This year, Passover will be like no Passover before. Self-quarantined in our homes to avoid doing harm to ourselves, our loved ones, and society, Passover will be smaller than ever before. But it will also be powerful. We are, after all, living through a plague of our own, one deserving of inclusion in the list of the Ten Plagues that God meted out against the Egyptians as he rescued the Israelites from slavery and brought them out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. The plague of the coronavirus will leave no community untouched, no family unscathed, whether in terms of health or finances. What can we learn about this modern day plague from the Ten Plagues in the Book of Exodus? What can coronavirus teach us about the Ten Plagues? We asked 20 influencers to write about the 11th Plague: Passover in the Age of Coronavirus. Here’s what they had to say.

Illustrations by Noah Lubin.

The views and opinions expressed in these articles are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.
And Pharaoh turned and went into his house, neither did he lay even this to heart. And all the Egyptians digged round about the river for water to drink; for they could not drink of the water of the river. (Exodus 17:23-24)

What did Pharaoh tell his people? Did he downplay the severity of the events? Did he promise it'd all be over soon? That the markets would come roaring back? That his healers were the most powerful magicians in the land? Did the people understand the connection between the sludge in their streams and the oppression of all those immigrant workers, toiling away on the pyramids?

The plagues were about power. The middle act of our great old epic of bondage, infanticide, torture, exile, exploitation, collective punishment, fever dreams, and dominance. For Egypt, the assertion of divine authority came through suffering and pestilence. The miraculous was experienced as a baffling curse, a nightmare of hunger and wonder.

The LORD of the alien slaves had poisoned the water. That which brought life, brought disease and death. The Nile turned red, the fish choked, and the Egyptians thirsted. Dam, blood. It lasted seven days.

Didn't they see that it was their own Pharaoh who brought this upon them, with his vanity, his ignorance, and pride? Or did it make them hate the slaves even more?

What was it like that morning, when average Cairo taxpayers woke up to find their wells black with coagulate? Did they attempt to wash with it? To drink it? Did they sense that this was only the beginning of Moses’ campaign of foreign supernatural terror?

Over the following weeks, every Egyptian would be stricken in helplessness. Their empire would become a wasteland of sickness, protected by no gods.

Maybe we’ve been telling it all wrong. Dipping our fingers into the wine, counting out the plagues onto the plate. Better it should happen to them. We were the Hebrews. We were the afflicted. We were once slaves. But it was always a projection, a fantasy of revenge and redemption. We told ourselves that it somehow connected us to all the oppressed in the world. We sang Let My People Go and reclined in our freedom. Dayenu.

Well, let this be the year when we see that, alas, we are not the Hebrews. We are all Egyptians. A new wrath is upon us.

And that which had bound us together, our commerce and communion, has become a source of disease and death.

Yet as national and physical borders are closed, other borders dissolve in a great collective of isolation and fear. We are now bound ever tighter, in the solidarity of our vulnerability. As in Exodus, his gods will not save him. No one can count on being passed over. We are aleyn tsuzamen.

We are the Egyptians now

By Daniel Kahn

Daniel Kahn, born in Detroit, is a Berlin-based singer-songwriter, theatre artist, and translator, working in Yiddish, English, and German.
As Plagues Go…

By Benjamin Wittes

As I write these words, I am lying on a hammock, next to a fire burning in an outdoor fireplace on my porch. A glass of single-malt Scotch is in my hand. The Mozart second horn concerto is playing in the background. As plagues that shut down society go, this one turns out to have its upsides.

Yes, we’re all stressed out about the shutting down of civilization, about death, about the collapse of the economy and the heartbreaking loss of employment for many people. We’re all worried about the welfare of humanity more generally. But not all of it is unpleasant.

I’m caught up with my email.

It all makes me wonder if the Big Ten — plagues, I mean — might get a bit of a bad rap. Sure, they were bad. You don’t send a plague for the recipients’ amusement. But were they all bad? Maybe there were, after all, some silver linings in those clouds too.

Consider: The American Red Cross declares that we are facing a “Severe Blood Shortage, Donors Urgently Needed.” What blood type was the Nile, one wonders? It’s too much to hope that it was O negative, the type that serves as a universal donor. But a Nile’s worth of any kind of blood would be helpful now.

The world is also running out of frogs — amphibians in general, actually. I’m not sure we need to go overboard solving this problem. You likely don’t need frogs to “come into thine house, and into thy bedchamber, and upon thy bed, and into the house of thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thine ovens, and into thy kneading troughs.” Still, bringing “forth frogs abundantly” right now sounds pretty good to me.

So does a cattle plague, to be honest. Cows are a major contributor to climate change. We have too many of them. We don’t seem to be able to curb our consumption of meat, so maybe a meat plague would not be the worst thing in the world, though it would obviously suck for the cows.

I also think there are climate change upsides to darkness. Just think how much less energy we would use if we had no prospect of shedding light. It’s not a long-term solution, to be sure. It’s only three days. But we do need to start somewhere. Maybe making energy consumption useless for three days would teach us to use less of it at other times, kind of like fasting makes you appreciate food.

Yeah, some of the ten plagues seem decidedly lacking in bright sides — lice, for example. I don’t think I can make a compelling argument for an infestation of lice. Nor for a swarm of malicious insects or beasts. Or locusts, a plague of which seems to be, uh, plaguing ten countries just now. I’m not pro-locust under any circumstances that I know of. But just think: Climate change is causing locust swarms and a cattle plague and darkness would fight climate change; maybe we can pit plague versus plague.

The truth is that more of the plagues have upsides than we tend to discuss at seder: boils, for example. Boils are really gross. I’ve had boils, which are actually caused by a staph infection. They made me pity Pharaoh. But there is, in fact, a bright side of boils too; it’s called antibiotics. Unlike coronavirus, staph is a bacterium. We learned how to deal with those a while back. [Don’t you raise antibiotic-resistant staph with me. This is a short comic piece.]

My favorite plague has always been hail. I love thunderstorms. I like hailstorms, too. They’re dramatic. I know, the Biblical one was, well, Biblical. I still think it would be a really good show. And roofs are a lot better now than they were in ancient Egypt. So bring it on.

All of which brings me to the killing of the first born. I confess, there aren’t that many good jokes about killing first-born children. The temptation to name famous first-born sons who would, as W.S. Gilbert might say, “none of 'em be missed” (there are a lot of them) seems in bad taste. So I’ll just content myself by
The invisible plague: grief

By Seth Mandel

If you’ve never sat in an eerily empty subway car amid a global pandemic, while reading a novel about a strain of influenza wiping out 99% of the world population – well, I don’t recommend it.

But that was a few morning commutes for me as the novel coronavirus knocked on America’s door. I was working on a review of Emily St. John Mandel’s new book, which necessitated rereading her apocalyptic 2014 bestseller “Station Eleven.” I started to question my life choices.

The running joke is that the writers behind our current plotlines of reality are going all-in, as if “America: The Series” isn’t getting renewed. And so the Times of Israel headline on March 16 seemed to follow the theme nicely: “Plague of locusts set to descend upon Middle East in time for Passover.”

