

## THE COVID-19 TEST

This Shabbat is Rosh Chodesh Iyyar and Tazria Metzora. My father Robert George Lancaster (1925-2020), may his memory be for a blessing, passed into the world of truth last week. He was interred last Friday, on the preparation day, and therefore, I have spent the last seven days observing *shiva*. For those of you unfamiliar with Jewish mourning customs, shiva is the seven-day period after the burial during which a mourner is exempt from attending synagogue services and does not leave home to go to work or to attend other events. So in other words, nothing changed. More of the same Stay at Home mandates.

Nevertheless, I've been following the continuing saga of the birth pains of Messiah through which our world is currently struggling. As of today, the death toll from Coronavirus in the United States has gone past 50,000. As dramatically terrible as that number sounds, I fully believe it's only a tithe of what we would experience if we had not undertaken such aggressive measures of social distancing and the shelter at home orders. I realize that, in recent weeks, this too has become a contentious political issue, and many would like to end the lockdowns immediately and return to normal commerce. Assuredly, that will happen soon. It will have to happen. But with God's help, the measures taken thus far have spared many lives. The enormous sacrifice the world has made in the last weeks and months has averted what had the potential to be the greatest human kill-off history has ever known. Of course, the story is not over yet.

From my perspective, I continue to be impressed with the parallels to the plagues on Egypt, many of which I have already described in previous teachings. We have observed locust plagues, severe weather, swarms of wild animals, water turning to blood-red color, and so forth. We have seen the angel drop the trumpet from his hands and the steeple tumble from the church. Last week, the comet Atlas, which should have made a blaze across the sky this May, disintegrated and fell apart, breaking into three or four pieces, which makes you wonder if it was a good idea to name a comet after the Greek god who is allegedly supposed to be holding up the whole world.

Then there were the reports that the Coronavirus can be transmitted to some animals. I saw this just before Passover. The report I saw said that particularly big cats are suffering. It reminded me of the animal disease that struck Egypt. But that was nothing compared to what we see today. Today, whole herds of livestock and flocks of poultry are being euthanized because, with restaurant closures, the demand has fallen off sharply and the animals are not being processed. Moreover, slaughterhouses have been crippled by the coronavirus, many forced to shut down or slow down production, choking meat processing. Agri-producers cannot keep feeding the animals, so they are forced to kill off mass amounts of livestock, as it says in the Torah, "Behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks" (Exodus 9:3).

The outbreak of Covid-19 in the United States has been economically devastating. Millions have been laid off. In five weeks, the Labor Department has received 26 million unemployment claims. I know that there are members of this community who have also lost their jobs or had

hours cut back. Nearly one in six American workers has lost a job since the outbreak began. Upon whom do we rely? Only upon our Father in Heaven.

But the outbreak has not been bad for all areas of business. Two commodities soared in recent weeks: gun sales and Bible sales. Americans are buying guns, presumably as a precaution lest social order starts to break down. And they are also buying Bibles. Add to that stockpiling of toilet paper and canned goods, and we have gone into full-on survivalist mode.

What are we to make of the sudden surge in Bible sales? Some reports say that Bible sales are up 150% and that Bible publishers are struggling to keep up with demand. Guns and toilet paper, I understand. Canned goods, I understand. But why are people buying Bibles? Is it that people are recognizing God's hand in current events and hoping to interpret the signs of the times? Yes, that's part of it. People are wondering if the pale horse of the apocalypse is riding through the land, and they are hoping that the Bible might offer them clues about what is going to happen next. That's part of the answer.

But I believe there's more to it than that. I think that the simple interruption of the business-as-usual has given people occasion to reflect on the meaning of their lives, the meaning of existence, and the role of spirituality in their lives. So long as life is hurrying along with all its busyness, distractions, and entertainments, there is no time or room for spiritual reflection or connection. The illusion of reality is all-encompassing. But when the world comes to a dead stop, as if the film has suddenly stopped and the lights in the theater have come on, people are suddenly looking around, blinking in the brightness, and asking themselves, "Who am I? What is my purpose? Why am I here?" Paul Levertoff teaches that the spirit inside remains in a state of slumber until some shock or tragedy rouses it from slumber. I think that's why people are buying Bibles.

Now we will see if they read them or not.

If they were to read them, they would find a great deal of material seemingly pertinent to the Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic, especially in this week's Torah portions, Tazria and Metzora. I'll give you a few examples. In this week's Torah portions, we are introduced to a mysterious disease called tzara'at (biblical leprosy). It has certain telltale symptoms, but, in its initial stages, the symptoms are not specific enough to determine whether it is tzara'at or just a similar but benign condition. To determine if you really have tzara'at requires rigorous testing.

