

God and the Coronavirus

Mar 15, 2020 | by [Rabbi Benjamin Blech](#)



What could be the meaning of a virus forcing millions into a “timeout” of quarantine and seclusion?

Coronavirus is now officially a global pandemic. Suddenly we find ourselves smitten by a plague of biblical severity.

Passover asks us to remember the 10 plagues which God sent against the Egyptians. With the help of the Bible we know the purpose behind these afflictions of a people. God had a plan. Egyptian suffering had meaning. What makes our contemporary anguish so particularly unbearable is its seeming incomprehensibility.

In the age of the prophets there would've been an effort to discern some divine message in this global tragedy. But today we somehow assume that scientific knowledge precludes the possibility for including God as part of the management of the universe. After all who can argue with Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch who, in the latter half of the 19th century, proved the germ theory of disease – that pathogens too small to see without magnification are the true cause of illness. Germs are the villains and viruses are the sole reasons for the presence of diseases which determine whether we live or die.

And I dare to ask: Doesn't belief in God demand that we merge the germ theory of disease with the conviction of faith in a supreme being who actually decides where, when and how far viruses spread?

When we are directed by doctors to wash our hands we are required to do so by Torah law.

Please understand exactly what I'm saying. Maimonides long ago made clear that it is our obligation to ensure our good health. We can't simply rely on God; God has made us his partners in our quest for longevity. Hygiene is a mitzvah; it's an obligation. Taking care of our bodies is a spiritual requirement akin to protecting our souls. When we are directed by doctors to wash our hands we are required to do so by Torah law.

But the ultimate decision of life or death remains, as we make clear every year on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when our fate is sealed, with the Almighty.

That is why I'm amazed that of the countless suggestions for how to counter and to cope with the coronavirus we hear so little of the word God and the possibility that this global pandemic brings with it a profound divine message.

I am obviously no prophet, but here is a thought that I think is worth considering and taking to heart. Every parent knows that one of the most obvious responses to a child's misbehavior is what is commonly known as a "timeout." The child is restricted from enjoying pleasurable activities. The child has his normal life disrupted. The child is encouraged to reflect upon his disobedience. Is it too much to consider that as our world continues to sink ever lower in our commitment to virtue that God responded with a virus that has forced millions into a "timeout" of quarantine and seclusion?

The 10 Commandments are the biblical source of the most basic system of ethical and moral behavior. They represent the primary justification for our continued existence on earth. And the commentators took note of a remarkable number. In the original Hebrew, the language in which the commandments were inscribed by God on the two tablets, there are exactly 620 letters.

620 would seem to be a number with no particular theological significance. It would've been perfect and readily comprehensible if there were exactly 613 letters in the 10 Commandments. Those are the numbers of mitzvot given to the Jewish people in the Torah. The 10 Commandments are the principles inherent in all of Jewish law. But what is the meaning of 620 letters? The rabbis explained. While the number of mitzvot for Jews is 613, the number seven represents universal law – what is commonly referred to as the seven laws of the descendants of Noah, required as a minimum for all of mankind. And 620 of course is the sum of 613 and seven, the totality of divine guidance for both Jews as well as the rest of the world.

The word corona – as in coronavirus – comes from the Latin word for crown.

The commentary does not end there. 620 is the *gematria*, the numerical value, of an important Hebrew word, *keter*, which means crown. A *keter* – a crown – is placed on top of every Torah scroll. The symbolism is obvious. The crown above the Torah demonstrates the relationship of the 10 Commandments to the

rest of the Torah. From the 10 – in number of letters 620 – we have the principles which subsequently found expression in the entirety of the Torah.

The *keter* – the crown – is the most powerful symbol of our connection with God.

The word corona – as in [coronavirus](#) – comes from the Latin word for crown.

Perhaps we need to consider the world's present affliction not just in the context of a disease caused by pathogens but as a divine message reminding us that we have been given our lives to invest them with meaning and virtue as defined by God's 10 Commandments.

Copyright © 1995 - 2020 Aish.com, <https://www.aish.com>.

Aish.com is a non-profit and needs your support. Please donate at: [aish.com/donate](https://www.aish.com/donate),

or mail a check to: Aish.com c/o The Jerusalem Aish HaTorah Fund PO Box 1259 Lakewood, NJ 08701.