

BELIEF

In the Talmud, wisdom and skills to survive a plague

by

Richard Hidary

July 16, 2020



Brett Carlsen/Getty Images

Three basic options confront any person trying to exert some control over uncontrollable danger: science, superstition, and prayer. The strategy that most successfully removes the danger may not be the one that most effectively allays fear, and the best overall choice depends largely on the quality of the science. The talmudic rabbis, as piously monotheistic as they were, offer a spectrum of approaches in their discussion of avoiding the common perils of crossing a river:

Rav would not cross a river in a ferry in which a gentile sat. He said: “Perhaps a judgment will be reckoned with him, and I will be caught together with him when he is punished.”

Shmuel would only cross in a ferry if there was a gentile in it. He said: “Satan does not have dominion over two nations together.”

Rabbi Yannai would examine the ferry and cross. Rabbi Yannai acted in accordance with his reasoning stated elsewhere, as he said: A person should never stand in a place of danger saying that they will perform a miracle for him, lest in the end they do not perform a miracle for him. And, moreover, even if they do perform a miracle for him, they will deduct it from his merits. ...

Rabbi Zeira would not go out and walk among the palm trees on a day when there was a southern wind blowing.

Rav Yitzhak, son of Rav Yehuda, said: A person should always pray that he will not become ill, as if he becomes ill they say to him: Bring proof of your virtue in order to exempt yourself. (Bavli Shabbat 32a)

Rav, assuming that gentiles bore sins and that sins cause maritime mishaps, sought safety in religious segregation, lest the righteous get swept up with the wicked. Shmuel, who factored in the reality of Jewish transgressors, followed the opposite policy hedging his risk since Satan judges only one nation at a time. By juxtaposing these two opposite portents, the Talmud mockingly demonstrates the inanity of such omens and sets us up for Rabbi Yannai's common-sense and comically simple option. Rather than rely on a shady superstition or a chancy miracle, why not just check the boat for leaks?

With this in mind, we can explore how the talmudic sages sought safe ground when threatened by the even more unpredictable and deadly plagues that menaced them with some regularity. The first line of defense recorded in the Mishna was to declare public fasting, prayer, and blowing the shofar once the epidemic reached a set threshold: "What constitutes a plague? If in a city that can supply 500 foot soldiers and three deaths occurred on three consecutive days, behold this constitutes a plague, less than this is not a plague" (Ta'anit 3:4). Assuming nine civilians for every potential infantryman yields a frighteningly high mortality rate of three in 5,000 within only three days.

The goal of fasting and prayer is not only to arouse God's mercy, but also to prompt the community toward repentance. This implied link between sin and suffering received further specificity when the rabbis associate specific transgressions with particular disasters. Thus, plagues come as a form of capital punishment, on account of improper use of seventh-year fruit, and for miscarriage of justice (Mishnah Avot 5:8; Bavli Shabbat 33a).

Besides the prayer approach, the Talmud also provides scientifically sound directives (albeit presented in the language of demonic forces, thereby blurring the distinction between science and superstition). A series of such teachings at Bava Kama 60a begins with a bold explanation of theodicy:

Once permission is granted to the destroyer to kill, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked.

The plague may begin as punishment against a wicked individual, but once inflicted, it spreads without distinction to the undeserving righteous as well. What the rabbis named “the destroyer” we may now understand as another semi-life-form we call viruses—but the lesson of collective consequences remains just as relevant. The first person to contract coronavirus was likely illegally trafficking pangolins, an endangered species whose scales are believed to have healing properties in traditional Chinese medicine, even after other murderous viruses transferred to humans through similar routes. The sin of the few can bring disaster to the many.

The Talmud continues with advice derived from Exodus 12:22 where Moses commands the Israelites not to leave their homes lest the destroying force attack them:

The Sages taught: If there is plague in the city, gather your feet, i.e., limit the time you spend out of the house, as it is stated in the verse: “And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning.” And it says in another verse: “Come, my people, enter into your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourself for a little moment, until the anger has passed by” (Isaiah 26:20). And it says: “Outside the sword will bereave, and in the chambers terror” (Deuteronomy 32:25) ...

At a time when there was a plague, Rava would close the windows of his house, as it is written: “For death is come up into our windows” (Jeremiah 9:20) ...

The Sages taught: If there is a plague in the city, a person should not walk in the middle of the road because the Angel of Death walks in the middle of the road, as, since they have given him permission to kill, he goes about in the open.

In other words, quarantine at home, be careful of airborne particles, and if you do need to go out, walk on the edge of the road and practice social distancing (from the Grim Reaper most of all). The talmudic sages had perfect faith in God's omnipotence, justice and mercy, and they voiced their anguished grieving and desperate hope through prayers and cries of shofar blasts. At the same time, they never held themselves up to be so perfectly righteous that they could presume God would break the laws of nature for every foolhardy handshake. Fully aware of the diabolical forces spreading virally to wicked and righteous alike, they prayed and studied from within the safety of their homes.

While the current pandemic is unprecedented in its global reach, humanity has suffered plagues of lesser and greater severity throughout history. Jewish liturgy bears scars of that pain in its daily repeated pleading to ward off pestilence and plague, words that have tragically become very relevant for the first time in a century. As we mourn for those who die alone in hospital beds isolated from their loved ones, and as we stagger back to normalcy, I hope we can find comfort and confidence from the ancient empathy, wisdom, and survival skills of generations past.

Rabbi Dr. Richard Hidary is an associate professor of Judaic Studies at Yeshiva University, a rabbi at Sephardic Synagogue, and a faculty member for the Wexner Heritage Program. He was recently a Starr fellow at Harvard University's Center for Jewish Studies and a LEAP Katz fellow at the Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies, University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Dispute for the Sake of Heaven: Legal Pluralism in the Talmud* (Brown University Press, 2010) and *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). He is currently writing a new translation and commentary on tractate Sanhedrin and he runs the websites teachtorah.org, pizmonim.org, and rabbiniics.org.

[#coronavirus](#)

[#Talmud](#)