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LEHRHAUS Over Shabbos

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PARSHAT HA-HODESH / VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI

THIS MONTH'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS
IS SPONSORED BY **CHARLIE HALL**

INCENSED BY CORONAVIRUS: PRAYER AND KETORET IN TIMES OF EPIDEMIC

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The patient recently returned from Italy and complains of fever and a cough. I am called to assess the patient. As the patient is suspected of having Coronavirus, I carefully put on my gown, gloves, mask, and face shield to examine the patient. Upon completion, I exit to a special room and very carefully remove (doff) my protective gear to prevent spread of contagious material. The process of dressing in protective gear is called to don and to doff. The last time I did the "doff" was during the Ebola scare. I have now, much to my dismay, restarted the "doff" *yomi*.

We are on high alert in the ER in anticipation of the spread of Coronavirus. Suspected cases, based on travel history, exposure, history, and symptoms are immediately isolated in a containment room, examined, and tested. Tensions are high. We have been here before (Ebola, Zika, Swine Flu, Measles), yet this time things seem different. The response is severe, the percentage of fatalities, at least at this point, appears on par with the 1918 Spanish flu (2-3%). Headlines tout the potential for this to be the worst epidemic in one hundred years. We have not seen a response of this magnitude to disease in our lifetimes.

Among the first confirmed cases in the New York area, and presently constituting the largest cluster of the disease, are members of the Orthodox Jewish community. What is our response to this epidemic? To be sure, in the spirit of *ve-nishmartem me'od le-nafshoteihem* and *pikuah nefesh*, we must address the technical aspects of disease contagion and transmission based on the dictates of modern medicine and the recommendations of the Center for Disease Control. To date, some Jewish schools and universities have closed, and *shuls* have been quarantined. Jewish organizations are sending frequent detailed e-mails and arranging conference calls to provide continuous updates on the situation. As of today, one community has declared a "whole community shutdown" - no *shul*, no *shivah*, no *simhahs*, etc.

There are attendant halakhic issues, such as kissing the *mezuzah* or Torah, davening with a *minyan* for those in quarantine, missing *keriyat ha-Torah* as an individual or community, fulfilling the obligation of reading *Parshat Zakhor*, listening to *Megillah* reading via phone or Facetime, walking the streets to deliver *mishloah manot*, travelling for Pesah, and many others. Purim was celebrated very differently this year, especially for those in quarantine, and the term "*mukaf homah*" has taken on a completely different meaning. Responses to some of these halakhic questions have already been rendered, and others will be forthcoming from contemporary *poskim*. *Barukh Hashem*, we are not so familiar with these issues. The advent of vaccinations and antibiotics has drastically reduced the impact of infectious diseases on our daily lives. Our ancestors, however, were intimately familiar with them. Plagues and epidemics were an ever-present and intimate part of their daily life.

One of our first responses to all tragedy, however, including the present Coronavirus outbreak, is prayer. First and foremost, we all fervently pray for the immediate and complete *refuah sheleimah* of all those affected. In addition to personal prayer, communal prayer and sometimes fasting are also integral parts of our response. How widespread does disease have to be in order to pass the threshold and trigger a communal response of prayer or of fasting? *Shulhan Arukh* writes:[1]

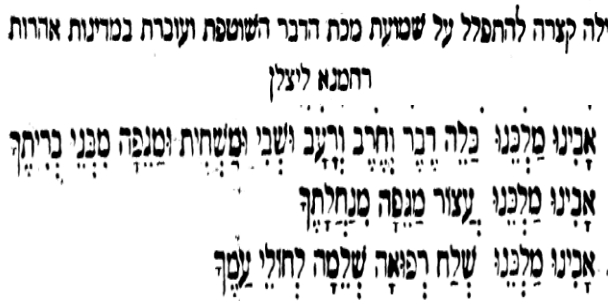
> Just as we fast… in times of drought, we also fast for other disasters… and so for plague. What is considered a plague? If a city of 500 inhabitants has three deaths a day (from plague) for three consecutive days, this is defined as a plague.

While this may not be the CDC's definition, and would clearly require updating today, it nonetheless reveals a sensitivity to a threshold in the definition of an epidemic. While there are a number of synonyms for epidemic in Hebrew, such as *magefah* or *dever*, there is no ancient Hebrew term for a pandemic. According to the World Health Organization, we are now in the midst of a global Coronavirus pandemic.

