composed by Yehudah bar Nahmani, the secretary of Reish Lakish:

> Master of the worlds, redeem and save, deliver and help your nation Israel from pestilence, and from the sword, and from plundering, from the plagues of wind blast and mildew [that destroy the crops], and from all types of misfortunes that may break out and come into the world. Before we call, you answer. Blessed are You, who ends the plague. *(Ketuvot* 8b)

[5] Paul Sehdev, "The Origin of Quarantine," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 35 (2002):1071–2.