Dueling plagues will surely make everyone’s seder feel more relevant. But it’ll also be instructive about human nature, fear, and our understanding of miracles.

Each locust, according to experts, can consume its own weight in pilfered crops every day – and will hit an area of the world already facing food shortages. That means a giant swarm of locusts is no joke. But the relaying of these headlines is almost always done in the tone of a punchline. The coronavirus, in contrast, is (rightly) spoken of almost exclusively in terror. The difference between the two highlights an aspect of the Ten Plagues we rarely pay much attention to.

No one ever says, “Hey isn’t it funny that a plague suffocating people to death in isolation is hitting just in time for Passover?” It’s a coincidence, perhaps, but a grim one. Yet we flippantly joke about the timing when it comes to locusts. Locusts – and frogs, to name another...
example — tend to be the ones we picture when we talk about ancient plagues. The word itself has an almost fantastical connotation to us.

This is understandable: We first learn about them when we’re kids, after all. The holiday is also, ultimately, a happy one. We were slaves; now we are free. But aside from abridging the Hallel prayer, how much do we really think about the massive loss of life accompanying our liberation?

The punishment doled out to our tormentors can be both just and tragic.

The older one is, the more likely he or she is to suffer after contracting the coronavirus — and more likely to die. And the suffering and death are done in isolation. So perhaps one lesson of our current terrifying moment is — at least for the adults — to think not of frogs and locusts but of the killing of the firstborn, and of suffocating darkness, when we hear the word “plague.”

But it should also teach us about faith. On Shemini Atzeret each year, we resume adding the line “mashiv ha’ruach u’morid ha’gashem” to our prayers, expressing our appreciation of the one who makes the wind blow and the rain fall. The rain part is obvious — at that time of year we’re heading into a season in which the crops need rainfall. That is also the part of the prayer that is most important; we must repeat the Shemonah Esrei if we forget it. Why? The Gemara teaches us that we don’t have to ask for wind: The world cannot survive without it, and therefore it will never be withheld.

It’s an important point: The part of that formula that the world cannot exist without is that which we cannot see. We only know it is there because of its effect on what we can see.

So it is with God Himself.

And in this is another lesson about the plagues. The coronavirus, like the death of the firstborn, is invisible. And it leaves in its wake a mostly invisible, yet supremely potent, pain: grief.

So the lesson of the plagues — then and now, ancient and modern — is, yes, the indelible image of its carnage. But if we really want to understand what we and others have gone through, and the most powerful forces at play in our stories, we must then ask: What am I not seeing?

Seth Mandel is the executive editor of the Washington Examiner.

Opinion

The man–made plagues of Gaza

By Muhammad Shehada

The story of Passover and the ten plagues always filled me with awe: Egyptians punished with hunger and thirst, bloody water, blinding darkness and loved ones lost overnight. When I was a young person, those horrifying plagues were unimaginable. Then, I experienced similar, man–made plagues, plagues that continue to swallow Gaza — slowly, painfully.

I remember summer of 2006, when the entire enclave was plunged into blinding darkness after a massive explosion sent shockwaves through the city. We rushed to the radios to find out what had happened, and learned that Israel had bombed Gaza’s only power plant to the ground.

The same plant was bombed again in 2014, and darkness, a “darkness that can be felt,” [Exodus 10:21] has engulfed Gaza ever since; at best, we’ve had eight hours of electricity per day, while on many days, we’re lucky to see a flicker of light.

Not long after the first bombing, in 2007, Israel put the entire region on lockdown. An aerial, naval and ground siege, and then Operation Cast Lead the following year pounded the enclave’s infrastructure, leaving large parts of Gaza so broken that its people were forced to live like it was the stone age.
God sent the plagues to force the Egyptians to set the Hebrews free; in our case, we’re held in confinement by those same people.

That was just the beginning. More plagues unfolded. Water treatment facilities couldn’t function without power, so raw sewage began to run through the streets and between houses. Available water is always decreasing. Today, 97% of Gaza’s water is unfit for human consumption.

“The river will stink and the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water,” reads Exodus 7:18.

No one in Gaza could mistake the smell of rot that permeates the enclave every night when life goes to rest. It is a smell like no other that comes from Wadi Gaza. What was once a vibrant natural reserve has now become a dumping site for sewage.

Likewise, the waters of Gaza’s beach, once irresistibly beautiful, have turned dark brown from contamination. Swarms of mosquitoes and flies have become a routine sight. Many observers fear that an outbreak of cholera or typhoid in Gaza is only a matter of time.

So many freezing winters have passed without any source of warmth. So many summers without enough electricity to even turn on a fan against the unbearable heat. Food became scarce, and hundreds of thousands of people have been living only one step away from starvation.

And now the coronavirus is yet another impending disaster for Gaza. An eleventh plague against which Gaza has no protection. We have no ability to contain it and no strength left to resist it.

Last Wednesday, seven more Gazans tested positive for the virus. With Gaza’s compromised economy, overwhelmed health sector, unlivable conditions and high population density, it’s only a matter of time until a coronavirus outbreak spreads through the beleaguered strip. There’s yet no preparation on Israel’s side to prevent such disaster from unfolding in Gaza.

Gaza’s plagues – the blinding darkness, the stinking water, the diseases and hunger – were all preventable. They were all man-made.

Muhammad Shehada is a contributing columnist for the Forward.

Opinion

The plague’s reminder: We only think we’re in charge

By Virginia Heffernan

As COVID-19 is not the fearsome *Yersinia pestis* bacterium – the rod-shaped, anaerobic organism that ravages human bodies by way of rat fleas – it is not, strictly speaking, a plague. No matter. If civilization can be said to be plagued by froyo shops or LED light displays, it’s plagued by COVID-19, though the infection is viral and not bacterial.

Some 41,260 people have died of the virus worldwide; by the time this is published, the number will be much higher. (Went to fact-check, and it’s now at 41,261.) This disease tearing through the human race is nothing if not a *plaga*, Latin for “strike,” the same root that gives us *plangere*: “to lament by beating the breast.” The coronavirus is breast-beating at the *Vidui* – a cause for lamentation, and an act of lamentation itself.

Plagues move in and out of abstraction. They’re both empirical infections of the body and overworked symbols that can certify a failure of leadership like Mike Pence’s, or a success, as when frogs, darkness, murder, etc., were celebrated as the “signs and marvels,” that proved to Egypt exactly whose god held the whiphand.

At least four of the ten plagues in Exodus are bugs: lice, flies, locusts and the microscopic, generally tick-borne parasites that are known collectively as livestock pestilence. These plagues are most akin to our own COVID, and their effect is to promote madness and illness at once.
Whatever their material effects on the body, an infestation of bugs is a devastatingly effective plague. It drives the human mind wild. Language-besotted primates – humans – can be efficiently made crazy by organisms whose uncanniness defies our every organizing principle. Bugs move wrong, they gather wrong, they are individually insensate but collectively intelligent beyond all imagining – subhuman and superhuman at once.

