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Lessons that must be learned

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God, as noted in my last column, did not send down COVID-19 to punish anyone, nor did He do so to teach us any lesson. He taught us many lessons in the past, however, and the time is overdue for us to learn them.

This pandemic knows no social status. It is not class-conscious. It cares not what religion a person follows, or whether a person is an atheist or agnostic. Race, gender, language—these are non-issues for it. In that sense, it is the great leveler.

The first lesson, therefore, is the inherent equality of all humans, regardless of who they are, or the job they do. The clerk behind the supermarket counter, or the drug store, or the one restocking the shelves, or the one collecting the shopping carts from the parking lot are all risking their lives every day so we can put food on our tables and medicine in our cabinets. The mailman is still delivering the mail. Gardeners are outside doing spring clean-up. Repairmen are answering calls. Restaurants are still cooking food for delivery, and delivery people are bringing that food to our doors. Service station attendants are still pumping gas.

Our emergency personnel—police, fire, ambulance, ER physicians, nurses and other staff—are at the highest risk, but they are still on the job.

May they all be blessed for what they are doing for us.

Judaism, Islam, and Christianity consider themselves “the children of Abraham,” but that misses the point, as is made clear in a debate between Rabbi Akiva and the scholar Shimon Ben Azzai regarding what is the great principle in the Torah. To Rabbi Akiva it is Leviticus 19:18, “Love your fellow as yourself.” To Ben Azzai, it is Genesis 5:1, “This is the book of the generations of Adam.” (See the Jerusalem Talmud tractate Nedarim 30b; lso Genesis Rabbah 24:7 and Sifra Kedoshim 4:12.)

Ben Azzai’s point seems strange. This, after all, is the opening verse in a long list of generations that descended from the First Humans. That, however, is Ben Azzai’s point: According to the Torah, all humans descend from the same single human being. All are brothers and sisters to each other. All deserve the same respect and, yes, even love. We are all one family, and we all need to treat each other as such.

 Thus, we read in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Berachot 17a: “[A person] should always strive to be on the best terms...with all men and even with the non-Jew in the street, in order that he may be beloved above [i.e., by God] and well‑liked below.”

Ben Azzai’s point is made in other ways by our Sages of Blessed Memory. Thus, in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin 38a, we are told that the First Human “was created alone so that the families [of all humans] will not quarrel with each other” regarding who had the more distinguished lineage; we all have the same ancestor.

The Talmud goes on. The First Human (sorry, but there is no such person called “Adam,” at least not in Genesis 1 and 2; the word “adam” means human) was created last. The reason, said our Sages, was “so that if someone becomes conceited, filled with self-importance, [God can] say to him: {Even] the mosquito came before you in the acts of Creation.”

The Torah teaches this lesson in many ways, including in the commandment to observe Shabbat. It not only requires us not to do any work that day, but one day out of every seven, for one-seventh of our lives, it forces us to acknowledge the total equality of all God’s creatures, human and otherwise, precisely because they are God’s creatures.

Another important lesson is the need to provide adequate health care to all people—including preventative measures, which, after all, benefits everyone in society.

To begin with, we are charged with the responsibility to emulate God’s positive attributes. The Torah makes this clear in several places, including Deuteronomy 13:5: “After the Lord your God you shall walk, and Him shall you fear; His commandments you shall keep and you shall hearken to His voice, and Him you shall serve.” As the sage Rabbi Chama ben Rabbi Chanina explained this verse in BT Sota 14a, just as God clothes the naked, so too must we clothe the naked. Just as He visits the sick, so too must we visit the sick. Just as He consoles mourners, so too must we console them.

It follows, then, that just as God is merciful, compassionate, and abounding in kindness (see Exodus 34:6), so must we be. Just as He “supports all who stumble and makes all who are bent stand straight” (see Psalm 145:14), so must we do. And, just as we say in every Amidah we recite that God “heals those who are ill,” and so must we do.

Emulating God is not an option; it is a requirement. That includes emulating his concern for the health and well-being of all people. That is not just an immediate need; it is a permanent one made even more vital because of the economic upheaval we have only begun to experience. Many more people in the months and years to come will lack the money needed for adequate health care.

A discussion in BT Ketubot 67b makes it clear that our obligations to those who lack sufficient resources—including when it comes to healthcare—is to adequately fill that need.

Another discussion, in BT Yevamot 106a, gives rise to a law forbidding price-gouging when someone is ill. It tells of an escaped prisoner who desperately needs to get across a river. He offers a ferryman an excessive fee for his passage. Because this is an emergency situation for the escapee, however, the halachah forbids the ferryman from accepting anything but the normal fare. This led Rabbi Yosef Karo to rule that if someone is ill and needs medication (an emergency situation), it is forbidden to charge that person more than the standard price. (See Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 336.3.)

So serious did our sages regard the commandment to care for the ill that Torah scholars were forbidden to live in a community that did not have at least one physician. (See BT Sanhedrin 17b.) The reason why a community lacks a physician is obvious: It did not provide the resources for even one medical professional.

This emphasis on emulating God by providing medical care also has ramifications for how physicians should be treated. “Honor a physician even before you have need of him,” said Ben Sira. (See the Wisdom of Ben Sira, 38:1)

Just how much the physician should be “honored” can be seen from a talmudic prescription regarding Yom Kippur, a day on which the Torah commands us to fast. If a person is told by his or her physician not to fast on Yom Kippur for health reasons, that person is prohibited from fasting—prohibited; it is not an option. “We listen to the physician,” says the Talmud, because the physician is the recognized authority in health matters. (See BT Yoma 83a.)

That brings us to yet another lesson: whom to trust when health is the issue. We hear some politicians argue that it is so important to get the country’s economy moving again that restrictions may soon be lifted. We hear physicians, on the other hand, say not so fast. As the Talmud states, the physicians rule, not the politicians.

Sadly, not all politicians see it that way, including some state governors and, of course, the president of the United States. The New York Times, for example, reported last Saturday that on the night of January 28, long before the White House got serious about controlling the pandemic, a senior medical adviser at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Dr. Carter Mecher, warned colleagues in and out of government that “this is going to be bad.” Among other suggestions he made, considering that university colleagues were among his e-mail recipients, was to “close the colleges and universities.”

From then on, the Times reported, “an array of figures inside this government—from top White House advisers to experts deep in the cabinet departments and intelligence agencies—identified the threat, sounded alarms and made clear the need for aggressive action.” Yet no aggressive action was taken for another six weeks.

This is not fake news. We have the word of none other than Dr. Anthony Fauci on that. “We make a recommendation,” he told a CNN interviewer the day after the Times article appeared. “Often the recommendation is taken. Sometimes it’s not. But it is what it is. We are where we are right now.”

Where we are now is this: As of last Saturday, more than 20,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the United States, including many in our area, with more deaths coming at the rate of approximately 2,000 every day. It did not need to happen. "Obviously you could logically say that if you had a process that was ongoing and you started mitigation earlier, you could have saved lives," Fauci told CNN. "Obviously, no one is going to deny that."

And no one should deny the wisdom of the Talmud: Listen to the physicians. When they give the green light, *and only when they give it*, should life resume, albeit cautiously. Right now, that might be the most important lesson to be learned. For now, unless we are essential to our communities, stay indoors or, when outside, wear face masks and gloves, and keep your distance from the next person.