Only the priests are qualified to administer the testing. Here's how they do it. They perform an examination and then quarantine you for seven days. After undergoing a seven-day quarantine, they check on you again. If the symptoms have advanced, they know that you have the disease. If the symptoms have not advanced, they put you under a second seven-day quarantine, just to be sure. If after fourteen days the symptoms have not advanced, you are declared clear and released from quarantine. If the symptoms have advanced, you have tzara'at, and they declare you unclean.

Remarkably, this schedule conforms closely to the incubation period for Covid-19. The average incubation period is 2-14 days, with symptoms typically occurring between 5 and 10 days. Therefore, if you have been exposed to someone with Covid-19 and have reason to believe you may be infected, you should be quarantined for a minimum of five to ten days. But to be completely safe, fourteen days. Exactly as the Torah stipulates for tzara'at.

As with Covid-19, tzara'at also contaminates surfaces. The virus can live on certain surfaces for a period of time. Likewise, the Torah warns that tzara'at can infect fabrics, textiles, leathers, and even the plaster of the walls of a house. And someone with tzara'at contaminates everything he or she touches. In fact, just being in the same room as someone with tzara'at, under the same roof, can contaminate you with their ritual impurity. Likewise, with the virus. Just being in the same enclosed space with someone can infect you.

What happens if you are diagnosed with tzara'at? You are then removed from your home, removed from your family and relatives and all your neighbors, put outside of the city to avoid having any contact with other people, and you are required to wear a mask.

Moreover, parashat Metzora is the Torah portion where we find the mitzvah of hand washing, and it says that any unclean person who touches someone or something "without having rinsed his hands in water" transmits the impurity. Likewise with Covid-19, we are continually warned that unwashed hands are the primary means by which the virus can be transmitted.

So it appears that the Bible's purity laws have some practical relevance to the current situation. But don't let me mislead you into thinking that tza'arat was some type of coronavirus. In reality, the Torah is not concerned with infectious pathogens, it's concerned with ritual purity. The issue with tza'arat and the reason for the isolation of lepers is the transmission of ritual impurity, not the transmission of germs. We have discussed that concept at length before. No doubt it's true that the principles and practices we derive from the Torah's wisdom, if applied, would go a long way to stop the transmission of infectious disease.

This is similar to what we saw in the Torah last week where the Bible prohibits the Jewish people from eating unclean animals. Why did the Bible forbid the consumption of pigs and bats? Not for health reasons. The Torah simply says that the Jewish people are not to eat such things because they are to be a holy people. It's a matter of holiness. But what has the current crisis taught us? The Coronavirus currently devastating the world most closely resembles the type transmitted by bats. As I have said before, in Wuhan, where the Coronavirus started, people eat things like bats.

Likewise, the Coronavirus that killed 16 million people in 1918 was a variation on the Swine Flu, a Coronavirus that passed from pigs to people. That's why there was such widespread alarm a decade ago when Swine Flu began to circulate again. Health experts feared another 1918. The Torah does not say, "You shall not eat these things lest you start a pandemic." But the principle remains valid.

Can anyone legitimately say that the Bible is irrelevant to us when it is telling us to wash our hands lest we infect other people or the surfaces of things we touch, and it is telling us to quarantine ourselves if we have symptoms, and its telling us to isolate the infected from those who are not infected, and it's telling us not to eat bats? (Or pigs?)

This is an example of the Wisdom of God which seems like folly to man. It reminds me of that movie, *Raid on Entebbe*, where the PLO hijacked a flight of Israelis and landed them in Uganda. They fed the Israeli hostages non-kosher food, non-kosher meat. The haredi hostages refused to eat it. They preferred to fast rather than transgress by eating non-kosher meat. All the other hostages ate the food and they all got food poisoning. The observant Jews were fine.

This is like what happened during the Black Death. The Black Death, also called the Bubonic Plague, was a malady in fourteenth century Europe. It is considered by historians to be the greatest human catastrophe in history. Unlike Coronavirus, the Bubonic Plague had an 80% mortality rate, meaning that, if ten people contracted it, eight of them would die. In total, sixty percent of the population of Europe died. Fifty million people. European cities became mass graves. It was an apocalyptic nightmare we can scarcely imagine.