Like the coronavirus or livestock pestilence, the vast majority of pathogens wreak their havoc at the electromicroscopic level. To envision the coronavirus, for example, picture a human hair magnified to the width of a football field. The virus at that magnification would be four inches across.

As they say: let that sink in. COVID-19 represents more than a “pest” to the human sensory system. It confounds it entirely; viruses break cognition as well as lungs. And yet we humans make our home among bugs whose numbers are best represented this way: ∞

As we are repeatedly reminded, our bodies are never free of the limitless microbes exploiting us as an ecological niche. Joi Ito, the former head of the MIT Media Lab, has proposed that microbes determine our every appetite, mood and move. The brain only thinks it’s in charge.

To keep at bay this incomprehensible truth, we can be forgiven for moving heaven and earth to deny it – to assert the primacy of the brain. Only when our brains falter does the denial dissolve. When the fevered or drug-addled see bugs crawling over their flesh, they’re not wrong.

The Justinian Plague, which began in the Byzantine Empire and moved westward in the middle of the 6th century, was probably typhus. That febrile infection is caused by rickettsia, which – like Yersinia pestis, cause of the bubonic plague – is a bacterium, non-motile, gram-negative, sporeless. The historian Procopius of Caesarea described it in 550 as unspeakably devastating, and laid blame for it at the feet of the emperor Justinian, for whom it is named. (Justinian’s failure was not that he didn’t produce enough ventilators; he was just demonic.)

Later historians put the death toll of the Justinian Plague at some 10 million, and called it the final blow to the Eastern Roman Empire. Then, in 2019, a group of historians and scientists rethought the Justinian Plague in the pages of the “Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences.” They examined pollen samples, coins, and Roman archeology, especially burial sites. Somewhat unceremoniously, the team downgraded what they called the JP from ferocious and catastrophic to... “inconsequential.” Though they didn’t have the power to strip it of its title as a plague, they did write that Procopius and others had overhyped it.

What will happen to our own plague, COVID-19? Perhaps, if our modern measures of containment keep the case-fatality rate around one to two percent, and considering that it’s not bacterial, it might – in 1,500 years – also be considered inconsequential.

But that doesn’t matter now. Like the ten plagues of Egypt, our catastrophic coronavirus demonstrates that, during times of great historical change, a non-human entity – numinous as a god or a swarm of microbes – has almost always taken charge.

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Opinion

My great-grandmother survived Stalin and Hitler. I’m thinking of her this Passover.

By Alex Zeldin

We’re going to be alone for the seders.

It was the first thought in my mind that really hit home the severity of the COVID-19 crisis as New York authorities began telling people to stay home. The next one was: Are we even going to be able to have a pesadic Pesach? The question filled me with dread.

For a holiday that is supposed to encourage commemorating the affliction of the Israelites as they fled from Egypt, the best many of us get to relating to what they went through is matching the Israelites’ unending kvetching. After all, it’s hard to resist complaining aloud that the real affliction is the demand of observing this holiday in the modern era.

The Israelites had it easy. Nobody had to kasher a thing. Nobody was running around like a madman with a feather. Nobody had to negotiate whose family hosts, how many people are coming, and all of the other proud pastimes of American Passover. Even their food, presumably kosher for pesach and prepared for the Israelites, fell from the sky.

No, it is not to the Israelites that I turn to in preparing for Pesach in the time of COVID-19.

It was the summer of 2017 and I was visiting my Babushka [grandmother] in her small apartment in Haifa. Sitting in her kitchen, drinking hot chai on a balmy July night and praying for an ocean breeze that never came, the conversation turned toward her Babushka, Sarah Plotkin.

Though I never met her, Baba Sarah played a big role in my upbringing. It was stories of Baba Sarah that my mother told me growing up. Baba Sarah who was so small that my mother was eye level with her by the time she was eight. Baba Sarah who always visited on Fridays with a “strange bread” [challah]. Baba Sarah who was always offering a sweet escape to her progeny in a time and place that treated “Jew” as a dirty word and used every opportunity to make sure Soviet Jews knew it. Baba Sarah who my younger sister is named in honor of.

Confident that this conversation was going to be an exercise in me being a good grandson, I prepared to patiently nod along to a story I heard a million times before. Instead, Babushka pulled out a photo album filled with photos I had never seen before.

In a hushed and serious tone she began to tell me about the harsher details of Baba Sarah’s life. About her father, who was murdered in a pogrom. How she navigated the Russian revolution. How her family survived Stalin’s purges. How she survived the Nazis. How many of her siblings and her son didn’t.

Unlike the wintry country we hail from, Russian Jewish conversations have no chill.

Talking about the later years of Baba Sarah’s life, Babushka mentioned how she always kept “separate pots” for Pesach and even traveled to Minsk to use her meager pension to purchase matzah for the holiday.

Baba Sarah had survived pogroms, a revolution that ended Jewish communal life, Stalin’s purges, and Hitler’s Holocaust. As stiff necked as any Israelite, she saw them all, outlived them all, and kept a pesadic kitchen in a country where religion was banned.

I often wonder if Sarah felt alone in her Judaism. Did she ever want to give up? Did she have doubts about her God? Seeing what she had seen, who could blame her for saying feh to it all? And yet, by all accounts she continued to practice the faith of her ancestors until her dying day.

We will be physically alone this Pesach to prevent the spread of COVID-19. But we will do so with the knowledge that, like our stiff-necked ancestors, we will endure.

Alex Zeldin is a contributing columnist with the Forward.
Coronavirus is exposing the plagues of American society

By Isaac Bailey

If God sent coronavirus to our shores, it isn’t because he’s punishing us. He’s simply forcing us to look into a mirror so we can finally take a good hard look at who we really are rather than what we’ve long pretended. Or maybe it’s because he was tired of watching us spending more time declaring our greatness and exceptionalism than making sure that we really are great and exceptional.

If coronavirus is the 11th plague, it’s designed to free our best selves from our worst instincts, to remind us that we can and should be better than we are and have been. It’s just that when we arrive at the Red Sea, on the precipice of an Earth-shattering transformation after which we can truly feel great again, I’m not sure we’ll have enough collective faith to keep moving forward together.

Already, we have a religious official who leads a Bible study for members of Donald Trump’s Cabinet declaring coronavirus is evidence of God’s wrath and something about China and homosexuality. We have the lieutenant governor of Texas urging grandparents to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their grandchildren’s economic fortunes and Fox News personalities doing the same. Writers in Christian magazines are asserting that “there are many things more precious than life.”

In the middle of a burgeoning pandemic that is evolving by the hour, we’ve found a way to pit the short-term health of the economy against the absolute health of the elderly.

We are a first-world country. And yet, front-line medical professionals are begging for needed protective gear while, according to the Washington Post, states are in “a mad scramble for masks, gowns and ventilators” as hospitals are asking construction companies, nail salons and tattoo parlors for donations.

