

God Did Not Send This Plague: A Modern Theological Discussion of the Pandemic and a Call to Action

Whenever tragedy and natural disasters strike, there are religious men and women of all faiths — especially members of the clergy — who are quick to assume that the suffering is either a message or punishment from God. Even now, there are those among us wondering if or even claiming to know that God placed covid-19 (the novel Coronavirus) among us either as a message or as a punishment.

However, with full faith, I do not believe that God sent us covid-19. I do think, though, that covid-19 is spreading as rapidly as it is because of human choices that have brought incredible advancements to our lives and also, then, place dangerous threats before us. As we well know, the innovations of industrialization, globalization, urbanization, and unregulated or under-regulated consumption of food and other natural resources bring many blessings; but they also bring many curses as well. Human choices lead to worldwide consequences.

Biblical Theology #1: God Sends Plagues as Punishment and as Messages

It is true that the Torah presents a number of examples of God using nature against humankind. Early in Genesis, because of society's violence, corruption, and unwillingness to treat each other with unmerited kindness, God sends the flood waters against the generation of Noah and rains fire down upon Sodom and Gomorrah. We are about to celebrate Passover and the plagues for which we will spill our wine are the ones the Torah states were used by God both as a punishment against the Egyptians for oppressing the Israelites and also as a message to our ancestors of God's awesome power. A careful look, though, reveals that God carefully selected the natural phenomena that the ancient Egyptians worshipped as gods, and used those phenomena as a punishment and as a message that all nature is subservient to the One creator.

The Torah mentions many other plagues as well. For example, in Exodus's Parashat Ki Tissa, we read the story of the Israelites rebelling against God and

Moses by worshipping the Golden Calf. "Then the LORD sent a plague upon the people," the Torah explains, "for what they did with the calf that Aaron made" (Exodus 32:35). In Deuteronomy 11:13-21, the second of the three paragraphs of the *Shema*, the Torah tells us that if we love God and if we serve God with all of our heart and soul, then God will grant us rain for the land in its season and crops in our field. If we worship other gods, however, God will turn away from us, and "will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce." Indeed, the Torah makes clear that God punishes those who rebel against God and rewards those who follow our Creator.

Biblical Theology #2: The Suffering Servant as a Light Unto the Nations

As the centuries passed, Jewish theology evolved. While the prophetic literature never calls into question God's ability to use the natural world as a punishment or as a message, it also reminds us that "bad things happen to good people" despite the fact that they are "good," and not because of some fault in their behavior. The prophet Isaiah comes to teach a concept called "the Suffering Servant," which is to say, perhaps the righteous suffer as a means by which God can teach the world. More to the point, the experience of suffering by the Jewish community facilitates our ability to serve as or *la-goyim*: a light unto the nations. Perhaps the most extreme example of this theology (which I am not advocating but which some people believe) might suggest that the Jews suffered the horrors of the Holocaust in order to teach the world what happens when humanity leaves unchecked the synergy of modernization, industrialization, secularism, economic downturn and widespread discrimination under the leadership of a selfish and deceitful leader with control over the media and ambitions of conquering the world. If the Torah suggests that God punishes the wicked, the prophetic literature adds that God sometimes also causes suffering not because of the fault of an individual or a community, but instead in order to teach certain lessons to others.

Biblical Theology #3: God Causes Suffering But Humans Cannot Understand Why

The biblical Book of Job adds yet another theology of suffering. By all accounts, Job is a righteous person who loses everything: his house, his livelihood, his wife and his children. God then welcomes Job into a conversation wherein Job challenges God much like Abraham did in Genesis; after all, we humans presume

God to act at all times with our human sense of justice. In one of the most troubling and yet also beautiful passages of the Hebrew Bible, God explains to Job none-too-gently how *chutzpadik* it is to presume that we humans can understand God's way. In Job we see a continuing theology of God causing suffering, but the story alleviates the burden of trying to understand suffering as a punishment or a message because God reminds us that there are limits to human understanding.

In the midst of suffering, then, the Hebrew Bible offers three entirely different theologies to explain suffering within the human condition: (1) suffering as a punishment or message sent by God against the one or ones suffering; (2) suffering as a message communicated against the non-sufferers through the suffering of innocents; and (3) suffering as sent by God but whose meaning defies human comprehension. All three biblical theologies would suggest that God indeed placed covid-19 among us, but leaves room for argument as to why.

Rabbinic Theology: The World Operates the Way the World Operates

As a non-Orthodox Jew trained in the positive-historical school of thinking (i.e., using contemporary science and modern understandings of history to interpret sacred scripture), I believe that the Hebrew Bible offers us Jewish "memory" in place of "history." I believe that our sacred scripture offers the world our story: our narrative. I consider myself also to follow in the Maimonidean school of Bible-study, teaching that Scripture is meant more as allegory than as history and that, therefore, the entire Hebrew Bible and especially the Torah should be read through generations of rabbinic interpretation and explanation.

