It Wasn't the First Time:
Plagues in Jewish History
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March 2020 wasn't the first time that a Jewish community like ours was faced with the threat of a plague. We Jews have known about plagues about as long as we've been a nation. The familiar "Ten Plagues" with which the Egyptians were stricken in the land of Egypt, which we mentioned just a few weeks ago at the Passover seder, certainly expose us to the anxiety that any community must confront when faced with a mysterious, debilitating and possibly fatal scourge, including what we would today call an **infectious disease epidemic.**

Although before 2020 most of us probably didn't pay much attention to it, anxiety about plague comes to our consciousness every time the High Holidays roll around, whenever the Cantor chants the Unetaneh Tokef, and reminds us of the many ways our lives can end unexpectedly: "Who," the text goes, "will live and who will die; who by fire and who by water, who by the sword and who by a wild beast; **who by earthquake and who by plague?"** ***"mi va-ra'ash, u-mi va-ma-geh-fah?!?"***

Incidentally, that phrase "and who by plague" (*u'mi va-magefah*) has its own distinct, ominous musicality in the traditional melody of the Unetaneh Tokef that used to be chanted by our late Cantor Emeritus, Harry Gelman. *"Mi va-ra-ash, u-mi va-ma-**GE-EH-FAH."***

But the Jewish response to plague hasn't merely consisted of anxiety, fear or prayer. Since the Middle Ages, we Jews have responded rationally, sensibly and responsibly, working together as communities **to treat the ill with care and**

compassion; to isolate the sick from the well, and to try our best to stop the spread of plague.

We Jews have long valued the medical arts, and have relied on best practices -- both among Jewish medical professionals and non-Jewish ones -- to treat the sick and to protect the well.

Incidentally, it didn't have to be this way. Not all religious traditions are as deferential as the Jewish tradition has been toward medical expertise. Why is that? Why is it that we have long seen doctors as partners with God in healing the sick?

I don't know the answer to that. Some say it's the result of persecution. Because, in so many societies, we weren't permitted to own land or to work in so many other ways, we, of necessity, came to see that making use of our minds -- our most portable asset -- was one way to survive.

Whatever the cause, I'm grateful. I'm grateful that to us it is not a challenge to our religious faith to go to a doctor, to seek a remedy for a malady, and to follow a doctor's orders. Instead, we Jews have come to see these behaviors as the fulfillment of an important *mitzvah*, to "guard [ourselves] and guard [our] souls very much (Deut. 4:9)."[1]

One famous Jewish physician who has long interested me is Rabbi Jacob Zahalon, who lived in Italy in the seventeenth century.

It wasn't easy to live in Rome at that time. In 1555, Pope Paul IV had established the Rome ghetto as a way of segregating Roman Jewry completely from the rest of the population. Eventually, that ghetto was surrounded by a wall. And within it was much poverty.

[1] See also Deut. 4:15, which repeats this directive.

Born in 1630, Jacob Zahalon was only 26 when the plague struck Rome in 1656.[2]

In his famous work, *Otzar Ha-Hayim*, the Treasury of Life, Zahalon writes a description of the plague as follows: "In 5416 (1656) in the month of June, a disease called morbilli [mor-BILL-i -- i.e., measles] broke out among the children; most of them died. Afterwards, adults became ill with blotches on the skin called petechiae [Pe-TEEK-ia] and in three days [most of them] were dead. It appeared three months earlier among the Gentiles than among the Jews; it also came to an end earlier among the Gentiles. The Jews were forbidden [by the Gentile authorities] to leave the Ghetto and enter the city, as was their custom. Two officers were sent to the Ghetto to prepare a suitable place for a "Lazaretto," [an isolation hospital] where the sick could be placed so that they were separated from the healthy and thus prevent the spread of the epidemic."[3]

By the way, to illustrate the precarious situation that Jewish physicians faced, Zahalon writes about a case in which he and a Christian physician differed in their diagnosis of a particular resident of the ghetto. The Christian physician maintained that the patient, Shabbtai Cohen, was suffering from the plague. Zahalon argued that it was not the plague, and that therefore the patient [and his family and his house] did not need to be isolated. The patient died, but when a post-mortem exam was held, it confirmed Zahalon's diagnosis, to which he responded with a sincere *"Baruch Ha-Shem,"* i.e., "Thank God."[4]

Isolation was a key strategy of confronting plague in those days. Already for over a century, during times of plague it had been the practice in Italy to require ships arriving from abroad to remain in the harbor for forty days before being allowed to

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[2] *A Guide for Preachers on Composing and Delivering Sermons: The Or Ha-Darshanim of Jacob Zahalon*, translated and with an introduction by Henry Adler Sosland, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987, p. 23.

[3] Harry Friedenwald, "Jacob Zahalon of Rome: Medieval Rabbi, Physician, Author and Moralist,", p. 2-3; also published in his *The Jews and Medicine* (Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore, 1944), pp. 268-279.

[4] Ibid., p. 25.

dock. That's the origin of the term "quarantine": it comes from the Italian phrase for forty days, *"quaranta giorni."*[5]

It appears that the isolation efforts helped reduce the number of casualties. When plague had broken out in Padua in 1631, out of 721 Jews, 421 were killed by the plague. But when it hit Rome in 1656, twenty-some years later, only 19% died. That was considered a success.