South Korea has tested 40 times as many people per capita as we have and we still haven’t been able to cobble together enough resources to make sure everyone who should be tested here will be. In Washington State, advocates are appealing to the state and federal government to ensure that those with disabilities won’t be the first denied or removed from ventilators if demand outpaces supply. In Alabama, officials are dusting off contingencies that will help determine rationed care, if it comes to that. Those with underlying health conditions might be disqualified from potentially life-saving care.

But if we are honest, we’ve long lived this way, even after leaving slavery and a century of lynching behind. That’s why millions go hungry in the world’s wealthiest nation, why there is no sick leave for millions of Americans, why there’s a lack of adequate health care for millions even after Obamacare reduced that number by more than 20 million. That’s why we are mistreating “the least of these” in our prisons and in detention centers on our southern border even if that neglect threatens to keep coronavirus around longer than necessary.

Coronavirus isn’t a plague from Exodus. But it is a revelation that we aren’t nearly as great or exceptional as we’ve long foolishly claimed.

Isaac J. Bailey is a journalist and professor of communication studies at Davidson College. His book, My Brother Moochie: Regaining Dignity in the Face of Crime, Poverty, and Racism in the American South was published in 2018.
I used to love the plagues – until I lived through one

By Molly Jong Fast

I used to love the plagues. Not anymore.

I used to love the plagues until I lived through them. As a child, my most favorite moment of Passover, the otherwise endless family dinner which featured a gelatinous fish dish and an overcooked meat dish, was the plagues. After all, the plagues were the moment we got to stick our fingers in the wine glasses and sing out the names of all the horrible things God sent down to the Egyptians for not listening to Him. Each plague was represented by a drop of blood, or in this case, red wine. It was a moment of levity, and a sign that the boredom of the Passover seder had almost abated.

But I never related to the plagues. I never thought they were actual things that might happen to me. I never dreamed that I would actually live through the plagues.

What a difference a pandemic makes.

Plagues are now the most relatable part of Passover, not that any of us are going to be doing Passover this year. I live in New York, which is mostly under lockdown. I can't imagine this will be lifted in another ten days.

This Passover, we get to live with real plagues. No more ceremonial plagues, no more plagues as a fun distraction. This year we have COVID-19 which is ripping through New York City with breakneck speed, killing a person an hour, according to Mayor De Blasio.

But wait, there's more: There are actual, giant, bird-size locusts swarming on two different contents – yes, locusts, you know from the Bible! Two continents are struggling with enormous swarms of locusts. Some swarms are so big they are three times the size of New York City. And there's the Toronto river running red with ink.

Will this Passover be different than all other Passovers? Yes, very much so. We will eat not with our elderly relatives, but we will instead socially distance from them. We will not break matzah with our parents, but we will break it with the image of our parents on a screen.

This year, we will pray for God to protect the old and immunocompromised. And this year, instead of saying next year in Jerusalem, we'll be saying, “Next year in person.”

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The Seder is a passport to the past and the future

By Ari Hoffman

In her book, “Illness as Metaphor,” Susan Sontag bans us from using metaphor to describe disease. We need to toughen up, she thinks, and forgo the flight away from the thing itself, the marauding crimes wreaked on the body by maladies too many to count.

As Sontag writes, “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.” It is a passport none of us wants to hold, and a trip nobody wants to make.

More than ever before, many of us feel the duality of our citizenship, and how close we live to the border between sickness and health. We are too close to COVID-19 to abstract it away or gauzily distance it from our own bodies and the bodies of those we love.

We are still checking our throats for a cough, watching where our fingers go and who breathes where. Huddled in quarantine, robbed of much of the world’s pleasures, COVID-19 is the most real thing in the world, right now.

You might say, without exaggeration, that COVID is the world. Or that the world, for this brutal interval, is COVID’s. We live in plague times.

For many of us, our closest contact with plagues is in the sticky Haggadah pages, the three quarters mark towards the seder meal. We are a lucky and blessed generation. But this year, we need to read the Haggadah with plague eyes.

The story of the Exodus is one of divinely imposed contagion and resistance, immunity and vulnerability spelled out across neighborhoods and smudged over doorposts, separating out the contagious and the quarantined, striking at Pharaoh’s palace and in the muddy shacks along the Nile.

Passover is the naturalization holiday for this dual citizenship. The seder is a border crossing from past to present to future, slavery to freedom, the province of history to the empire of the imagination. But it also affirms that both passports jostle in our pockets uneasily, and chafe against each other; we are always both.

That bothness mirrors the reality that so many of us feel these days, when the lines between the sick and the healthy and the safe and the dangerous seem as blurry as our isolation feels stark and brutal. Sontag banned metaphor because she didn’t want us to anesthetize the pain of this doubling. It cleaves us, and that’s the point.

Because on the other side of this rich grey is the potential for healing, the slave feeling the first drift of sand underneath free feet. To be sick implies the possibility of being well, just as loss always presupposes something worth losing.

The kingdom of illness is vast these days and has far too many suffering subjects. But like the Egypt of old, its grip on power will not last forever.

Plagues freed slaves from Egypt, and we will win our freedom from this plague. I can’t wait to hear the song we sing on the far side of the sea.

Ari Hoffman is a contributing columnist for the Forward.
In times of senseless tragedy, God manifests through us

By Shai Held

The situation is devastating. An entire country, the most powerful one of its time, brought to its knees, its vast military and economic might no match for the plague that envelops it.

It must have been utterly crushing to be an Egyptian back then.

And yet, horrible as things got, the world at least made sense. God announced that God would bring the plagues, and why God would bring them. The plagues proceeded along their predicted course and were brought to an end by declarations, however fleeting, of repentance and submission. Egypt was overrun by tragedy but at least, according to the biblical narrative, it understood why.

There is comfort in knowing why – and barring that, in pretending to know why. Not for no reason have Jews traditionally responded to historical tragedies by taking the blame upon themselves – “Because of our sins were we exiled from our land,” as the liturgy has it. It is easier to indict oneself than to admit that the world is chaotic and the suffering that pervades it often senseless.

If the choice is between an insistent affirmation of meaning and a tormented acknowledgment of meaninglessness, many will choose the former, no matter how much cognitive dissonance it may generate.

To follow the spread of the coronavirus is to be reminded again and again of how little we know: who becomes symptomatic and who doesn’t; who is ill for just a few days and who ends up fighting for their life; who lives and who dies. Much of the time, no explanation is available to us, and thus our fear and anxiety only grow.

“The world proceeds along its course,” say the Talmudic Sages. Diseases make no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. At moments like this, the intertwining of the moral order and the natural order, so fundamental to biblical spirituality, seems like (at best) a messianic fantasy to us.

For those of us who are (or aspire to be) believers, there is that always nagging question: How to affirm God and to love God in a world with so much… randomness and useless suffering.

What does God do in a world like this?

In the story we will soon reenact and celebrate, God is revealed through God’s thunderous intervention in history. In the story we are now living through, God is revealed – if at all – through small and often subtle acts of human responsiveness to the sufferings of others.