Prayers have been written for centuries both for general disease outbreaks, as well as for specific epidemics, such as cholera.

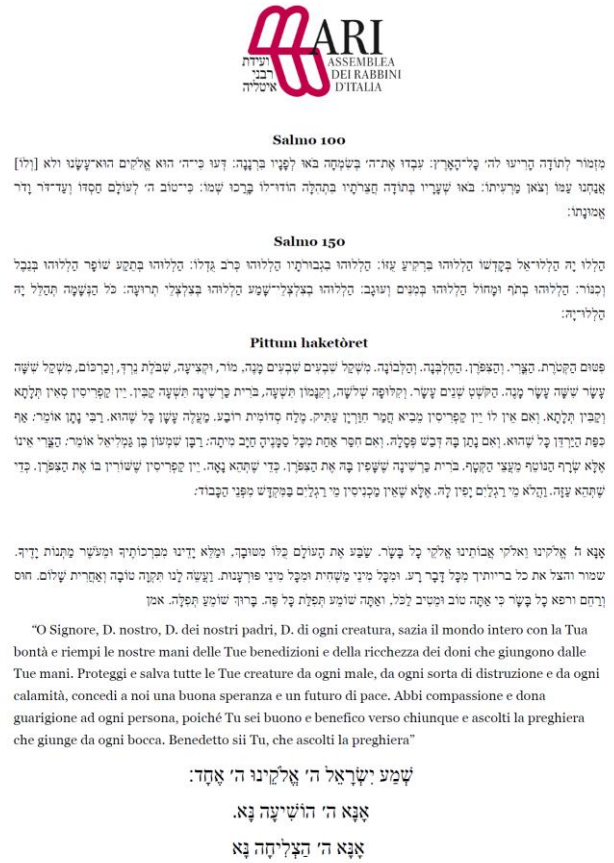
[1] *Orah Hayyim*, 576.

Some of these prayers, such as an Italian prayer during a plague from 1700, include excerpts from *Avinu Malkeinu*,[2] which is typically recited on fast days and during the *aseret yemei teshuvah*:



Many of us today have extra concentration, and think of our ill loved ones and friends, when we recite: "Our father, our King, please send a complete recovery to those ill amongst your nation." There are, however, other phrases in *Avinu Malkeinu* that we might otherwise recite without much thought, such as, "Our father, our King, prevent a plague (epidemic) from spreading amongst us." Prayers referring to "*magefah*" or plague are found frequently in *davening*, though we utter them by rote. Our ancestors surely had great concentration when reciting these phrases. Regretfully, we will now have a heightened sensitivity to these references, giving us but a small window into what occupied the recesses of our ancestors' minds when they read them.

The Rabbinic Assembly of Italy, from whence my patient returned, and which is experiencing the largest outbreak outside of China, composed the following prayer to be recited for the current pandemic:


ARI
ASSEMBLEA DEI RABBINI D'ITALIA

Salmo 100

מִזְמוֹר לְתוֹדָה הָרִיעוּ לַה׳ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: עִבְדוּ אֶת־ה׳ בְּשִׂמְחָה בֹּאוּ לְפָנָיו בְּרִנָּנָה: דְּעוּ כִּי־ה׳ הוּא אֱלֹקִים הוּא־עָשָׂנוּ וְלֹא [וְלוֹ] אֲנַחְנוּ עַמּוֹ וְצֹאן מַרְעִיתוֹ: בֹּאוּ שְׁעָרָיו בְּתוֹדָה חֲצֵרֹתָיו בִּתְהִלָּה הוֹדוּ־לוֹ בָּרְכוּ שְׁמוֹ: כִּי־טוֹב ה׳ לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ וְעַד־דֹּר וָדֹר אֱמוּנָתוֹ:

Salmo 150

הַלְלוּ יָהּ הַלְלוּ־אֵל בְּקָדְשׁוֹ הַלְלוּהוּ בִּרְקִיעַ עֻזּוֹ: הַלְלוּהוּ בִּגְבוּרֹתָיו הַלְלוּהוּ כְּרֹב גֻּדְלוֹ: הַלְלוּהוּ בְּתֵקַע שׁוֹפָר הַלְלוּהוּ בְּנֵבֶל וְכִנּוֹר: הַלְלוּהוּ בְתֹף וּמָחוֹל הַלְלוּהוּ בְּמִנִּים וְעוּגָב: הַלְלוּהוּ בְצִלְצְלֵי־שָׁמַע הַלְלוּהוּ בְּצִלְצְלֵי תְרוּעָה: כֹּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְּהַלֵּל יָהּ הַלְלוּיָהּ:

Pittum haketòret

פִּטּוּם הַקְּטֹרֶת. הַצָּרִי. וְהַצִּפֹּרֶן. הַחֶלְבְּנָה. וְהַלְּבוֹנָה. מִשְׁקַל שִׁבְעִים שִׁבְעִים מָנֶה. מוֹר, וּקְצִיעָה, שִׁבֹּלֶת נֵרְד, וְכַרְכֹּם, מִשְׁקַל שִׁשָּׁה עָשָׂר שִׁשָּׁה עָשָׂר מָנֶה. קִלּוּפָה שְׁלֹשָׁה, וְקִנָּמוֹן תִּשְׁעָה, בְּרִית כַּרְשִׁינָה תִּשְׁעָה קַבִּין. יַיִן קַפְרִיסִין סְאִין תְּלָתָא וְקַבִּין תְּלָתָא. וְאִם אֵין לוֹ יַיִן קַפְרִיסִין מֵבִיא חֲמַר חִוָּרִין עָתִיק. מֶלַח סְדוֹמִית רוּבַע. מַעֲלֶה עָשָׁן כָּל שֶׁהוּא. רַבִּי נָתָן אוֹמֵר: אַף כִּפַּת הַיַּרְדֵּן כָּל שֶׁהוּא. וְאִם נָתַן בָּהּ דְּבַשׁ פְּסָלָהּ. וְאִם חִסֵּר אַחַת מִכָּל סַמָּנֶיהָ חַיָּב מִיתָה: רַבָּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר: הַצָּרִי אֵינוֹ אֶלָּא שְׂרַף הַנּוֹטֵף מֵעֲצֵי הַקְּטָף. בְּרִית כַּרְשִׁינָה שֶׁמְּשִׂיפִין בָּהּ אֶת הַצִּפֹּרֶן. כְּדֵי שֶׁתְּהֵא נָאָה. יַיִן קַפְרִיסִין שֶׁשּׁוֹרִין בּוֹ אֶת הַצִּפֹּרֶן. כְּדֵי שֶׁתְּהֵא עַזָּה. וְהֲלֹא מֵי רַגְלַיִם יָפִין לָהּ. אֶלָּא שֶׁאֵין מְכַנִּיסִין מֵי רַגְלַיִם בְּמִקְדָּשׁ מִפְּנֵי הַכָּבוֹד:

אָנָּא ה׳ אֱלֹקֵינוּ וֵאלֹקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֱלֹקֵי כָל בָּשָׂר. שָׂבַע אֶת הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ מִטּוּבָךָ, וּמַלֵּא יָדֵינוּ מִבִּרְכוֹתֶיךָ וּמַעֲשֵׂר מַתְּנוֹת יָדֶיךָ. שְׁמוֹר וְהַצֵּל אֶת כֹּל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיךָ מִכָּל דָּבָר רָע. וּמִכָּל מִינֵי מַשְׁחִית וּמִכָּל מִינֵי פּוּרְעָנוּת. וַעֲשֵׂה לָנוּ תִּקְוָה טוֹבָה וְאַחֲרִית שָׁלוֹם. חוּס וְרַחֵם וּרְפָא כָּל בָּשָׂר כִּי אַתָּה טוֹב וּמֵטִיב לַכֹּל, וְאַתָּה שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלַּת כָּל פֶּה. בָּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה. אמן

"O Signore, D. nostro, D. dei nostri padri, D. di ogni creatura, sazia il mondo intero con la Tua bontà e riempi le nostre mani delle Tue benedizioni e della ricchezza dei doni che giungono dalle Tue mani. Proteggi e salva tutte le Tue creature da ogni male, da ogni sorta di distruzione e da ogni calamità, concedi a noi una buona speranza e un futuro di pace. Abbi compassione e dona guarigione ad ogni persona, poiché Tu sei buono e benefico verso chiunque e ascolti la preghiera che giunge da ogni bocca. Benedetto sii Tu, che ascolti la preghiera"

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה׳ אֱלֹקֵינוּ ה׳ אֶחָד:

אָנָּא ה׳ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא.