These approaches to theology and scriptural interpretation lead me to see natural phenomena as far ranging as earthquakes and pandemic viruses through a different lens. In the Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 54b, our rabbis set up a conversation between gentiles and the rabbinic sages then living in Rome. They imagine the gentiles asking our rabbis, "If it is not God's will that people should engage in idol worship, why does God not eliminate it?" That is to say, if the action God hates the most is idolatry and God is all-powerful, why would God not just miraculously remove idol worship? "The Rabbinic Sages said to [the gentiles]: Were people worshipping only objects for which the world has no need, God would eliminate it. But people worship the sun and the moon and the stars and the constellations. Should God destroy God's [entire] world because of the fools?"

Rather," the Sages respond to the gentiles, "the world follows its course, and the fools who sinned will be held to judgment in the future for their transgressions."

Certainly, as traditionally observant and religious Jews, the rabbinic sages of our Talmud would believe that God would punish idolaters and most certainly that God could if God wanted to do so. But the Sages argue that, in a post-biblical world, God chooses not to suspend the laws of nature and, instead, allows the world to follow its course; our kabbalists call this *tzimtzum*: God "contracts" or "minimizes" God's self in order to allow for free will. In so doing, God established the laws of the natural world and they exist as they exist. That which happens on a day-to-day level is not of God's direct, intentional doing. Rather, the experience of humanity is the combination of the laws of the natural world intertwined with the consequences of human autonomy.

Understanding Covid-19 Today: Is It God's Plague to Humanity?

To put it more directly and in application for our time, God certainly could have created and sent a plague to humanity. But I believe that God would not and does not do so. God did not send this plague. This terrible virus is of the natural world, and its effects are compounded by the choices we make. The innovations of industrialization, globalization, urbanization, and unregulated or under-regulated consumption of food and other natural resources bring many blessings; but they also bring many curses as well. Likewise, our leaders' failure to appreciate the ferocity of this virus and thus our government's failure to act quickly enough in response to it, our society's lack of preparation for the potential of a pandemic, and ordinary citizens' reluctance to sacrifice their own pleasure in order to protect the lives of the vulnerable (e.g., the sunbathers on Miami Beach) means that we continue to suffer from our prioritization of short-term conveniences over long-term humanitarian needs. Human choices lead to worldwide consequences. We are in the midst now of one of those consequences.

At the same time, our ability to weather this plague and eventually, God-willing, to control it and then vaccinate against it, are the results also of those innovations that make us who we are today. Our health care professionals are angels working on God's behalf to care for the sick and the injured. Our First Responders at home and abroad daily put their lives on the line for us. Small businesses are closing and small business owners are risking their own livelihoods for the benefit of the greater good. Those of us who are able to remain home aside from essential trips

out are participating in an act of incredible *chesed* – of kindness, enabling (please God) our doctors and nurses to care for those who are truly in need; the act of staying home as much as possible is a sacred mitzvah at this time. And all those who are essential workers, from those who keep our electricity on and our water flowing to truck drivers and grocery store employees, are daily taking their lives into their own hands so that we as a society can continue to function. These people and so many more are fulfilling God’s instruction to do justice, love kindness, and to walk in God’s ways. They – we – are angels acting on God’s behalf.

God Has Our Back, But We Must Be Strong and Smart

In I Kings 19, we read, “There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire—a still, small voice.” God is not the shattering wind, the destructive earthquake, the all-consuming fire, nor the deadly plague; but God is in the voice we hear from within, girding us to strength and inspiring us to hope. God is also in the voice of family and friends who reach out to us in our time of need, and within the words and actions of those who perform selfless acts of loving-kindness for complete strangers. God is very much present, like the parent of an adult child who is available for advice, for support and for love, and God is telling us to be smart, to be kind, and to summon our collective resources and unlimited willpower to overcome this plague.

As we struggle with this pandemic, my prayers are with those sickened by covid-19 and their families, and especially with those who have lost loved ones to it. My prayers are with all those who work in the healthcare industry, especially our doctors and nurses. My prayers are with our first responders who daily put their lives on the line. My prayers are with all those who honestly wonder from where their next meal will come – because perhaps their school is closed, their house of worship is shuttered, or their source of provisions has disappeared. My prayers are with those whose source of income has disappeared or will disappear during these unprecedented times. My prayers are with the families who have postponed or cancelled celebrations. My prayers are with us all: not because I believe that God will suspend the laws of nature in order to save us, but because I

believe that God implanted within humanity the ability to save itself ... when we aspire to the higher good and utilize the gifts of our minds and our hearts to do.

Frankly, we Jews have overcome worse than this virus; we have been down in the pit before ... and we know how to get out. Together, with a commitment to stand by each other, to lift up the fallen, to devote ourselves to acquiring and applying secular knowledge and to gaining and practicing spiritual wisdom, to putting the collective needs above the individual wants, willing to sacrifice the immediate rewards of materialism for the advancement of all ... and mindful that God has our back, we will indeed overcome this as well.

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