Deuteronomy tells us that God loves the stranger, manifesting that love by providing the stranger with food and clothing (10:18) and then charges us to love the stranger, too (10:19). The message implicit in the juxtaposition of these two verses may be: How does God love the stranger? God’s love is manifest through our own.

We must become God’s hands. When 30,000 medical professionals come out of retirement and risk their lives to save the lives of others, they become God’s means of operating in this broken, terrifying world.

The present moment leaves us with no choice but to dwell in radical uncertainty. We may wish for certainty but we will not find it. A theology of love does not pretend to understand why the world is as it is; it focuses not on explanation but on response. It seeks not to justify God but to manifest God.

Our world is very far from the world of Moses and Pharaoh. That was a world in which God needed little assistance. To the extent that we can still talk about God now, it is a world in which God has chosen to need our assistance.

The moments of self-dedication and of human connection that ensue may be the closest we can come to seeing God in our world.

Rabbi Shai Held is a theologian, scholar, educator as well as President, Dean, and Chair in Jewish Thought at Hadar, a Jewish educational institute in New York City, where he also directs the Center for Jewish Leadership and Ideas.
Opinion

Being alone, choosing life: Jewish practice in a plague

By Deborah Lipstadt

For Jews who practice even a modicum of tradition, social distancing is an unnatural act. Our tradition is predicated on the notion that no Jew should live alone on a desert island.

Consider the institution of a “minyan,” a quorum of ten adult Jews. One needs a minyan to enter a male child into the Covenant, name a newborn female child in synagogue, help a young person mark their transition from child to adult when they chant from the Torah, conduct a wedding or allow a mourner to recite the kaddish.

In other words, at every major milestone of our lives, our tradition mandates that one has to be surrounded by community. You could live as a hermit in some remote location, but when you want to mourn or to celebrate, you have to violate your isolation and find other Jews.

In Pirkei Avot, Hillel speaks against the practice of some people to live in remote areas, like on the banks of the Dead Sea. By doing so, they sought to avoid temptations to sin; how could one engage in gossip, sexual misdeeds or commercial crimes if one was in a desert cave? No, said Hillel, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” In other words, be a Jew in the “marketplace,” and learn to overcome the temptations therein.

More than this, I suspect Hillel wanted us to lean in to the power of living in relationship with our communities.

There is the concept of Seudat Mitzvah, the meal that accompanies a major moment like a circumcision or wedding. Once again, we are being told, “Don’t celebrate alone. Be with others.” The Seudat Mitzvah’s counterpoint is the Seudat Havra-ah, the meal of comfort eaten by mourners upon returning from the funeral; though today it is often treated as a public condolence event, it actually should be a private meal. We demonstrate that our lives have been ruptured by not being in community. But even here, the notion of community is not absent: The community should provide the mourners’ food.

So now, in this moment where we are adjusting to life in the coronavirus crisis, a minyan is something to be avoided. But we observe the Torah’s teaching: “Therefore, above all, be most careful to protect your lives.” [Deut. 4:15]

But the Jewish community is also known for its resilience. Adaptation is woven into our long history.

In Israel, ten Jews came out on their balconies so that one of them could say kaddish and the others could answer “Amen.” Many communities are using the internet. My synagogue said Kabbalat Shabbat together with everyone dressed in their Shabbat clothing. Have a joint study session, a Jewish joke slam, or a kumisitz, a song session, with everyone sitting around their computer. Bring instruments. Arrange a viral bikur holim, visiting the sick. Gather the people with whom you kibbitz in shul. Have a Zoom session and kibbitz over some quality single malt scotch. Cholent optional.

Even as it breaks our hearts and feels unnatural to live as Jews alone, we must do so. It is not a matter of debate but of life and death. As the Torah instructs in an absolutely unqualified fashion: “Therefore choose life.” [Deut. 30:19]

Deborah E. Lipstadt is Dorot Professor of Holocaust History at Emory University and the author of ANTISEMITISM HERE AND NOW. She can be found on Twitter @DeborahLipstadt
When a new plague exacerbates the old

By Tema Smith

Every year at Passover seders around the world, as families gather to recount the story of the Israelites’ exodus from slavery in Egypt, we recount the ten plagues that befell the Egyptians: Blood, frogs, lice, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, the killing of the firstborn. As they are recounted, wine is spilled from our cups, in recognition that our own joy at our freedom must be diminished because of the suffering of the Egyptians.

Even our enemies are worthy of our compassion.

At my family’s seder table, we would continue around the table, with everyone contributing a modern plague to the conversation: Domestic violence, modern slavery, income inequality, the struggles of indigenous communities, gender disparities and discrimination, racism and xenophobia, housing insecurity, the loneliness epidemic... each year the list would address some of the major issues of our day.

Never, though, did it cross our minds that there might come a day when our seder itself would be interrupted by a contemporary plague. We never even imagined that there could be something like the novel coronavirus spreading at a rapid pace through the world, threatening lives and livelihoods alike, that would keep families apart on this night where typically we come together.

For many of us, this plague is the only thing on our minds as we physically distance ourselves from the world outside our homes. Something foundational in life as we know it has shifted – and there is no clear end on the horizon.

The more I think of this plague, the more I think back to the plagues we named each year around my family’s seder table. So many of them have been put into stark relief by the present circumstances.

I think of victims of intimate partner violence, forced to self-isolate with their abusers. They have nowhere to escape to, no opportunity to be alone to reach out for help should they need to. The New York Times reported that China experienced an uptick in domestic violence during its strict lockdown, and that experts predict that a similar trend will follow in other places where lockdowns occur.

I think of reports that prison labor, recognized by many as a form of modern slavery, is being used to make hand sanitizer to meet the unparalleled demand. This, as the correctional system braces for the arrival of COVID-19, which is likely to spread uncontrollably in the crowded jails of America.

I think of income inequality, where many of the people finding themselves out of work were living paycheck-to-paycheck. Many others in low income jobs are the people stuck on the frontlines, working in customer-facing businesses like grocery stores, restaurants, transportation, and so on.

Then there are those in the gig economy whose incomes are drying up with nobody to provide services to. Most of these workers are in roles that exclude them from the work-from-home arrangements of many white collar workers.

I think of indigenous communities, where poverty is rampant, housing is woefully inadequate and infrastructure is poor, leaving many with no access to adequate sanitation, and entire communities without reliable access to healthcare. A COVID-19 outbreak on many of these reservations would be completely devastating and surely would result in a high mortality rate.

I think of gender disparities, where women outnumber men in many of the professions still working with the public during this crisis – cleaning, healthcare, long-term care, cashiering, and so on. I also think of the fact that women, still, on average do two times the housework and childcare as men, even when they work full time. What does this look like when they are expected to do their jobs from home?

I think of racism and xenophobia. The Chinese community has borne the brunt of both during this pandemic.
the brunt of both during this pandemic. From lost income due to people avoiding Chinatown out of fear, to harassment and violence, to the President of the United States referring frequently to this coronavirus as the “Chinese Virus”, Chinese-Americans are at high risk.

