Jewish Teaching in the Face of Pandemics

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How to deal with contagious disease has been a Jewish preoccupation since ancient times. Extensive passages in the books of Leviticus and Numbers are devoted to this challenge and are among the earliest manifestations of the understanding of the importance of quarantine and isolation in addressing such situations.

Talmudic guidance goes further and cautions against the danger of transporting disease from one place to another (Taanit 21b): affirms the need to stay at home at a time of plague and maintain social distancing (Bava Kama 60b, Ketubot 77b); and also provides strict guidelines for maintaining hygiene, especially the importance of regular washing of hands and feet (Shabbat 108b).

These injunctions are codified in the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) such as in Yoreh Deah 116:5, where Rabbi Moses Isserlis states that we are obligated in such times to do our utmost to avoid contagion of self and others and that it is forbidden to rely on miracles.

Indeed, much of Jewish ritual life ensured a high standard of hygiene in keeping with the Talmudic dictum that physical cleanliness is connected to spiritual purity (Avodah Zarah 20b).

Arguably, this way of life provided Jewish communities with greater protection against disease during the Middle Ages and may have also contributed to the Antisemitic scapegoating and attacks on Jewish communities, accusing them of being behind these plagues. In particular, the Black Death that rampaged through Europe from 1348 to 1351 killing perhaps as much as half the general population, was blamed on the Jews and led to murderous attacks on Jewish communities. Dr. Martin Blazer of NYU’s medical school has suggested that as the plague peaked at springtime, Passover cleaning and especially the removal of household grain which attracted disease carrying rats, may have also played a significant role in reducing contagion.

During the cholera pandemic of 1826 to 1837 across Europe and beyond, one of the most noted rabbinical authorities of his time, Rabbi Akiva Eiger of Posen (Poznan), issued a ruling to minimize social contact and reduce prayer minyanim to small groups (of no more than fifteen), and even supported law enforcement for such steps. He urged Jewish communities to be scrupulous about hygiene, specifically mentioning regular washing of hands and face; and above all he demanded that all behavior should be in accordance with the guidance of medical experts whose recommendations must be followed to the letter (Chidushei Rak’a, Nedarim 39).

As indicated then, rabbinic directives for social distancing and curtailing prayer gatherings and other religious social meetings are not new. What is new however, are the technological possibilities that modern society provides as possible responses to these challenges. As a result, rabbinic authorities have been spurred to rule on the use of remote technologies such as Zoom for prayer services and even the approaching Pesach seder meals. While the Conservative movement has overwhelmingly embraced these opportunities, the issues are hotly debated within the Orthodox community.
Not only are there religious legal issues at stake, there is also a profound fear of the negative impact of allowing technological tools to dominate and even undermine the values of Jewish religious life. On one chat site a prominent Modern Orthodox rabbi stated: “My feeling is that technology is so ubiquitous that this won’t be limited to just (these matters). Already, virtually all of the youth in our synagogue use technology on Shabbat, whether they’re honest about it with their parents or not. That’s part of a technology addiction that’s had detrimental consequences on our collective wellbeing, on our politics and on teenagers in particular”. Furthermore, “many opportunities for reflection and privacy have become burdened with relatively shallow interaction instead of rest and reflection. I fear that Shabbat has already moved way too far in that direction and that this will move it further there.”

Nevertheless, the technological tools for communication that we now have at our disposal are invaluable in overcoming the isolation that present circumstances demand. The importance of social communication in times of sickness and danger have always been a matter of serious concern for Jewish tradition; and where visitation is not feasible, these tools become even more important. A hundred and fifty years ago, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan known popularly as the Chafetz Chaim highlighted the religious obligation to communicate with family during war time as a matter of “pikuah nefesh” saving life, even if this was only through the psychological effect of such (Mahaneh Yisrael, 35). A century later, Rabbi Shlomo Goren as chief rabbi of the IDF ruled that the obligation upon soldiers in wartime to reassure families of their safety, warranted using the telephone on Shabbat (Meshiv Milchamah 1,48).

As has been widely stated, we are in effect in a war situation with an invisible but deadly enemy. Jewish teaching not only demands that we take the necessary steps to combat it, but that we must do as much as we can to prevent the effects of this combat compounding social alienation.