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Of COVID-19 and disgracing God’s name

Shammai Engelmayer

On the first day of Sukkot, we heard these words chanted near the beginning of the Torah reading: “And you shall faithfully observe My commandments and do them….And you shall not profane My holy name…. (See Leviticus 22:31-32.)

Profaning God’s name, the sin known as chilul ha-shem, was taken very seriously by our Sages of Blessed Memory and all who came after them. As we are taught, for example, in the Babylonian Talmud tractate that deals with matters relating to Yom Kippur, engaging in chilul hashem is unlike most sins, for which atonement may be achieved in this world (assuming the sin is not repeated). That is not the case when it comes to desecrating God’s name; no atonement is possible in the violator’s lifetime. (See BT Yoma 86a.) Elsewhere, we are told that when God judges a person, even if that person’s sins and his good deeds balance out, the sin of desecrating God’s name tips the balance towards sin every time. (See BT Kiddushin 40a.)

Clearly, chilul hashem is a big deal, as it should be.

In too many places throughout the United States, Israel, and the rest of the world, COVID-19 cases have been on the rise. As the High Holy Days approached, however, we began to see a serious increase in the number of cases in certain areas in particular—namely, in ritually rigid Jewish communities, and it continued through Sukkot.

Israel’s rate of coronavirus infection is among the highest in the world—even higher per capita than in the United States—and it brought with it a second severe lockdown. The high rate is especially noticeable in its ritually rigid Israeli communities, which accounted for 40 percent of all Israel’s new confirmed cases over the two weeks from Rosh Hashanah to Sukkot.

According to news reports, confirmed cases in these communities alone rose 79 percent between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, while there was only a one percent rise in the general Israeli population. The death rate from COVID-19 in those communities in the week between the two observances rose 100 percent compared to a 48 percent increase in the general population.

In the New York area, the story appears to be the same. From two weeks before Rosh Hashanah until the start of Sukkot, more than 20 percent of all new infections in New York City were in charedi and chasidic communities. Similar outbreaks also have been seen in suburban charedi and chasidic enclaves.

New Jersey’s COVID-19 cases have also spiked. After Rosh Hashanah, Gov. Phil Murphy reported that “Ocean County, and especially Lakewood, [are] clearly our hotspots right now.”

Noting the rise in cases in the New York-New Jersey area, Murphy raised a most important side issue—the possibility of an anti-Semitic backlash.

“I don’t want a speck of anybody in this state saying, ‘Hey, see, it’s because of them’ or whatever,“ Murphy said.

Murphy’s comment was not off the wall. That COVID-19 is a “Jewish plot” began to surface early in the pandemic. In early May, for example, a study conducted by Oxford University found that nearly 20 percent of the 2,500 Britons surveyed either suspected or totally believed that “Jews have created the virus to collapse the economy for financial gain.” Only Muslims came out higher, with slightly over 23 percent either suspecting or believing that “Muslims are spreading the virus as an attack on Western values.”

It is not just the “crazies” who think this way. As one study participant, Dr. Sinéad Lambe, put it, “Conspiracy thinking is not isolated to the fringes of society.” According to study leader Daniel Freeman, an Oxford professor of clinical psychology who was interviewed by the Israeli newspaper the Jerusalem Post, “Rates of coronavirus conspiracy beliefs were higher than we anticipated. Only half of the population appear completely unaffected by such ideas. Highly disturbing ideas were endorsed by a significant minority.”

Such conspiracy theories also have consequences because they contribute to spreading the virus.  “Our study indicates that coronavirus conspiracy beliefs matter,” he is quoted in an Oxford press release as saying. “Those who believe in conspiracy theories are less likely to follow government guidance, for example, staying home, not meeting with people outside their household, or staying two meters [approx. 6.5 feet] apart from other people when outside. Those who believe in conspiracy theories also say that they are less likely to accept a vaccination, take a diagnostic test, or wear a facemask.”