I think of the loneliness epidemic, which will only worsen as people are forced to shelter-in-place for the foreseeable future. Social isolation, though, is a known determinant of health outcomes, leading to an increased risk of premature death, depression, and even suicide.

As the virus spreads, the cracks in our society become increasingly exposed. Plague by plague: housing insecurity and homelessness, lack of access to healthcare, unequal distribution of resources, systemic racism, individualism leading to senseless hoarding of necessary supplies, the mistrust of science and authority... it seems that each day uncovers another one.

One thing is certain: When this crisis is over, there will be lots that will require our deep attention. These foundational faults in our society will not disappear quickly. But so too was the case when the Israelites finally left Egypt after the tenth and most terrible plague.

We read in the Torah that the Israelites wandered the desert for 40 years before being allowed to enter the Promised Land. These 40 years let old ways of doing things fall by the wayside, and new ideas take hold.

When this crisis is over, we too will be entering a liminal time – a time to take stock and plan for change. May we use it well and rededicate ourselves to eradicating these modern plagues so that we are evermore prepared for any crises that befall us in the future.

Tema Smith is a contributing columnist for the Forward.
some won’t be able to afford either one.

I attended a dinner with Ruth Messinger, then CEO of American Jewish World Service, shortly after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. She told us, a group of justice advocates, that we must understand how often the impacts of natural disasters aren’t natural at all. The scale of the earthquake’s damages, like those of Hurricane Katrina, was multiplied because of a place and people who by greed or imperialism had been stripped of their ability to withstand devastation.

In New Orleans, the poorest neighborhoods were developed in the areas most likely to flood; while no accurate death toll has ever been taken, the majority of those who died in Hurricane Katrina were black and poor.

In Haiti, the effects of the earthquake were magnified because of mass deforestation for use in industries like coal production, which led to soil erosion, flooding, and a lack of sustainable agriculture, causing poverty and near famine.

In some ways, COVID-19 is like a hurricane, or an earthquake, or a plague: Those most negatively impacted will likely be those furthest from the power to mitigate or to bear the damage.

Had those in leadership taken the disease more seriously, would we have more tests available? Would hospitals be more prepared to treat the afflicted? Had Pharaoh acted sooner, would Egyptians have been spared locusts? Or worse? And today, will those with the most power use their resources to help those most impacted? Or will they protect themselves and their power at their followers’ expense?

This Passover, we can ask ourselves what we would do to mitigate the suffering of our neighbor. We can ask how support might become solidarity – how donating money for medical supplies might translate to a structural fight to make sure everyone has access to healthcare and all workers have paid sick leave.

Ask how donating to an emergency shelter might become a push for rent control. We can remember that once the plagues had ended and the Israelites were freed, a long desert journey was still ahead, the Promised Land yet to be defined, and we can decide what world we will build together.

Carin Mrotz is the Executive Director of Jewish Community Action and has been organizing Jews in Minnesota for racial and economic justice since 2004. She is currently sheltering in place with her family at home in Minneapolis.
Opinion

Even during a plague, choice is destiny

By David Wolpe

In the book of Job, after Job has suffered great losses, his friends come to comfort him. Finding Job sitting on the ground covered in boils, they throw dust up in the air and onto their heads (Job 2:12). A modern Israeli scholar, Meir Weiss, suggests this may be early homeopathic medicine, since when Moses causes boils to break out upon all the Egyptians, we are told that Moses and Aaron took dust and threw it in the air to cause the plague of boils (Ex. 9:8). That which causes something perhaps can cure or prevent it.

This is a beautiful example of a modern sensibility – medical intervention – commenting on an ancient problem – the outbreak of plague.

We understand the fear, for plagues today still feel quasi-magical in their malevolence: Invisible and ubiquitous, we resort to ritual like washing, sanitizing and cleaning, with all the fervor of a traditionalist inspecting a kitchen for conformity to recondite rules of kashrut.

Two different starting points converge on the same end: human behavior.

For the plagues, it was the immorality of the Egyptians that brought on catastrophe. For moderns, it is the fecklessness (eating a bat?) or carelessness (gathering for a party now?) of human beings that enables the plague to take hold.

Most of humanity is no longer in thrall to the belief that if we repent, the virus will magically disappear. Still, we recognize that our choices determine our destiny.

Still, we recognize that our choices determine our destiny. We are simultaneously committed to interaction and distance. Both can be governed by the precedent of the Passover. The contagion of the time was slavery in Egypt and the separation had to be complete.

Still the bonds of closeness were just being formed among the Jewish people, because in a time of transition, of anxiety and of looming cataclysm, human connection becomes more, not less, urgent.

We combat this modern plague by separateness and togetherness. In Meir Weiss’ reading, Job’s friends came to sit with him but tried to protect themselves.

God ensures the Israelites protection in the wilderness; solidarity does not mean vulnerability. The legacy of the plagues was Israel’s ability to create a new and safer society, one based on both law and goodness.

If this pandemic encourages us to do the same, to extend what is good in our society and repair what is broken, we will have learned as much from our modern trials as our ancestors did from ancient ones.

David Wolpe is a writer and the Max Webb Senior Rabbi at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles. He has been named Most Influential Rabbi in America by Newsweek and one of the 50 Most Influential Jews in the World by The Jerusalem Post. Rabbi Wolpe is the author of eight books, including the national bestseller Making Loss Matter: Creating Meaning in Difficult Times. His new book is titled David, the Divided Heart. It was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Awards, and has been optioned for a movie by Warner Bros.
Opinion

Anti–COVID cleansing gets a lesson from the Torah: We don’t control everything

By Joel Swanson

I’ve slid back into old habits over the past two weeks.

I struggle with obsessive hand and body washing, as a way of coping with past sexual trauma. My body feels polluted and tainted, and I wash it obsessively to provide some momentary relief from these feelings. At the best of times, I can learn to cope with these feelings that my body has been invaded from outside without taking four showers a day.

Needless to say, these are not the best of times. With a major pandemic raging, I can justify my obsessive washing tendencies as nothing more than good hygiene. I can rationalize my unhealthy coping mechanisms as responsible citizenship.

I can tell myself that for once, my feeling that my body is a diseased, fleshly animal is a feeling shared by everyone.

When I learned about the ten plagues in Hebrew school as a child, the teacher would spend the most time telling us about the Angel of Death, or perhaps frogs or locusts. But I always found myself most infatuated by the boils, these strange, alien markings that sprouted on the bodies of the Egyptians, without their knowledge or consent.

It wasn’t the pain of the boils or the illness itself that preoccupied me; rather, I would imagine these Egyptians looking at their reflections in the Nile River and suddenly seeing their bodies invaded by strange patterns, their own reflections as something they could no longer recognize. It always felt like a form of body horror, this feeling that suddenly their bodies no longer belonged to them.

I’ve felt that way for years, that my body is an alien being imposed on me from outside, thrust upon me without my consent. During a pandemic, I imagine I’m not the only one feeling this way, that my body is a site of betrayal, something I desperately wish I could tame and place under my control, but which always eludes me.

