

How to Respond to Uncertainty

Parashat Ki Tissa

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It's such an odd coincidence that, after an extraordinary week during which we've come to realize that the spread of the coronavirus has become a pandemic, the threat of plague as a punishment is mentioned twice in today's Torah reading. It's mentioned first at the very beginning of the parashah, when the people are told that they should take a census of the Israelite population, and that if they fail to do it properly, they'll be struck by a plague.

The second time "plague" is mentioned in the parashah is in the story of the Golden Calf. It begins with the people in a state of **confusion** and **despair**. And what was the origin of that? It's very simple: "And the people saw that Moses delayed in descending from the mountain" (32:1).

That was it. That was all it took. The very next words read, "... and the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, 'Get up and make us a god who will go before us, because Moses -- we don't know what has happened to him.'" (Ibid).

"And the people saw that Moses delayed..." How delayed was he? Well, according to the Midrash, before going up the mountain, Moses said to the people, "after 40 days I'll come down by noon." They heard that as, "*On the 40th day* I'll come down by noon." So they started counting, with the first day being Day 1. But Moses didn't mean to include the day he went up the mountain (i.e., the 7th of Sivan), so, on the 17th of Tammuz (the 40th day), noon came and went, and Moses wasn't back! So the people immediately assumed that he was dead! (see Shabbat 89a).

They were upset. And so, what did they do? They panicked. They turned to Aaron and said, Make us a god!

We know how the story proceeds: the people insist that Aaron build an idol. He takes his time, trying to delay, hoping that Moses will come back in the meantime; but eventually, he finishes the calf and tells them, “Tomorrow, you can worship God” (v.5). And so, the next day, the day that Moses was due to come down, the people get up early, offer sacrifices, eat, drink, and “frolic.”

Meanwhile, Moses is on top of the mountain, finishing up, when God says to him, “You’d better get down there in a hurry. The people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, they’ve been quick to turn aside and pray to this Golden Calf!” And Moses goes down, sees what’s going on, smashes the tablets and grinds them up.

And then God punishes the people. How? He sends a **plague** among them, on account of the Golden Calf (32:35).

What is a plague? Well, in ancient days, it was a mysterious illness that struck a community insidiously.

Today, we would call it an epidemic disease that causes high mortality. And what’s an epidemic? It’s a disease that affects many persons at the same time, and spreads from person to person, in a locality where disease is not permanently prevalent.

So why a **plague**? What’s the significance of that as a punishment?

Well, a plague is insidious. It comes upon a community stealthily. It comes up and picks off the weakest, the frail, and the elderly. In its manner, it induces confusion, disorientation, **uncertainty**.

Think about the uncertainty created by a plague: When will it arrive? Who will it touch? Will I be among those who get sick? The questions are almost endless. Perhaps the last one is the simplest of all: **When will it be over?**

It makes sense in the context of the narrative for the plague to be the response to the Golden Calf because the reason that the people built the Golden Calf in the first place is that they couldn't handle uncertainty.

So God gives them even more of it!

Now, we today understand -- I hope we do -- that plagues are not a form of divine punishment. Plagues are a natural phenomenon. Human beings may contribute to the spread of disease; they may also impede its spread. But a plague doesn't distinguish between the virtuous and the wicked. The virus particles don't have that level of consciousness.

But though we intellectually understand plagues today differently from our ancestors, one thing is common: and that is the terror that plagues induce. **It's a terror prompted by uncertainty.**

Why is uncertainty so tough to handle? It's because we naturally want to see ourselves in control of our fate. We want to do everything we can to protect ourselves and our loved ones. When, despite all of our efforts, we see that things are out of our control, we don't know how to handle that. We may "lose it." We may become upset. We may be sad. These are natural feelings.

I'm sure, for example, that it wasn't wasn't easy for you, Zoe, that instead of there being 300 people sitting here in person there would be far fewer. But think how many are watching! I'm sure you were looking forward to a party this evening. It's not easy to deal with such disappointments.

What you're experiencing is, in essence, a glimpse of the human condition. By that, I mean that the essence of being human is to live in a world in which there's

an awful lot outside of our control. We don't know what the next day will bring. And although there are things we can do to influence our fate, to influence what will happen tomorrow, we are fundamentally incapable of determining the future.

One old Yiddish way of putting that is to say, "*Der Mentsch tracht un Gott lacht*" -- "We humans plan, and God just laughs."

I actually don't like that aphorism for a bunch of reasons -- which I'll get to -- but it captures the essence of what I'm talking about. We can make as many plans as we want, and *still* some things won't go according to plan.

So what don't I like about the aphorism? It suggests that since we can't control our own fate completely, there's nothing we can do. Since we can't *totally* determine the outcome, why bother to do anything?

That is just not the Jewish approach at all for a whole bunch of reasons!
Let me tell you why.

First, we Jews have long believed in the virtue -- not just the permissibility of, but the *virtue* of -- medical care. We don't simply throw up our hands and say, "What will be, will be!"

Instead, we go to doctors. When they give us medicine, we take it. We believe that it's a *mitzvah* to do what we can to alleviate suffering, to pursue life-giving therapies.

What's more, we're called upon to listen to doctors not only when they're focusing on helping *us*, but when they're focusing on helping *others*. And so, when the doctor tells us to practice social distance -- not only because it may protect us but because it may protect someone else -- we do that. By sitting the way we're sitting (every other row, with two seats between each person), we're modelling virtuous behavior.

By the way, this behavior is so difficult because it is contrary to our natural instincts! *So many* of us like to schmooze in shul! That makes sense!

There's a synagogue in Portsmouth, N.H. with a little alcove outside the sanctuary with a couple of seats. It has a name. It's called, "The Shmoozitorium!"

We don't have a designated shmoozitorium here at Temple Aliyah, so most people just assume that the entire sanctuary is a shmoozitorium. Look, there's a time to be silent and a time to speak. I'm not trying to elevate the importance of schmoozing.

And yet, schmoozing **is** important. It demonstrates that we want to be in community. We want to be a part of other people's lives, and we want them to be a part of our lives.

And that leads to yet another thing we can do, which again may not alter our individual fate, but which can influence the fate of the society in which we live.

We can help one another when a plague strikes. We may need to maintain social distance, but we needn't be alone, nor leave anyone else alone. We can reach out to those whom the plague has touched and offer comfort and support. So there's a lot we can do.

And I don't think that God laughs when we plan how we as individuals or as families or as communities are going to help one another. That's not a laughing matter at all. And God is not so malevolent that God would delight in confounding those plans.

So, we have our work cut out for us. And that work is a powerful way of addressing uncertainty. For we may start by saying, "I don't know exactly what will happen," but then we can move to, "But I know exactly who I'm going to reach out to; I know exactly who needs my help today or tomorrow or the next day. And I know what kind of help I can offer, and who and how I'm going to accomplish that."

That kind of thinking, that kind of *pivoting*, turns our attention away from focusing on what's happening to me, or to us, and turns it toward focusing on what I can do, what you can do, what together we can do to address the threat we are facing.

That is a conscious turning away from focusing on uncertainty (which is not necessarily productive) toward focusing on the certainty of what we can do and the certainty of the virtue of virtuous behavior -- even when carried out virtually.

Shabbat Shalom!