According to Alyssa Weiner, assistant director for international Jewish affairs, at the American Jewish Committee, that some conspiracy theorists blame the Jews should come as no surprise because for “centuries anti-Semites have blamed Jews for global pandemics.”

In an article posted on the AJCommittee website, she wrote, “The most prevalent conspiracy theories linking Jews with coronavirus blame Jews, Zionists, or the State of Israel for engineering COVID-19 for malign and selfish reasons….[Some] anti-Semitic messages claim Jews, Zionists, or the State of Israel itself have created COVID-19 with the sinister purpose of then being able to profit from developing an antidote. In others, Israel is falsely portrayed as caring for its own population while preventing any help for Palestinians.”

It is the “third set of examples” she gives that is most troubling, however, because of its “claims that Jews themselves are infected and spreading the deadly virus via their own communities, much as they were accused of spreading the plague in medieval times,” the very situation Murphy warned against.

Weiner offered yet another take on Jews and COVID-19 by citing the viciously anti-Semitic founder and host of the far-right Christian channel TruNews, Rick Wiles: Jews are being punished for not believing in Christ and, because they are, the disease is spreading to everyone else. “There is a plague moving upon the Earth right now,” Wiles said in one TruNews broadcast, “and the people that are going into the synagogues are coming out with the virus. You are under judgment because you oppose his son, Jesus Christ. That is why you have a plague in your synagogues.”

in May, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz ran an article by Flora Cassen, associate professor of Jewish, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies and associate professor of history at Washington University in St. Louis. She added another layer to the anti-Semitic theme. “Far right theories on a Jewish-Chinese COVID-19 cabal are breaking out of the infamously anti-Semitic dark web—with real-world consequences,” Cassen wrote. To the traditional anti-Semitic tropes, a new one has been added, she said. “The newer element is the idea of coronavirus as a grand plan engineered by the Jews and China together.”

The most bizarre claim she cited was this one: “In a discussion probably triggered by President Trump’s willingness to entertain the unproven theory that the virus was engineered in a lab in Wuhan, China,” Cassen wrote, “an anonymous poster (or ‘anon’) attempted to reveal the ‘real’ viral genesis. He noted as fact that the coronavirus came from a Chinese lab but that it was not created by the Chinese: ‘The kikes get the credit for that one. It was the kikes. It’s ALWAYS the kikes.’” Apparently, the Jews are in charge of China’s laboratories.

COVID-19 is a killer plague. With over 210,000 deaths recorded so far in the United States, nearly 1,800 so far in Israel, and over a million worldwide, the threat is real and must be taken seriously. Jewish law requires it, and also requires that we do everything possible to minimize the spread and keep all people safe, not just our own. Yet COVID-19 is not being taken seriously by too many in the ritually rigid Jewish communities here, in Israel, or elsewhere. In Britain, for example, the COVID-19 death rate among Jews was reported some months ago as being 2.5 times higher than among non-Jewish Britons. According to Britain’s Office for National Statistics, Jewish men had twice as high a risk of dying from coronavirus as Christian men.

There clearly is a total disregard among many in charedi and chasidic communities for mask-wearing, social distancing, and avoidance of close-contact gatherings (High Holy Days services especially). In Crown Heights on Monday evening, for example, police tried to break up a large street celebration for Sukkot (news reports referred to it as a “dance party”), “prompting indifference and hostility from Orthodox revelers who continued dancing even in the face of police orders,” according to the Gothamist website. Police eventually gave up trying to disperse the revelers and left the scene.

Not only does such behavior violate halachic principles regarding health and welfare, which is serious enough, it has resulted in the sin of chilul ha-shem because it adds to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories making the rounds. If Jews act this way, it must be because “the Jewish God” wants them to do so. Anti-Semitism of a different sort is also a by-product of such scenes as the one in Crown Heights.

If keeping people safe from harm—a prime directive of Jewish law—is not sufficient reason for such behavior to end now, disgracing God’s name, a sin for which we are taught atonement is not possible in this lifetime, surely must be.