But Jewish tradition tells us that this very lack of control is deeply significant, even generative. The *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael*, a halachic midrash to the Book of Exodus, tells us that one of the most important elements of the Exodus narrative is that the Israelites received the Torah at Sinai and not in the land of Israel, that “the Torah was given in public, openly in a place free to all. For if the Torah had been given in the land of Israel, the Israelites could have said to the gentiles, ‘You have no share in it. But it was given in the wilderness, in public, openly in a place free to all, so that anyone wishing to accept it could come and do so.’”

In other words, the early rabbis taught that Israel had to receive the Torah in a place that we did not possess ownership or control over, to escape the false pride of thinking the Torah fully belongs to us.

I like to think of this as a lesson about the limitations of control, that there are always elements in our tradition that we cannot fully possess or understand. That just as our bodies, those places most intimate and closest to us, can seem so alien and strange, so too must the Torah, the most important text in our tradition, always escape our grasp, elude our full understanding.

The Exodus narrative shows God inflicting a bodily violation upon the Egyptians. But it also shows God teaching us a lesson about our lack of control and agency.

At a time like this, when all of our potentially infected bodies seem strange and unfamiliar to us, I am trying to hold onto that knowledge; I may feel out of control, but that very lack of control is an important part of Jewish tradition, which others have shared.

And in the meantime, I’ll remember that obsessively washing, too, is part of our tradition.

Joel Swanson is a contributing columnist for the Forward.
Resistance to tyranny and longing for Zion, then and now

By Amanda Berman

Of all the Jewish holidays that could coincide with a once-every-century global pandemic, there is clear divine instruction in its eclipse falling on Passover.

It's been said many times that Pharaoh was the original anti-Semite and that the plagues descended upon the people of Egypt because of his discriminatory treatment and scapegoating of the Jews. Meanwhile, today, we're seeing a rise in anti-Semitism around the globe, and over the past year especially, the Jewish people have had less and less freedom to express ourselves as, or to be, proudly and unabashedly Jewish. Recognizable Jews have been physically attacked, and many others have faced psychological or emotional abuse for being Zionists, inherently committed to our own people's freedom, which is so deeply encapsulated by the Passover story.

Indeed, Passover is actually the original Zionist story – a story of freedom and liberation for the Jewish people. The Jews of Egypt – then, as now, children of Zion – sought and ultimately found refuge in the land of Israel; during the Seder, we say “next year in Jerusalem,” as we do on so many momentous Jewish occasions. We don’t commit to physically being in or living in Jerusalem; most Jews in the diaspora know, even as they utter the words, that they will not be celebrating next year in Israel. But these words, spoken by Jews around the world for as long as our tradition has existed, unite the Jewish people in our love for, commitment to, and drive toward Zion.

Zionism, then as now, transcends the politics of the state; it is rather our everlasting commitment to our own Jewish existentialism. Passover is the first time, but certainly not the last time, that Zionism proved itself as freedom and liberation for the Jewish people, breathtaking in its righteousness.

But the lessons of freedom and liberation handed down from generation to generation, not just at Seder but in our very Jewish beings, is not exclusive to ourselves. The Jewish people have had outsized influence in justice movements the world over not in spite of, but because of, the lessons we have learned in fighting for freedom and liberation in every era, society and political culture throughout our history.

Fighting for equality for all people is ingrained in the Jewish ethos and exemplified by our communal commitment to tikkun olam, repairing the world. Today, it is clear that the coronavirus does not discriminate in who it infects or whose life it ultimately takes. Status and wealth cannot protect nor immunize, and it is penetratingly obvious that we live in a world defined by the “haves” and the “have nots”.

I have never felt more privilege than I do today, as someone who has youth, health and vitality; a warm home (and a job that allows me to work from it); ample food (and the capacity to pay price-gouged prices for necessities); and a loving family and support system (even if only accessible virtually).

Passover teaches us that our liberation – indeed, our salvation – is bound up with the liberation of others, that all people are entitled to the emancipation our people experienced in the Passover story, that we are obligated as Jews to offer refuge, security and justice to the vulnerable among us.

But freedom for all is bigger than this. It demands institutional and structural change, through competent, enlightened leadership that advances society instead of scapegoating others for his/her/its failures. Today, the contemptible othering of Asian-Americans, particularly of Chinese descent, should make our stomachs turn and ignite our instinctive and historical commitment to fighting bias and bigotry.

This Passover season is as critical a time as any to remember that Jewish freedom in the age of Pharaoh demanded Jewish resistance against tyranny, and that this is a Jewish mandate in perpetuity – even if it’s not only Jewish freedom that is at stake.

Amanda Berman is a civil rights attorney and the Founder and Executive Director of Zioness Movement.
This Passover Will Be Different From All Others – And There’s Freedom In That

By Amanda Berman

Passover is the birthday of the Jewish people. We went down to Egypt as a family, but we left Egypt as a people. For thousands of years, we have celebrated that birthday, but this year’s Passover will be different from all other Passovers.

During the original Passover, Jewish families were told to hunker down in their homes in order to survive the plague raging outside. Each family was told to prepare only what was needed for the people in their homes and share with neighbors to ensure that there was no extra, no waste. God promised that those who stayed home and put the blood of the lamb on their doorposts would be spared. And so they were.

Jewish families are once again being told to hunker down to avoid a plague. Most likely, we will spend this Passover as we did the very first one.

Back then, we were able to double up with smaller families. Now, we may not, as every physical interaction is potentially lethal. This forces us to be creative, to think and consider. It reminds us to worry about those who have less than we do and who may need our help. For some, it seems like we are being sent a message.

Here are some of the messages I’m hearing:

What it means to be the Jewish People

The Israeli government sees all Israelis as its responsibility. It has been rescuing stranded Israelis from all over the globe. Four airplanes took their longest flights ever to bring back 1,000 backpackers from Peru. Our foreign ministries are working overtime to get Israelis home before airspace is closed. People around the world are in awe of the efforts Israel goes to for its citizens. “No one left behind” is not an empty slogan here.

The smallness of difference

On my street live Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Dati Leumi, Haredi, and Yeshivish Jews. All go to different synagogues, most of which are closed. Our street has become a makeshift minyan with men on balconies or on the street, 10 feet apart, praying together. Somehow, the differences in tradition melt away.

The importance of turning in and tuning in

We have been forced to turn inward, to our nuclear families and those we live with. Now we are more than parents and spouses, roommates and siblings. We are full-time companions. We must help one another more, relate to one another more, empathize with one another more. We need to really listen and make this scary time a bit easier.

At the same time, there are those who are not with us. They may be alone, scared, isolated and down. We need to tune in to the needs of others, check on people, those for whom the situation is harder. We must bring them food and tend to other needs they may have, even the need to know that someone cares. We need to count our blessings and be the blessing for others. ZOOM, WhatsApp, FaceTime and other free apps can connect us with those we cannot physically touch, but can touch with our hearts.

