

God, Science, Albert Camus and the Plagues

Dam, Tzfardeah, Kinim, Arov, Dever....

Blood, Frogs, lice, wild beasts, cattle plague...

As I say those words, I can feel my pinky twitching!

As a little boy, I remember well the recitation of the plagues and taking a drop of wine out of my cup and putting it on a plate. I can still remember my grandmother warning all of the children at the table to not put your finger in your mouth; it is bad luck.

Later, I learned the Midrash of the angels in heaven cheering the destruction of the Egyptian arm at the Sea of Reeds and how God admonished them by saying, *my children are drowning in the sea and you celebrate?* From that, the Rabbis learned that we should not rejoice in another person's pain, and there is no room for what the Germans call *Shadenfreuden* in Judaism. So, we take a drop out of our cups of joy, our cups of redemption, to remind us of that fact.

But gathering at our tables this year, and hearing the plagues in a time of the Coronavirus, brought the entire experience into sharp focus.

During my years in college, I became enamored with absurdist, existentialist thinker Albert Camus, and read most of the French philosopher's works. His book, *The Stranger*, regarding a man who was unwilling to accept the norms of society, was perfect fare for a college student trying to find his way. I remember reading his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" about a man forced to push a boulder up a hill over and over, just to have it roll down. How many hours did I spend pondering Camus' famous question, how do we find meaning and purpose in an absurd universe?

In a world struggling to fight a pandemic, Camus's novel *The Plague* is chillingly relevant. It tells the story of a small, boring town near the shore in Algeria which is struck by Bubonic Plague. The reaction of the townspeople is eerily similar to the way that many of us have reacted to the coronavirus – denial, fear, blame, and inspiring acts of courage. The town is totally locked down. Nobody can come or go. Sound familiar? In the book, Camus uses the term "exile," which rings so true for Passover. He wrote: "Still, if it was an exile, for most of us, it was exile in our own home." Camus' words sound almost Jewish, but in reality, nothing could be farther from the truth.

The difference between the Jewish world view and Camus' world view is that, as Jews, we believe in a caring God who is involved in history. In Camus' world, life is absurd; there is no God, and like poor Sisyphus, we struggle to make sense in a world that does not care. There are two world views: a caring world and an absurd world.

It is for us to decide in which world we want to live.

From the Torah's perspective, there is meaning in history and historical events. As Psalm 21 teaches: "The God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps." The Ten Plagues were purposeful, a punishment brought on the Egyptians with cause. Plagues are a punishment upon Pharaoh for calling himself a God and for the Egyptian people for their indifference in the face of such cruelty. Later in the Bible, God brings a plague in the days of King David for the sin of taking a census. Throughout the Bible, certain plagues are seen as a punishment from God.

In the post-Biblical era, when Jews were scattered across the world, our people made a convenient scapegoat. The horrible black plague in Europe in the fourteenth century was often blamed on Jews. Ironically, Jews were spared from the worst of the Black Plague because our tradition has numerous laws about hand washing and other sanitary measures, as well as the laws of Passover which required our ancestors to clean out their barns and silos of chametz, thereby ridding themselves of rats who were the main carrier of the disease. In the minds of the Christians, that became a reason to blame the Jews; they must be poisoning the wells. Today, there are voices on the right that blame the coronavirus on gays. There are voices on the left that blame the coronavirus on global warming. There have also been murmurings about Jews. In this mindset, a plague means someone deserves the blame.

So, does God having anything to do with the coronavirus? How do we know that God is not bringing this upon us?

I believe that Religion only makes sense if it goes along with the best of science. There cannot be two sets of truths. The ultra-Orthodox community is paying a heavy price for ignoring the science of the Coronavirus and believing that God will protect the faithful. Ironically, the same Bnai Brok mentioned in the Haggadah, where the rabbis stayed up all night to discuss the going out from Egypt, is the epicenter of the Covid19 in Israel today.

Looking through the eyes of a microscope, we see that a virus does what all nature attempts to do: replicate itself. A virus accomplishes this by

overtaking a cell and multiplying as it divides. Quite simply, that is how nature works.

Reading science through a religious eye leads to the conclusion that the same God whose creation produces viruses has also endowed human beings with remarkable immune systems. God has imbued our bodies with the power to ward off infection and disease, but that will only take us so far. The coronavirus is a mutated virus to which our bodies have not yet developed immunity. But our tradition does not stop there; it also teaches that God has endowed us with great minds that can discover the cure for such viruses, and that the cure is within the creation as well. We not only live with that hope, but also the sacred responsibility to work to find the cure. That is the Jewish way.

The coronavirus is not a punishment from God but a natural event in a world created by God. We do not live in Camus' absurd, meaningless universe, but in a universe where we can see the hand of God in the human response. God's hand can be seen in the extraordinary responses amongst the human beings created in the divine image. The extraordinary acts of courage, kindness, bravery, ingenuity, and caring. God is not punishing us and God has not abandoned us, either. We just need to know how and where to look.

Rabbi Naomi Levy, a very thoughtful Conservative Rabbi, has written a bold response to those who believe that God is behind the Coronavirus for the Passover Seder:

Tonight is the time to proclaim God as the One who lifts us up, frees us, shelters and blesses us each day. Passover will survive without a belief in a God who visits plagues upon any soul. The key to Passover is a belief in rebirth, a belief that tomorrow can be better than today; a knowing that we each have a critical part to play in the unfolding of hope. Freedom begins with open eyes and ears and hearts. Seas will part, answers will come, cures will emerge, New ways of believing will sprout up and take root, A universal love that mirrors God's love for every living creature and for our world.

During my college years, I was enamored with Albert Camus. That notion of an absurdist universe appealed to me. Now, nearly a half century later, I see how far my life's journey has taken me:

- I crave a universe of order, a universe of meaning,
- a universe where human beings bear the responsibility of creating a just society,

- a universe where we have the power to find the cures for our ailments,
- a universe where in the midst of our fears we can show love, caring and empathy,
- a universe where the presence of a kind and caring God can be seen in the drops of wine at our Seders and in the world around us.

Chag Sameah!