אָנָּא ה׳ הַצְלִיחָה נָּא

I bring your attention to a section of the present Italian prayer. The text begins with two chapters from Tehillim and concludes with a prayer beseeching God to protect us from all evil and forms of destruction. The center section of the prayer is occupied by the *Pittum ha-Ketoret*, the description of the incense brought in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*. What is this seemingly unrelated passage doing in a prayer during an epidemic? No context is given.

The answer begins with the biblical description of the Golden Incense Altar (*mizbah ha-ketoret*), but winds its way through later biblical passages and medical history only to resurface in the Italian Coronavirus prayer. The ceremonial burning of incense is an integral part of the Temple service. The incense was burned daily on a golden altar that rested in the *Kodesh* (Holy) section of the Temple. On Yom Kippur the incense is brought into the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* (Holy of Holies). It is noteworthy that when the Torah describes the construction of the *Mishkan*, the description of the Altar of Incense is not coupled with the description of the *Menorah* and the *Shulhan*, where one would expect it to appear, but rather is found after the mention of all the other Temple vessels and sacrifices. Ramban considers this an allusion to the fact that the incense has unique powers and properties, such as the ability to abort a plague.[3]

This foreshadowing of the power of incense to combat plague is actualized in the episode that follows the rebellion of Korah. God unleashes an unrestrained "*magefah*" (plague) upon the people of Israel. Moshe instructs Aharon to take *ketoret* from the Temple and to wave it amongst the sufferers of the plague. This rapidly brings about the cessation of the plague, "*va-tei'atzar ha-magefah*." This

[2] Jewish Theological Seminary Library B. (NS)PP380 (Italy 1700).

[3] Shemot 30:1.

may be the only direct effective treatment for plague mentioned in the Torah.

Yet this same *ketoret* which Aharon used to stave off the plague and save many lives also led to the death of his own sons, and the death of two hundred and fifty people in a dramatic display during the Korah rebellion.

The double-edged sword of *ketoret* is alluded to in a Talmudic discussion[4] which addresses the question, "How did Moshe know to use the *ketoret* to abort the plague?" The Talmud answers that while he was up on the mountain receiving the Torah, Moshe was taught by the Angel of Death that the *ketoret* possessed special healing powers. The fact that it is the Angel of Death who teaches Moshe about its medicinal qualities intimates that the same substance can be an instrument of death, as well as a medical cure.[5]

A contemporary medical halakhic discussion invokes this story as well. Moshe (and Aharon) needed to abrogate the law requiring the restriction of the burning of the *ketoret* to the confines of the *Mishkan* in order to utilize its curative powers against plague; Aharon walked with the *ketoret* outside the *Mishkan*, in the camp, amongst "the living and dead." Commentators have debated the exact halakhic justification for the permissibility of Aharon's actions.[6] While it is clear that one may violate biblical prohibitions for the sake of *pikuah nefesh*, this exemption generally applies to proven medical treatments. One needs to justify how the use of *ketoret* outside the *Mishkan*, which entails a biblical prohibition, would be halakhically permitted, inasmuch as it was not previously known to be a cure, nor part of the traditional medical armamentarium.

One contemporary authority[7] compares Esther's violation of the laws of *arayot* (illicit sexual relations) to the use of *ketoret* by Aharon. In both cases there was a situation of *pikuah nefesh*, yet the violation did not constitute a proven remedy for the problem. However, since they each involved prevention of the possible destruction of the people of Israel,[8] even an unproven remedy would be permitted.

It is this biblically-derived notion of the curative properties of *ketoret*, specifically for the treatment of plague (however that is to be defined), that led to its virtual ubiquitous inclusion in prayers for plague throughout the centuries. This association has been forgotten in the modern post-vaccination and post-antibiotic era, when epidemics with high mortality rates are far less frequent. It behooves us to recall this tradition and its place in our medical and halakhic history.

Abraham Yagel, a sixteenth-century physician, mentions the story of Aharon and the *ketoret* and supports the recitation of *ma'aseh ketoret* in times of plague.[9] He also cites Rabbi Judah Muscato who adds that by delving into the *ketoret*, the infestation will stop by natural means and the air will be purified.[10] The Ari *z"l* likewise recommends the recitation of *pitum ha-ketoret* in times of plague.[11] Even in his primarily medical treatise published in 1631, Abraham Catalano mentions the value of the recitation of the *ketoret*. In the early twentieth century, David Macht performed experiments which identified antiseptic properties of the ingredients of the *ketoret*.[12] Indeed, he penned an entire volume dedicated to identifying the exact ingredients of the Temple incense.[13]

