



Quarantine at the first Passover

Category: Vayikra

With the advent of a second Passover with social distancing, let's take a look at the first Passover Seder in history, which was in isolation as well.

Good Shabbos!

Its already been a full year since the rise of the COVID-19 coronavirus, with “social distancing” becoming the catchphrase that seem to dictate our lives now. But with the holiday of Pesach coming, I'd like to give this pandemic a bit of a Passover twist.

Until this year, our generation has never had any experience with pandemics, lockdowns and other such situations (when it was all too common in Europe up to and including WWII), and it was definitely hard for us to adjust to it.

However, civilization has survived such diseases over thousands of years, and so the Jews also managed to overcome such

plagues. And one of particular note was the outbreak of cholera that struck Germany and Poland in the summer of 1831 (cholera used to come in waves that would strike different parts of the world years, even decades, apart).

Holidays with Cholera

In those days, in the city of Posen (which today is part of Poland but then was part of Germany), there lived a very famous rabbi by the name of Akiva Eiger. When the plague struck, Rabbi Eiger was already 70 years old and a very famous leader.

When the cholera epidemic began sweeping across the city, Rabbi Eiger established a Jewish cholera committee whose mission was to see to it that every community member obeyed the instructions of the government to stop the spread of the disease.

This committee was responsible for the hygiene of the wider community by means of informing residents of such. The doctors had established that hygiene was a critical factor in stopping the disease's spread. The committee also saw to it that cleaning crews were funded for the community's poor families, and they also circulated declarations on the requirement to boil all drinking water before drinking it. Doctors at the time believed that drinking non-boiled water was life-threatening. What's more, Rabbi Eiger ordered that people change their outfits at least once a week (back then, unlike today, people wore the same clothing for much longer).

But like today, they did in fact know back then that mass gatherings of people in one place was the biggest risk for the

spread of disease. And so, Rabbi Eiger issued a rabbinic ruling that group prayer would have to be suspended for the time being.

But then came the Days of Awe—Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Posen had several large and prominent synagogues, where people (like today) would purchase seats for the entire year. And since the Posen community was an ancient community, people had inherited their seats in many of the synagogues from their parents and grandparents, and it was very important to them to join the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayers. What would the community do?

Well, Rabbi Eiger established that the community would be split in two. Half would join the Rosh Hashanah prayers, and the other half would attend the Yom Kippur synagogue prayers. Those who had a reserved seat with an even number would attend on Rosh Hashanah, and those who had a reserved seat with an odd number would attend on Yom Kippur. They did so because they had to ensure that there'd be an empty seat between each attendee during services.

Even the prayers themselves were truncated by Rabbi Eiger in a serious way. Rabbi Eiger ordered that the Piyutim, the hymns, not be recited. Arrangements were all also carried out in conjunction with the local authorities. Officers and even military personnel were stationed at every synagogue to keep a sharp eye on order and to prevent crowding during entry and exit.

Additionally, Rabbi Eiger required everyone to drink hot liquid on Rosh Hashanah day before the prayers were started. There is

a custom among many Jews to not eat or drink anything on Rosh Hashanah day before the Shofar is blown—but Rabbi Akiva Eiger instructed his community that it was a matter of life-and-death and that they had to drink something in the morning first.

Now with Yom Kippur, Rabbi Eiger posted doctors in each synagogue, so that anyone not feeling well could consult with a physician immediately. Rabbi Eiger advised that, again, it was a matter of life-and-death and that everyone had to protect their lives—because life, ultimately, belongs to G-d, Who has merely loaned it to Man. In fact, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe (1745-1812), writes in his Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law): “A person has no permission whatsoever to strike his body or shame it or cause it any pain.” What’s more, and all the more grave, is the prohibition to not harm another person’s body— meaning, if one were to infect another person and thus cause that person to fall ill, the first person is guilty for harming the second, which is worse.

For his public-health efforts, Rabbi Eiger ultimately received a proclamation of royal recognition from Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm III, the King of Prussia.

Quarantine Passover

In the Talmud (Tractate Bava Kama 60b), the Sages teach: “Should a plague of pestilence come upon the city, gather your legs”—meaning, minimize leaving the house. And that brings us right to Pesach.

You see, to support that assertion, the Talmud quotes a verse

from what is called “Parshas HaChodesh,” the small section of the Book of Shmos (Exodus) that instructed the Jewish Nation while still in Egypt how to conduct the first Passover Seder in history.