We’re all in this together

What we do affects everyone else. If we go out, we put others at risk. If we defy the regulations and gather in groups, we raise the rates of infection and put the most vulnerable among us at greater risk of death. We are not just responsible for ourselves; we must think of others with every move we make.
**Back to basics**

Coronavirus has stopped the trajectory of the world. Nearly every industry in every country is or will be affected. For the Jews, it has cancelled schools, synagogues, and derailed Passover plans.

Those who normally go away for Passover, can't. Those who make lavish meals with many people will have to pare down. New clothing for the chag won't be easily gotten and we will all have to make do with what we have.

There is stress in this, but there is also freedom: freedom to focus on what matters and not what people think. Freedom to focus on the people closest to us and the things that matter most. Freedom to focus on those messages trying to get through. May we all get through this together.

*Shoshanna Keats-Jaskoll is the co-founder of Chochmat Nashim, an Israeli NGO dedicated to battling extremism and raising the voice of women in the Jewish conversation.*

**Opinion**

**In the 11th plague, all the world are neighbors**

By Noah Lubin

Though we will be without guests this Passover, we will remain with neighbors. The eating of the pascal lamb was a collective event, a bonfire frenzy of hungry spiritual brothers (and sisters).

But the story of Exodus begins with neighbors. After all, the Egyptians and Hebrews lived side by side. Decent neighbors at first. Later, they decided we were dangerous pariahs, a growing threat, and so they become oppressive neighbors. I sometimes wonder if there is a midrash somewhere detailing a noise complaint to Pharaoh that started it all. *The banging, the knocking!* They don't stop! complained one Egyptian to king Pharaoh. Or perhaps, *Children! Dozens of them, coming out of the woodwork!*

The story of Passover has me reminiscing about neighbors. When I was a kid, we had a large bearded man downstairs who banged on our floor, his ceiling, with a hammer. I can't imagine how many holes he made. Maybe he was trying to get in, from below. I myself prefer doors.

My father would have major arguments with the bearded hammer-man on the front sidewalk. The man stood there, hammer in hand, shouting back and forth with my father, each outdoing any Pavarotti performance. The neighbors had all earned free tickets to gaze upon the spectacular sidewalk show, “Hammer and Howl.”

Another neighbor, next door, had his apartment filled
with animals. There were horrible smells from that apartment. Worse than a neglected zoo. Snakes, cats, dogs, fish, rabbits, ferrets... and for sure, armpits. He owned the local pet store that had closed and brought every animal home to live with him. A biblical miracle.

One evening, we found a bright red snake wrapped around our toilet. My father rightfully suspected it belonged to the pet store prophet dude next door. My father banged on his door. The man was so happy to see his lost snake. We handed it back. While holding it, it bit the owner's finger leaving a bright red mark. He thanked us, and told my father to “keep an eye out” for two more snakes that had escaped into the walls, or perhaps near the toilet, around our bare feet. This Urban Red Toilet Snake is a lesser known species.

My favorite performance art came from two neighbors in the building across the way. One neighbor was an elderly woman, apparently with senile decay, who decided to dump large cans of garbage on the lawn of a handsome young man, her neighbor. He had a few girlfriends he'd bring over separately, to play Uno. I guess.

The elderly woman came to believe that he was running a prostitution ring and decided to dump garbage on his "filthy" back lawn. In her defense, she was attacking a pimp and protesting exploitation.

The young man arrived home around 8:30 one night, and started throwing every piece of garbage on her side of the fence, shouting a slew of sacred insults only known to angry young men. She came out of her house and went nose to nose with him, spewing back rhythm and rhyme in tribal tongue. A battle of epic proportions fought between an 85-year-old senile woman and 19-year-old mack daddy. One hour of top notch screaming and swearing, with pounds of garbage flying.

I was 12. I sat in a tiny window and watched, eating apple pie. #America

But God’s task, during these testing times, stands alone.

As the ultimate landlord, he must find a coherent way to manage billions of noisy, smelly, half-sane tenants, and even more so, to hope they get along... and even more so, to hope they love.

The coronavirus crisis has provided evidence that we are, indeed, all neighbors. The world stands crowded shoulder to shoulder.

Italy becomes the room next door. My neighbor’s salted bat-soup lunch can indeed affect my relaxing daffodil potpourri afternoons. And I, with my gang of Huckleberry Finn children, may inadvertently disrupt the inner peace of an insular isolated middle-aged soul.

The world is a Roman colosseum housing our shared (in)humanity. Seats are stacked. Entertaining, but at final hours, tormenting.

Noah Lubin is a contemporary Jewish artist and the illustrator of “The 11th Plagues” series. He explores traditional Jewish themes through humor, play, and absurdity. He currently lives in Rhode Island with his wife and noisy children. He can be reached at noahlubin@gmail.com. See more of his work at www.playwurx.com

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In The 11th Plague, All The World Are Neighbors

7
Opinion

Darkness is the absence of recognition

By Noah Efron

**Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was.** [Exodus 10:22-23]

When he was twelve, Aryeh Even hid with his mother and brother in basements and barns; that's how the three of them escaped deportation to Mauthausen. When Aryeh Even died last week in Shaare Zedek hospital in Jerusalem, at 88, his family was not with him, because he had the virus. Rachel Gemara, his nurse on the ward, saw his last moments:

By the grace of God, two patient angels rush to his side. With tears in my eyes, I watch them instinctively place their hands on his eyes and recite the ‘Shema’ prayer. They comfort him and say goodbye as his holy soul enters the gates of Heaven.

The Talmud describes a scholar named Honi-the-Circlemaker who slept for 70 years. When he woke, a man out of time, he could find no one to study with, and he died. “Either companionship or death,” the sage Raba concludes. Elsewhere, the Talmud tells of two friends and study partners, Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish. After Reish Lakish died, Johanan could not be consoled, “he went on rending his clothes and weeping, ‘Where are you, son of Lakish?’ The Rabbis prayed for him, and he died.”

What made Egypt’s darkness into an affliction was that, for days, no Egyptian could see, or “get up from where he was” to be with anyone else. “It is not good for a person to be alone,” God says in Genesis. It is a plague to be alone, God says in Exodus.

As a public service during this pandemic, the Forward is providing free, unlimited access to all coronavirus articles. If you’d like to support our independent Jewish journalism, click here.

This all seems obvious enough – clear as the light of day – in this odd time of quarantine and distance, when visiting friends is forbidden and making the Seder with your parents could kill them.

So obvious, that it is hard even to remember that only months ago, kids of families seeking asylum in America were taken from their parents, and that only weeks ago, Israel’s Population and Immigration Authority was preparing to exile back to Ethiopia the undocumented-immigrant father of a twelve-year old from Petach Tikvah named Yoel Tagan, and that only days ago I walked past the guy who sleeps on a bench on the boulevard and didn’t give him a second thought.

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Noah Efron is the host of TLV1’s “The Promised Podcast” and is a professor of history and philosophy of science at Bar Ilan University. He has served on the City Council of Tel Aviv-Jaffa.