The *Pitum ha-Ketoret* of the Italian Rabbinate is thus simply the perpetuation of a longstanding tradition, tracing its origins back to the Torah itself, of invoking the *ketoret* as a form of protection against plague or epidemic diseases. This hopefully gives us not only an historical appreciation of this prayer, which has been part of our history for centuries, but also an appreciation of the scientific advances that have led to our collective amnesia of its significance.[14]

King Hizkiyahu performed a number of actions without asking prior permission from the Rabbis, though he received retrospective approbation. One of these is the burial of the *Sefer Refuot* (*The Book of Cures*).[15] According to Rashi, this volume possessed the cures for all human disease. Over the course of time, people began to rely exclusively on the cures, neglecting to turn their eyes towards the heavens and pray to the ultimate Source of all healing. Hizkiyahu thus felt compelled to inter the precious book.

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[4] *Shabbat* 89a.

[5] See also Rashi to Bamidbar 17:13.

[6] See, for example, Mordekhai Carlebach, *Havatzelet ha-Sharon* (Jerusalem, 5767), *Korah*, 568-572; R. Yossi Sprung, *Parshat Korah,* "Chillul Shabbos and Experimental Therapy," 5779.

[7] Yosef Aryeh Lawrence, *Mishnat Pikuah Nefesh* (Bnei Brak, 5763), Chapter 62.

[8] God threatened to destroy the entire nation in the episode of Korah.

[9] See Abraham Yagel, *Moshia Hosim* (di Gara: Venice, 1587), 63 and 66. On Yagel, see David B. Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Harvard University Press, 1988). For what follows, see Andrew Berns, "Judah Moscato, Abraham Portaleone, and Biblical Incense in Late Renaissance Mantua," in *Studies in Jewish History and Culture, Volume 35, Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in the 16th-17th Centuries*, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Miletto (Brill, 2012), 119-133.

[10] Berns, *op. cit.*

[11] *Sha'ar ha-Kavanot*, *Derush Tefillat Shaharit*.

[12] David Macht and William Kunkel, "Concerning the Antiseptic Action of Some Aromatic Fumes," *Experimental Biology Medicine* (1920): 68-70.

[13] David Macht, *The Holy Incense* (Baltimore: 1928). For the previous attempt by Abraham Portaleone to identify the ingredients of the *ketorot*, see Berns, *op. cit.*

[14] The Chief Rabbinate of Israel also issued their own brief prayer for the Coronavirus pandemic. https://www.srugim.co.il/427406--הרבנות-מפרסמת-תפילה-מיוחדת-לעצירת-הקו (accessed March 8, 2020). While the text of the *pitum ha-ketoret* is omitted from this prayer, it does refer to the original episode of the post-Korah plague. It cites a phrase from Tehillim (rather than the original reference in the Torah) that focuses on the element of prayer as opposed to the vehicle of *ketoret*, *"Va-ya'amod Pinhas va-yefalel, va-tei'atzar ha-magefah*" (Tehillim 106:30) In this version of events, it is the prayer (or actions, according to the commentaries) of Pinhas, as opposed to the *ketoret* brought by Aharon, which achieved disease remission.

[15] On *Sefer Refuot*, see D. J. Halperin, "The Book of Remedies, the Canonization of the Solomonic Writings, and the Riddle of Pseudo-Eusebius," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 72:4 (April 1982): 269-292; Zev Zicherman, *Otzar Pela'ot ha-Torah*: *Shemot* (Brooklyn, NY, 5775), 413-415; F. Rosner, "The Illness of King Hezekiah and the 'Book of Remedies' Which He Hid," *Koroth* 9:1-2 (1985): 190-197; Yaakov Zahalon, *Otzar ha-Hayyim* (Venice, 1683), Introduction; Hazon Ish, *Emunah u-'Vitachon*, Chapter 5; Shlomo Halperin, *Sefer ha-Rof'im*, in *Sefer Assia* 2 (Reuven Mass: Jerusalem, 5741), 78-79; M. Hirt, *Kuntres ve-Rapo Yerapei* (Bnei Brak, 5763), 17-22; Mordechai Gumpel Schnaber, *Solet Minhah Belulah* (5557), 31b-33b.