But the Jewish communities seemed largely immune. Back in Egypt, in the book of Exodus, Moses said to Pharaoh that the plagues would not effect the Hebrew communities so “that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel” (Exodus 11:7).

The same principle seemed to hold true in Europe during the plague years. The Jewish communities did not seem to suffer with the plague as the rest of Europe did. That led to suspicion on the part of the anti-Semitic Europeans that the Jews were responsible for the plague. Many suggested that the Jews were poisoning the water supplies to kill Christians. They carried out reprisals against the Jewish communities in the form of terrible atrocities.

But in truth, the Jewish people were not responsible for the plague. Rats were responsible for the plague. Not the rats themselves, actually, but the flees carried by the rats. The flees carried the pathogen, and their little bite injected it into their host. When the rats died from the plague, the flees left the rats and went to find new hosts—people. After a person was bit by a flea, it took about five days incubation before the person would fall ill. Three to five days later, the person was dead.

No one really knows why the Jews were not affected, but as we saw from last week's Torah portion, rodents, especially dead rodents, are a ritual purity problem. They ritually defile food supplies, so the Jewish community does its best to practice rodent abatement. Moreover, the Torah's laws regarding ritual purity, the washing of hands, regular immersions in the mikvah, and general sanitation and hygiene engendered by the purity laws kept both the rats and the flees at bay. The Torah did not give those laws to protect Jews against the Bubonic plague. They were matters of holiness and ceremonial purity. Nevertheless, the Jewish people suffered far less from the plague than their Gentile neighbors, thanks to the wisdom of the Torah.

From these things we should learn a simple lesson. The Torah is good. It's instructions are for our good. As Paul says, "The Torah is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." The laws of the Torah are for the good of Israel, but also for the good of all humanity. That's why we look forward to the future Messianic Era when all human beings will recognize the wisdom in God's Torah and they will say to one another, "Let's go up to the Temple Mount, the mountain of the LORD, to the House of the God of Jacob, that we may learn his Torah and he may teach us his ways." In the kingdom, the Torah will go forth from Zion, and the wisdom of the Bible will be cherished universally. In that day, Bible sales will surge, but gun sales will plummet dramatically. That is the kingdom ideal for which we are waiting and in which we hope.

Last week I sent to the members a copy of Reb Eby's dream from the eighth day of Passover. On the Eighth Day of Passover, we anticipate receiving revelation about Messiah and the Messianic Era. That's why we read the prophecy of Isaiah 11 on the Eighth day of Passover, and that's also why we celebrate the Messiah Banquet on the last day of Passover. So it's of extra significance that Aaron received this dream on the eighth day of the festival. It comes to us as an insight into the future kingdom but also as a very practical warning for the current hour in which we live. In the dream, Aaron is brought to the future kingdom and he asks them about the era in which we are currently living, the days of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

I will read you Aaron's description of the dream he received from heaven, and the interpretation that his wife gave to it:

Sparing many of the details, on the eighth night of Passover I had a vivid and lucid dream. It was so remarkable to me that I actually woke my wife in the middle of the night in order to tell her about it.

The dream took place in a prosperous and calm future. I asked the residents of that future era what was to be the outcome of our current crisis. In a solemn and serious tone they said that it was a tremendous difficulty economically. Jobs became scarce.

I asked them, "What should I tell the community to do?" I remarked that perhaps gaining this information was the reason I was there.

They told me that many people would make the mistake of turning down jobs because they did not offer 40 hours per week. They sternly urged, "If someone offers you a job with four hours or twelve hours, take it and become their boss!"

When I told my wife this dream, she noted that it may have a spiritual application perhaps in addition to a physical one, and this rang true to me. The job with few hours may be the seemingly lesser mitzvot that we tend to scoff at and turn down. But many of the higher profile mitzvot have been taken away from us. We have to invest in the many small mitzvot available to us right now and not squander them in order to see them blossom into great works.

The dream has two meanings. On the simple level, the meaning of the dream is simply as it sounds. We should be preparing for a time of economic difficulty. We will need to make sacrifices and take what opportunities come to us. We may need to learn to live with less. To survive, a person may need to take work that he or she might consider to be beneath his or her worth or dignity. This is like the teaching of Yeshua. Rather than holding out for the place of prominence at the table, Yeshua teaches us that we should take the lower seat. Better to take the lower seat at the table and later be promoted to a higher seat than to demand the higher seat and receive no seat at the table at all. Take whatever opportunity comes. That's the simple meaning of the dream.

