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‘Acceptable’ deaths are not acceptable

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According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, the word “acceptable” has the following meanings: tolerable, allowable, admissible, supportable, sustainable, justifiable, defensible, and defendable.

The death toll in the United States from COVID-19 is fast approaching 200,000, with deaths in August averaging around 1,000 per day. It is predicted to be around 240,000 by the beginning of November. As one media outlet estimated it, there has been one death so far for every 1,900 Americans who were alive last January 1.

How many of these deaths are tolerable, allowable, admissible, supportable, sustainable, justifiable, defensible, or defendable?

The answer should be that no deaths are acceptable, however one chooses to define that word, and we as a nation should be moving heaven and earth to stem the tide sooner rather than later. That, at least, should be the answer we Jews give, because that is what our Torah teaches us and what our Sages of Blessed Memory took very seriously and expanded upon.

There are many ways this lesson has been taught to us. The Torah tells us, for example, that “God created man in His image.” (See Genesis 1:27.) It follows, then, that every death is the death of an image of God.

That First Human, though, was a hermaphrodite, male on one side and female on the other, according to Rabbi Jeremiah ben Elazar, because that verse adds this: “male and female created He them.” (See Midrash Rabbah B’reishit 8:1.)

Why did God start out with a single half-male and half-female being, rather than simply creating two humans—a man and a woman? Said our sages, because all people—regardless of gender—come from one person, all people are brothers and sisters to each other and all are equal to each other. We are all one family. It follows that we should care for each other as if we were one family.

There is another reason, however: It is to teach us “that whoever destroys even one life Scripture charges with destroying an entire world, while whoever preserves even one life, Scripture credits with preserving an entire world.” (See the mishnah in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin 37a.)

The mishnah also tells us that this lesson can be found in some curious wording found in Genesis 4. When God confronts Cain after he killed his brother, He tells Cain, “The bloods of your brother cry out to Me from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s bloods from your hand.”

Notice that the text did not say “the blood of your brother.” Twice in that sentence God used the plural bloods. This teaches us, said our sages, that when Abel’s blood ran into the ground, so did the bloods of his children, and grandchildren and great grandchildren, ad infinitum. Abel never got the chance to create a world of Abel. It died when he died.

And that is why “bloods” is used, and not “blood.” Said the sages, this, too, “teaches us that he who destroys a life, it is as if he destroyed an entire world. And he saves a life, it is as if he saved an entire world.”

Our sages taught us that we had to take seriously any death; no death should ever be considered acceptable however that word is defined. The “saving of life (pikuach nefesh)” not only “takes precedence over [any restrictions regarding] Shabbat,” just the mere possibility that life might be in danger, safek sakkanat n’fashot, overrides those restrictions. (See BT Yoma 85a.)

The saving of life also overrides the rules of kashrut—even on Yom Kippur. In BT Yoma 82a and 83a, we are told that even forbidden foods are permissible to feed someone on Yom Kippur if there is even a suspicion of danger to life.

Clearly, then, to us at least, even a single COVID-19 death (or any other kind, for that matter) should be unacceptable—especially so if many of those deaths could have been avoided had the threat been taken seriously by our government right from the start.

How sad it is, then, that Republicans do not see it that way, according to a recent CBS News/YouGov poll—and I am not even referring to the speakers at last week’s GOP convention. While the survey showed that one out of every 10 Democrats find the death toll to be “acceptable,” which is bad enough, an astonishing 57 percent of Republicans feel that way, as do one out of every three Independents.

That nearly six out of every 10 Republicans find the COVID-19 death toll acceptable is mind-boggling, but not surprising given what the leader of their party often says and what he often does. President Trump has sought to downplay the dangers of the coronavirus from the very beginning. He has shown a disdain for the warnings of health professionals and has even publicly ridiculed them.

He also ignores their advice, thereby encouraging others to do so. That was so evident last week when he made his acceptance speech before a crowd of over 1,500 invited guests. Most of the invitees sat close to each other, without wearing protective masks. Most were not even subjected to rapid coronavirus testing before being admitted to the White House grounds. The excuse that Trump campaign and GOP convention officials gave was that they did not think it was logistically feasible to conduct so many tests, although that does not explain why the seats were so close together.

As Amesh Adalja, an ­infectious-disease expert at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security, put it to a Washington Post reporter the next day, “When you look at the way the president has handled the pandemic, it has basically been one evasion after another evasion. And when you see this type of event and the way he is acting and the way he is allowing his supporters to act, it cements the fact that they have never taken this outbreak seriously from the beginning.”

Adalja’s observation is reflected in other recent surveys, as well. An NPR/PBS/Marist poll found that while 71 percent of Democrats say they will probably get vaccinated when a vaccine has been proven safe and effective and is available, only 48 percent of Republicans say they will.

That political divide is evident, as well, when it comes to wearing a mask in public and maintaining social distancing while doing so. A Pew survey in June found that 76 percent of Democrats and those who lean that way are more likely to wear masks in public versus only 53 percent of Republicans and those who lean that way. It is even more dramatic when you separate conservative Republicans from the GOP moderates. Only 49 percent of the conservatives say they have worn masks, compared with 60 percent of moderate Republicans.

Given all this, it should come as no surprise that a majority of Republicans find the death toll to be acceptable, or that nearly two-thirds of Republicans, according to the same poll, do not even believe that so many people have died. Even as health professionals fear that more people have died from COVID-19 than has been reported, many Republicans believe the number has been exaggerated to make Trump look bad.

In so many ways, the president and some of his key allies have shown a wanton disregard for human life. They may even have put the lives of U.S. veterans at risk in order to prove the scientists wrong about the dangers of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, a much Trump-touted COVID-19 treatment. Even the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has warned against taking the drug. The FDA said that hydroxychloroquine could lead to serious heart rhythm problems, as well as liver problems and liver failure, kidney injuries, blood and a variety of lymph system disorders.

Despite such warnings, according to the Washington Post and other media outlets, the anti-malarial drug was secretly administered—without adequate warnings about side effects—to 30 former servicemen at the Southeastern Veterans’ Center, located outside Philadelphia, including 11 veterans who had not even been tested for COVID-19, much less showed any symptoms. Similar experimentation was performed, again without disclosure of possible dangers, to residents at various nursing homes around the country.

“He who destroys a life, it is as if he destroyed an entire world. And he saves a life, it is as if he saved an entire world.”

As Amesh Adalja said, “they” have not taken this outbreak seriously from the beginning. “They” also continue to play the disinformation game even now, as the body count mounts in states that have followed Trump’s lead. Florida is a prime example; it has seen nearly 1,000 cases a day for the past three months, and reported deaths are “on an upward trend,” according to Fox13 News in Tampa this past Sunday. If “they” do not take the COVID-10 threat seriously, why should we take “them” seriously?

Seriously, why should we?