Despite our breathtaking medical advances, perhaps representing a metaphorical exhumation of the *Sefer Refuot* of old, we are now reminded that we are not in control; that God is capable through a mere microscopic intermediary to bring the entire world to its proverbial knees; and that there are times even today when prayer can be our most potent, if not only, weapon against disease. May this be a temporary reminder to allow us to adjust our course and return our eyes to the heavens, so that the advances against disease (a possible vaccination is already on the horizon), through the hand of God, can progress and stem the tide of this latest pandemic.

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.*[16]

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.[17] "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."
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> 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 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

[16] Institute of Medicine (IOM),*Ethical and Legal Considerations in Mitigating Pandemic Disease, Workshop Summary* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2007).

[17] Susan Mosher Stuard, *A State of Deference. Ragusa/Dubrovnik in the Medieval Centuries* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 46.

> survived and is the basis for the modern practice of quarantine.[18]

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)

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

Punishment, Progress, Or Impossibility? Three Medieval Accounts of Exile

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For nearly two millennia, Jewish life has been defined by the experience of living in exile, often referred to as the diaspora. This Greek word literally means "dispersion, scattering," based on the Septuagint's translation of Deuteronomy 28:25 ("thou shalt be a *dispersion* in all kingdoms of the earth"). Wrapped up in this multifarious concept are a number of related historical events and conditions: the destruction of the Temple, the loss of political sovereignty, and this dispersion among the kingdoms of foreign nations. While diasporic life brought obvious political, social, and economic changes to Jews, it also brought a new and difficult theological problem with which to grapple. Jews now needed to unpack the fraught theological meaning of their current subjugated, non-autonomous state in (mostly) unfriendly lands and link that meaning to their understanding of Jewish nationhood and the arc of Jewish history.

Jews were spurred on in this task of articulating a coherent national-religious identity amidst statelessness by the rise and growth of the nascent "Jesus movement" (later, Christianity), which rapidly gained adherents throughout the Roman Empire and became the official state religion in the early 300s CE. That this happened during the same three centuries in which the Temple was destroyed and communal life in Israel utterly devastated under Roman rule, gave rise to difficult religious questions. The blatant simultaneity of Judaism's political fall with the rise of Christendom, whose adherents claimed to be the new people of God with a New Covenant that fulfilled and superseded the Hebrew Bible, gave Christians a powerful argument and forced Jews to account for their lowly sociopolitical state.

The popular literature of the Church Fathers and later medieval preaching frequently seized on the reality of Jewish exile as demonstrable evidence that God had rejected the Jewish people, *middah keneged middah* (measure for measure), for their rejection of Jesus. The Christian scholar Origen, active in the early 200s CE, wrote in his apologetic work *Against Celsus*, "We may see how after the advent of Jesus the Jews have been entirely forsaken, and retain none of their traditionally sacred possessions, nor even a hint of the divine presence among them… for what nation is an exile from their own metropolis, and from the place sacred to the worship of their fathers, save the Jews alone" (Book 2, Chapter 8)? Later, Augustine elaborated on this claim in what would become known as the "doctrine of witness" in his supremely influential work, *The City of God*, writing that the Jews "suffered a more wretched devastation at the hands of the Romans, and were utterly uprooted from their kingdom… they were dispersed all over the world… and thus by evidence of their own scriptures, they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ" (Book 18, Chapter 46).

From the 13th century onward, Western European Christendom grew in political strength and missionary activity. As Christian power grew in Spain and France, the Church blessed efforts by the Dominican Order to missionize the Jews, forcing them to attend sermons and financing the publication of polemics. Robert Chazan writes that in response, for the first time ever, Jews began to compose their own anti-Christian polemics en masse, in order to "blunt the pressures

exerted by a powerful Christian majority society and to reinforce Jewish commitment,"[19] as well as to "maintain the identity of a beleaguered Jewish minority" (20). Two important representative works of this genre, both from 12th century Spain, are *Sefer he-Berit*, by R. Joseph Kimhi (father of Radak) and *Milhamot Hashem*, by the little-known Jacob ben Reuben. Both spend a considerable amount of time rebutting the Christian claim of "Jewish hopelessness… as evidence of divine rejection" (Chazan 185). At the very beginning of his book, written as a dialogue between a Christian and Jew, Kimhi has the Christian protagonist say: "you… lack belief and deeds and power and kingship. You have lost everything" (ibid., 184), demonstrating the centrality of this line of argument in disputational contexts.