But on a deeper level, the meaning of the dream is about the world that we find ourselves in today and the changed world into which we will emerge. For example, today we are unable to assemble with our brothers and sisters for prayer services. Unable to assemble in the name of our Master to worship Hashem and learn his Torah together. This is like being laid off from a job. A person might assume that he can just spiritually coast and wait for the synagogue to reopen. Don't do that. Grab the mitzvot that are available to you now, even if they seem like small things. Take the time for your daily prayers and studies, daily acts of charity and kindness. Don't slack off. Seize the little mitzvahs like praying maariv and counting the omer every night, like thanking God after eating, like going the extra mile for others, taking time to listen or to show a small kindness, guarding your eyes and your heart, whatever the thing may be that you are apt to disregard.

Today we aren't able to meet together to celebrate Shabbat. But that doesn't mean you should take a break from your personal observance of the holy day. It's still Shabbat whether or not the synagogue is open. Honor the Shabbat as you are able. Don't make the mistake of turning down these small opportunities for godliness.

Our Master says, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much" (Luke 16:10). It might seem like there's not much you can do for the kingdom and not many mitzvot at hand under the circumstances. That's not a reason to become spiritually lax or to backslide. Just the opposite. Be extra faithful in the little things that are at hand, and don't waste a single opportunity to exercise godliness.

And in reality, under our circumstances today, there is a tremendous opportunity to draw near to God. Our Torah portion is not really about an infectious disease. It's really about ritual purity, the laws of clean and unclean. And what is ritual purity about? It's about being in a ceremonially fit state to come into the presence of God, to enter his house, and to eat from his table, the holy sacrifices.

The great opportunity that we have today is to seize the quiet moments and draw near into the presence of God. Draw near to the LORD and he will draw near to you. Spirituality and spiritual connection exist in the spaces between things. When life is full of things, there's not much room for experiencing spirituality. When things stop, when things cease, and we experience the quieting effect of the ceasing, that's when there's room for experiencing God. That's what

meditation means in the Jewish sense. Not an emptying of the mind, but a cessation of ‘other,’ and an entering into the presence of the One. That’s also the real meaning of Shabbat. The work was completed, so God ceased. God is in the ceasing. A Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God.

The Bible says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Today the world is standing still.

It’s an opportunity to know that he is God.

Some religious teachers today interpret the current signs and circumstances as God’s punishments. They imagine God as a vindictive God punishing the world for sin with the virus, as if the Coronavirus was a punishment for the sin of this or the sin of that. Maybe it is, but that’s not how I would understand it. I don’t believe the Coronavirus is punitive in any sense. Nor the locust plague in Africa. Nor any of the unusual phenomenon that we see happening around the world today.

The signs that came on Egypt in the days of Moses were not punishments, as if Egypt was more wicked than Mesopotamia and therefore had been singled out for retribution. They were intended to reveal Hashem to the world, and to test hearts. Egypt was not being punished. Instead, Pharaoh was being tested. The question was not one of punishment. The question was, “Will Pharaoh acknowledge God or not?” And that is the test for the world today as well. Are all these things merely random coincidences? Will we stick to agnosticism and atheism and materialist reductionism? Or do we acknowledge that God exists and, as a result of that revelation, repent from our own wickedness and turn to righteousness. If we believe that everything comes from the hand of God, then how could we turn a blind eye to current circumstances and say, “These things are merely coincidence and happenstance.”

In addition, the signs on Egypt revealed what was in Pharaoh’s heart. We have seen the same effect with world leaders from China to the United States. The crisis has stripped away the false veneers and revealed hearts and character of world leaders.

It’s a test. A worldwide test. And like any test, there’s a way to pass the test and a way to fail the test.

Humanity could emerge from Covid-19 many steps closer to the kingdom. Closer to the revelation of God. We could emerge from this disaster a kinder people, more enlightened, more in tune with spiritual realities, more concerned for our neighbor, and for other peoples elsewhere in the world. We could emerge from the Covid-19 Era wiser and gentler, with a heightened sense of empathy for the suffering of others and a concern for their wellbeing, and a sharpened sense of wonder at the gift of life and the enjoyment of life’s simple delights.

Or we could emerge from Covid-19 a meaner people, an angrier people, embittered against this ideology or that and possessing a heightened sense of xenophobia and paranoia, even more

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hardened and calloused to the spiritual world and the hand of Hashem, as it says, “And Pharaoh hardened his heart.”

The choice is ours. It’s a test of our hearts. The choice belongs to each one of us. Choose life. Don’t harden you heart. But when you see these things happening, lift up your heads. Your redemption draws nigh.