

Corona and Keter, Disease and Divinity

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A recent headline on the *Times of Israel* website highlighted the challenge of our world-wide pandemic for people of faith: “Slammed by COVID-19, ultra-Orthodox Jews try to understand what God hath wrought.” The article went on to note that “many observant Jews have found themselves forced to confront the theological implications of a plague that has subverted popular assumptions regarding reward and punishment.” <https://www.timesofisrael.com/slammed-by-covid-19-ultra-orthodox-jews-try-to-understand-what-god-hath-wrought/>

But it is not only very Orthodox Jews who are asking these questions. Many people - of all faith traditions - have articulated the same spiritual concerns. Essays from a variety of faith leaders have populated the *Globe and Mail*, CBC, the *New York Times*, Huffington Post and other international media outlets. Arnold Eisen, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote: “So much death and suffering! So many hopes for a better life, destroyed by pandemic. Such an incalculable amount of trust -- in government, in the future, and in God -- undermined or irreparably lost.” Why would God permit such pain, suffering, social disruption and death? <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/18/opinions/religion-faith-coronavirus-covid-19-eisen/index.html>

One of the terms for God is *Keter*, Crown, referring to Divine sovereignty and immediately evoking a connection to Coronavirus. We want to make sense of the connection between Corona and *Keter*, disease and divinity. Ishay Ribo reflected this concern in a song recorded shortly after Purim, as Israel was placed in confinement: What does God want humanity to learn in order to give the Holy One “*Keter Melukhah*,” the Crown of divine sovereignty? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUfo0mqPzG8>

We recognise that human beings can act in terrible ways: shooting school children, killing people in the holodomor and gulag, murdering Jews on an industrial scale. Is there a way forward in the face of moral evil, natural disaster or a gnawing feeling that nothing makes sense or has meaning?

Seeking answers, some people return to an ancient explanation, rooted in the Bible and Rabbinic literature: human sin and moral misdeeds lead an all-powerful God to punish the world. Sometimes, this leads to blaming particular groups or identifying specific behaviour as a contributing cause. Others imagine that we face suffering as a test, to ascertain who has true trust and loyalty, belief and faith in God. And there are those who see economic collapse and human suffering as “contractions” prior to the birth of a messianic era. All of these see the divine crown, the *Keter*, as intimately involved in the coronavirus pandemic.

Trying to comprehend contingency and uncertainty, these explanations seek to offer some rationale for “who shall live and who shall die.” Of course, there is value in reflecting on our personal or social behaviour in search of self-improvement, or taking tragedy and turning it into motivation for future good. Of course, we can use this crisis as an opportunity to reflect on and improve our environment. Of course, we who can should be thankful for every breath we take. Of course, we should recite blessings to make the everyday holy, offer appreciation and remind ourselves that we are not in control.

However, that doesn't mean that religious thinkers should claim that they “know” what connects God, the *Keter* of the universe, to the corona virus. If you think you really know what God is doing, for weal or woe, please forward me a copy of the divine text message. I shrink away from the idea of a deity who is sufficiently cruel to cause pain and suffering in an indiscriminate and massive manner or as part of a plan to bring about a better world. With hundreds of thousands of deaths, rows upon rows of coffins, people dying alone, families experiencing terrible mental anguish, physicians forced to triage patients, it is God who would have a lot to explain.

Still, what we can learn after the fact from tragedy does not exempt us from trying to understand the relationship between humanity, the world we inhabit and the divine *Keter*. An opinion offered in the Talmud tells us that even though

idolatry, theft, and adultery should interfere with the natural processes of the world, “the world goes along and follows its course” (*Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah* 54b). Similarly, Christian Scripture teaches “the rain falls on the just and unjust” (*Matthew* 5:45). Medieval philosophical thinkers developed these ideas and imagined that a rational God created a world that operates by immutable laws of nature.

However, despite the order and design we generally observe in this world, regardless of the benign and even benevolent views of nature to which we cling, we also witness cataclysm and chaos, from violent biological conflicts to cosmic entropy and disorder. Physicists warn of the “destructive power of ‘antimatter,’ ‘black holes,’ ‘dark energy.’ On earth [scientists] warn of ‘pandemics’ as natural occurrences — unrelated to sin or demonic forces — that could decimate earth’s human population...” (Byron Sherwin, *Faith Finding Meaning*, 127).

If we will not proclaim an omnipotent God who orders and structures our daily lives and we reject the notion that our lives are meaningless — a disteological surd with no purpose or meaning — we must look for another way to comprehend the relationship between God and our world, between the divine *Keter*, and COVID 19.

I find the theological tradition that we live in an incomplete and unredeemed world to be helpful. From the Genesis narratives, as Jon Levinson has shown, the Bible portrays God in a persistent struggle to establish cosmos and control chaos (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 1994). The Talmud imagines humans as partners with the Holy One to complete Creation (*Talmud Bavli Shabbat* 119b). This effort is ongoing.

The Talmudic tradition recognized that this unredeemed world includes evil mixed with good, creativity mixed with destruction (*Beresheet Rabbah* 3.7). Even at a time of great achievement, such as the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, we experience the problematic nature of our lives: “In this world, there are wars and sorrow. The evil inclination, Satan and the angel of death have authority to rule in this world (*Midrash VaYosha Exodus* 15.18).” Following the Shoah, Martin Buber observed, “Standing, bound and shackled, in the pillory of mankind, we

demonstrate with the bloody body of our people the unredeemedness of the world” (cited by Ernst Simon, *Jewish Frontier*, Feb, 1948).

Rather than seeing God as omnipotent, this approach sees the divine *Keter* sharing in human suffering and the struggles of human life. In this view, human beings have the possibility of enhancing or reducing Divine presence and power in this world (*Pesikta d'rav kahana* 25.1). As one version of the Kedushah prayer states, we on earth forge, through our actions, the divine Keter. By continuing despite tragedy, the Jewish people, linked by Covenant to the divine, brings strength to God and the world.

Tamar Ross, commenting about C19, draws attention to Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook who noted increased human “interconnectivity and interdependence with a vast and fluid spectrum of being.” He thought that a more holistic theology would not see sharp distinctions “between the natural and the supernatural, or between human endeavor and divine control.” (<https://katz.sas.upenn.edu/resources/blog/pandemic-and-plague-theological-and-philosophical-reflections>). This suggests that God doesn't decree or prevent the coronavirus – or any natural evil. We, by our actions, convey or control the spread of the virus. As partners with God, we contribute to the divine desire to minimise chaos and destruction and to enhance life by washing our hands, maintaining social distancing, and wearing masks.

Hans Jonas, whose writing takes on more significance with each passing year, was a philosophy of biology and environmental ethics who discussed the integration of the material and moral aspects of nature. He argued that the linkage of the physical and biological elements of our world entail human ethical responsibility for the continuity of life on earth. Following the Shoah, he came to believe that the “existence and autonomy” of the world and full human responsibility for history leads to a rejection of an omnipotent God in favour of a suffering, becoming and caring deity “emerging in time,” experiencing “something with the world... [being] affected by what goes on in it.” Thus, “It is not God who can help us, but we who must help God.” (*Mortality and Morality* 1996, 143 and 191)

Where is God? With us and waiting for us. In a constant struggle to defeat the anti-*Keter*, the coronavirus, our actions will determine whether the true *Keter* will be crowned as the God of life.