How, then, did the Jews respond? The most straightforward way to rebut the idea that Jewish exile validates Christian dogma is to simply acknowledge that exile is a result of sin—just not the sin Christians are thinking of! Classical Jewish literature is replete with this claim, from the text of the festival *Musaf Amidah* that begins, "because of our sins we were exiled from our land," to Talmudic passages like the one in *Yoma* 9b that attribute the destruction of the First and Second Temples to a host of different sins. This rabbinic sentiment is itself based on numerous biblical passages, like Leviticus Chapter 26, which asserts that national disobedience to Israel's covenant with God (26:15) will result in exile from its land: "I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you" (ibid., 33).

This approach rebuts the claim that Jews do not suffer because they aren't good Christians: they suffer because they aren't good Jews! The early 12th-century scholar Rabbi Meir bar Simon of Narbonne makes this exact argument in his polemical work *Milhemet Mitzvah*, emphasizing that the prolonged Jewish exile is a fulfillment of the biblical prophecy, and that "just as the punishments have materialized, so too will the eventual redemption" (Chazan 198). To blunt the bitterness of this harsh internal critique, both Rabbi Meir and Ramban, in his *Sefer ha-Geulah*, cite the verse in Deuteronomy: "For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers" (4:31), reassuring their readers that exile and subjugation, however long, cannot supplant the promises of God and do not support Christian claims to chosenness. This mode of argumentation grants the sorry political state of Jewry, and even chalks it up to sin, but finds proof from and comfort in the Bible itself, which says that exile is temporary and redemption guaranteed.

However simple and textually grounded it may be, this argument does not tell the whole story of Jewish polemical responses. Jews might have variously been bothered by the harsh personal opprobrium of such a defense, which assumes that collective Jewish sinfulness has endured for over 1,000 years, or its lack of explanation for Christian triumph. After all, even if Jews must suffer, why should that mean their enemies must prosper? Such reservations leave room for another explanation for the exile, offered by Ramban as an aside during the 13th-century Disputation of Barcelona with Pablo Christiani: "then I serve my creator in your domain, in exile and in suffering and in subjugation and in the contumely of the nations—who regularly revile me, my reward will be great, for I perform a sacrifice to God with my body. For this I shall merit the world to come more and more" (Chazan 211). Hyam Maccoby notes that Ramban is basing himself on the teaching in *Pirkei Avot*, "According to the pain is the reward" (5:23).

In the *Kuzari*, Judah Halevi strengthens this argument, cleverly pointing out that even Christians themselves agree that serving God amidst suffering and lowliness is the greatest form of devotion:

> Humility and meekness are evidently nearer to the Divine Influence than glory and eminence… Christians do not glory in kings, heroes and rich people, but in those who followed Jesus all the time, before His faith had taken firm root among them. They… suffered disgrace and slaughter for the sake of their belief. These are the people in whom they glory, whose ministers they revere, and in whose names they build churches… In these, their humility and martyrdom do they glory; not in the princes who boasted of their wealth and power, but rather in those clad in rags and fed scantily on barley bread (4:22).

This argument goes beyond marking exile merely as punishment and instead makes the ambitious *positive* claim that greater rewards are in store for those who keep the faith under conditions of humility and powerlessness than under sovereignty and wealth. The Christian trope of supersessionism—in which political inequalities between Church and Synagogue reflect religious ones-is utterly inverted, and Christian belief itself is marshaled to show that weakness before man is a catalyst for pious submission before God, fundamentally shifting our understanding of the purpose of exile.

The final line of argumentation I want to discuss is not scriptural or theological, but imaginative. Instead of accepting Christian claims about Jewish powerlessness, some Jews steadfastly insisted that even now, there are *some* Jews in *some* region of the world somewhere that still do have power. The medieval legends told about such Jews, often understood to be the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, reflect that not all Jews were content to accept traditional explanations for exile and loss of autonomy, and desired the comfort of knowing that Jews still rule somewhere, somehow.

In one case[20], the 14th-century Spanish Rabbi Shlomo Halevi converted to Christianity, and his student Yehoshua Halorki wrote a letter to him attempting to bring him back into the fold by rebutting arguments for Christianity. He includes a telling passage insisting that Jewish subjugation under Christendom doesn't prove anything because, after all, "the members of the ten tribes continued to conduct an independent life and were not dominated by any foreign power"[21] (Benmelech 197).