So there, Shmos 12, the Torah tells us as follows: “The L-rd spoke to Moshe... On the tenth of this month, let each one take a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household... And you shall keep it for inspection until the fourteenth day of this month, and the entire congregation of the community of Israel shall slaughter it.” The Torah begins with commanding everyone to take a sheep into their home on the 10th of Nissan, and then, after holding it for over three days, to slaughter it right there in the house. And then, “And they shall take [some] of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel.

Several verses later, the Torah goes on to warn: “And you shall not go out, any man from the entrance of his house until morning”—meaning that everyone is required to stay in quarantine inside the house all night. Why so? Because, as the next verse (Shmos 12:23) states, “The L-rd will pass to smite the Egyptians, and He will see the blood on the lintel... and He will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses to smite [you].” On that, Rashi (on the previous verse) comments, “Once the destroyer is given permission to destroy, he does not discriminate between righteous and wicked.” But back to the current verse, the Talmud quotes this verse as a support for the idea that when there is an epidemic in a city, “gather your legs”—meaning, as mentioned, to isolate yourself and thus protect yourself. Meaning, the reason that G-d commanded the Jewish Nation to stay at home all that night was to save them

from the Plague of the First Born.

Make Your Home a Temple

The Rebbe, who always looked for the positive message in everything, explains that this section contains a fundamental and positive lesson.

The Rebbe says that in the “Egyptian Passover” sacrifice, we find a phenomenon that is not found in any other sacrifice throughout the Torah. To bring a sacrifice, one always had to travel to the Beis Hamikdash, and only there was it permitted to offer up a sacrifice—and only on the Mizbayach, the Altar. Even before the construction of the Beis Hamikdash, when it was still permitted to offer up sacrifices on bamos (platforms, or personal altars), those bamos could not be constructed just anywhere, or in your backyard, but rather, specifically in places “suitable for the dwelling of the Shechinah [Divine Presence].” And as we see, when the Patriarchs built their own altars, they did so in places designated for such: Avraham built an altar on Mt. Moriah (which ultimately became the Temple Mount); Yaakov built an altar at the place “where G-d had revealed Himself to him.” But for everyone to offer up a sacrifice in their own individual home?! That only happened once in Jewish history, and that was in Egypt. G-d did not send all the Jews to bring their sacrifices in the house of Moshe or Aharon but rather, each individual in their own homes.

But why was that so?

The Rebbe says that the answer to that lies in the first commandment to construct the Mishkan. There (Shmos 25:8),

G-d says, “And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst.” And as the Sages famously comment, “It does not say, ‘In his midst’ but ‘in their midst’— within each individual of Israel.” That means that in addition to the fact that they built one single physical public Mishkan for everyone, G-d really wants that every Jewish home serve as a Mishkan, a sanctuary, for Him.”

And therefore, even though the Jewish Nation was required to offer up every sacrifice specifically on the Mizbayach on the Temple Mount, at one occasion in Jewish history—just before the Exodus from Egypt, the “birth of the Jewish Nation”—G-d wanted to emphasize that the target and mission of the Jewish Nation’s spiritual work is to make one’s individual home a place that the Divine Presence can rest.

And so G-d commanded, “And you shall not go out, any man from the entrance of his house until morning”—the place where they would be eating the Passover Sacrifice and the place where they’d be sleeping that same night, as they were also required to do years later in

Jerusalem when they would offer up the Passover Sacrifice. That means that the reason G-d had them quarantined in their homes at the Exodus from Egypt was not just to rescue them from the plague but more so, to turn them homes into little Temples (Likutei Sichos Vol. 26, Bo

3).

Return to the Family Seder

And perhaps we can say that even today, there is a deeper, meaningful reason behind isolation and quarantine other than the coronavirus wafting about outside. Just as with going out of Egypt, when G-d wanted us to turn our homes into homes for Him, so too this year, our mission was to turn our homes into homes for Him.

There are many Jewish people who celebrate Passover at hotels, or as invited guests with family, friends and so on. And it could happen that years go by with them actually never making their own Seder in their own house. This year like last year, G-d is calling out to all of us and saying, “Now it’s time for you to invite Me to your house—it’s time for Eliyahu HaNavi to visit you in your house.” This year, my friends, G-d wants every Jewish house in the world to celebrate Seder Night.

My dear friends: Last week, we completed the Book of Shmos. And when we finished that Book, as we do with the completion of each one of the five Books, we declare out loud, “Chazak, chazak, v’nis’chazeik!” Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened! For it is with the power of the Torah that we will succeed in overcoming these difficult days—not just surviving them but more so, emerging from them stronger than ever.

Let us be strong—and let remember to turn our personal homes and personal lives at this time into little Temples for G-d, ultimately bringing about the building of the Third Bais Hamikdash with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!