Incidentally, understandably, physicians took grave risks in treating patients during the plague. Many physicians died. Rabbi Zahalon's cousin, Rabbi Yitzhak Zahalon, died of the plague. There was a physician named Samuel Gabbai who served with his father (also a physician) in Rome at the time. Both came down with the plague; the son recovered, but the father died.[6]

"When a physician would visit the sick [Zahalon writes], it was customary that he take in his hand a large torch of tar, burning it night and day to purify the air for his protection, and in his mouth he had theriac [an antidote to snake venom].[7]

In reading Jacob Zahalon's account of the plague, we see a resolve to treat the ill, to isolate the ill, and to protect those who are not ill.

But that's not all we see.

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[5] "The practice of quarantine, as we know it, began during the 14th century in an effort to protect coastal cities from plague epidemics. Ships arriving in Venice from infected ports were required to sit at anchor for 40 days before landing. This practice, called quarantine, was derived from the Italian words *quaranta giorni* which mean 40 days." (https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/historyquarantine.html)

[6] Friedenwald, p. 3.

[7] Harry Friedenwald, the author of "Jacob Zahalon of Rome: Medieval Rabbi, Physician, Author and Moralist," wonders whether the vapor of the burning tar impregnating the physician's clothes made the doctor an undesirable host for fleas and thus afforded real protection.

We also see a commitment to maintain the spiritual health of the community. For Jacob Zahalon wasn't just a physician: he was also a rabbi, scholar, and preacher. He was known not only as a physician who went out into the community to tend to the ill; he was also known as a rabbi who continued to minister to his flock. But how could he do that in Rome, when the synagogue was closed?

He gives us the answer in writing: "Since the people were not able to go to synagogue, on Shabbat Toledot (2 Kislev 5417) [1656], I Jacob Zahalon, preached in Catalana Street, from the window in the corner house of David Gatigno to the people (may God preserve them) standing in the street. At another time, I preached in Toscana Street, from the window of the house of Judah Gatigno (of blessed memory), the people standing below. In other streets, scholars would preach from the windows of their houses."[8]

Many rabbis who have been serving in congregations during these past two years have drawn inspiration from Rabbi Zahalon. Long before Zoom; long before Microsoft Windows; Rabbi Zahalon realized that it wasn't enough to care for the sick and to isolate the sick; it was necessary to continue, as best he could, to serve the spiritual needs of the people by reaching them in whatever way he could.

But it wasn't just Rabbi Zahalon. It was the entire community.

What we see in Rabbi Zahalon's account of the plague is a community working together to resist a common foe.

That has been the overall ethos of the work of our Reopening Committee. For much of the time, a major focus has been on how we can help assure that the environment of our synagogue -- the physical space in which we gather -- does not become a place where disease is transmitted.

Underlying its work has been a recognition that as Jews we have a duty that complements the rights we enjoy as a part of the larger free society in which we live, and that is **the duty to do what we can to help all of us.** Not just the

[8] Friedenwald, pp. 3-4.

vigorous, but also the weak; not just the young, but also the elderly; not just the so-called "courageous", but also the so-called "cautious"; not just those with healthy immune systems, but those who are immunocompromised.

In addition, the Committee has followed in the footsteps of Rabbi Zahalon in seeking and promoting ways -- *prudent* ways -- to maintain our religious practices: to continue to gather -- whether virtually or in person -- to learn, to daven, to socialize; to continue to live Jewish lives, so as not to lose contact with the ultimate source of our strength and vitality.

The Committee has managed to do this for two years, and that's because the Committee has been devoted to its goals. While it has quietly been doing its work over this time, it has been modeling mutual respect; it's been modeling the value of listening to and learning from others.

Credit for that goes to all of the members of the Committee, but in particular to Peter Krupp, its chair. Peter is a wonderful listener, a *respectful* listener, who has sought, always, through listening, to determine the best approach for our community.

The work of the Committee began two years ago. It isn't over yet -- in fact, its next meeting is this coming Tuesday evening -- but we thought that this would be a good time to pause and to give thanks and to express our appreciation to the members of our Committee for the work that has been done up until now, and the work that still lies ahead.

At the end of his account of the Rome Plague of 1656, Jacob Zahalon shares a "bittersweet thought reflecting the continuity of the Jewish community."[9]

"Ul'siman tov l'yisrael," -- "As a good sign for the people of Israel -- a pregnant woman named Zivia, the wife of Yitzhak Mondolfo, contracted the plague, and though confined to the Lazaretto, was able to deliver a healthy child, whom she

[9] "The Physicians of the Rome Plague of 1656, Yaakov Zahalon and Hananiah Modigliano," by Edward Reichman, *The Seforim Blog,* p. 5.

was able to nurse for a period before her demise. The child lived, [he writes] until today [which means that he lived at least to the age of 20.]

And then there is one more sentence:

"The brit milah was performed there [in the Lazaretto, the isolation hospital]], and [then Zahalon concludes on a homiletical note with the phrase from Ezekiel 16:6 that is traditionally recited and repeated by all present at a brit milah]: *'I say to you, by your blood you shall live, and I say to you, by your blood you shall live.'"*[10]

Let's never stop taking care of everyone in our community, and let's never stop doing whatever we can to continue to practice Judaism faithfully -- now and always.

Shabbat shalom.

[10] Reichman, p. 6.