In a polemical work written by the 16th-century German Jewish convert to Christianity, Anthonius Margarita, he writes that the Jews "comfort themselves with the 10 tribes that the king of Assyria drove out and led back to Assyria and placed in the city Chalo/Chouor by the stream Goson and in the city Modai, as you find in Kings. It is a great wonder to me why they hope these 10 tribes, called the Red Jews, will come and redeem them. They also have little Hebrew and

[19] Robert Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity in Medieval Western Christendom* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.

[20] I'd like to thank Dr. Chaviva Levin for bringing many of the sources in this section to my attention.

[21] Moti Benmelech, "Back to the Future: The Ten Tribes and Messianic Hopes in Jewish Society during the Early Modern Age," in *Peoples of the Apocalypse: Eschatological Beliefs and Political Scenarios*, eds. Wolfram Brandes et al. (De Gruyter, 2016).

German booklets in which they write many lies and fairy tales about these 10 tribes. They also write about a stream named Sabbathion, which stream is so wild and wave-tossed during the week that no one can cross it – only on the Sabbath is the water calm. And these Red Jews dwell in the midst of these waters" (cited in Walton 107).[22]

Other examples abound. The writings of Eldad ha-Dani, a 9th-century Jewish merchant who traveled throughout Europe claiming to be the member of a Jewish community in East Africa that descended from the Ten Lost Tribes, were widely read, discussed, and accepted by many. A medieval Jewish folktale about the origins of the *piyut Akdamut* tells that during a period of dangerous Christian antisemitism, R. Meir of Worms traveled across the Sambatyon River on Shabbat to meet with an other-worldly Jewish community beyond the river, some of whom he sent back to Worms to defeat an antisemitic priest through mystical incantations and invocations of God's name.

Taken in total, these medieval Jewish arguments against the supersessionist triumphalism of Christian apologists and preachers had two purposes: one theological, the other psychological. In their apologetical works and debates with Christians, Jewish thinkers and rabbis sought to deter conversion to Christianity, while also giving Jews—even devout ones—the faith and hope to continue living as Jews, no matter how difficult and precarious their social and economic conditions might be. Each argument has to be evaluated along these dual axes of meaning, responding both to intellectual arguments about the meaning of Scripture and the divinely-orchestrated progression of Jewish history, as well as emotional ones about the fear that perhaps God had abandoned us in our exile.

With the return of Jewish sovereignty in the last century, Christian supersessionist arguments have become far less convincing, to Jews and Christians alike. Already by 1956, in a public address on Yom ha-Atzma'ut later published under the title *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik declared that "the arguments of Christian theologians to the effect that the Holy One has taken away from the Community of Israel its rights to the Land of Israel, and that all of the biblical promises relating to Zion and Jerusalem now refer in an allegorical sense to Christianity and the Christian Church, were all publicly shown to be false, baseless contentions by the establishment of the State of Israel."

In their stead, new questions have arisen, about how Jews should wield their political power, how to balance national security with pursuing peace, and the proper place of religion, private and public, in a Jewish state. And yet, with all of these changes, I would argue that medieval perspectives on the purpose of exile remain compelling sources of wisdom in approaching this new stage of Jewish sovereignty. From Rabbi Meir bar Simon of Narbonne, we learn that sin can have difficult consequences. Those clamoring to create a *medinat halachah* and start rebuilding the Temple today would do well to consider that perhaps we are not yet worthy of these blessings, and should work to improve ourselves within before altering geopolitical realities without. From the Ramban and Judah Halevi, we are reminded of the greatness of serving God in the midst of suffering. Even with sovereignty restored, the state of Israel and its soldiers and citizens have come face to face with the threat of extinction more than once and face the trauma of war with disturbing regularity. The attempt to make meaning out of ongoing national suffering did not end in 1948 or 1967 and, sadly, continues to this day. And finally, from medieval Jewish folktales and lore about the lost 10 tribes and their kingdom beyond the Sambatyon, we may remember to never take our sovereignty and power for granted. The Jews telling these stories could not accept that all Jews around the world were subject to foreign powers. For them, the pride of autonomy and self-rule was such an essential part of Judaism that it simply *had* to exist, in some form or another. It would be valuable for American Jews (myself included) to ask themselves whether they feel the same way and if so, what that might demand of us.

In all three cases, we can see strands of continuity between the modern political and theological problems of sovereignty and medieval reflection on exile. As long as sin, suffering, and national pride continue to exist, looking back at ancient thinking on Jewish nationhood and history will continue to bear fruit.

[22] Michael Walton, *Anthonius Margaritha and the Jewish Faith: Jewish Life and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Wayne State University Press, 2012).