

A wedding in a cemetery: Judaism, terror, and pandemic

by [Susannah Heschel](#) June 18, 2020

Susannah Heschel

Susannah Heschel is the Eli M. Black Distinguished Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College and chair of the Jewish Studies Program. She is the author of *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*; *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*; and *Jüdischer Islam: Islam und Deutsch-Jüdische Selbstbestimmung*, and editor of *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel*. A Guggenheim fellow, she is also the recipient of grants from the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, the National Humanities Center, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

Joy comes in the morning, the psalmist tells us, but this pandemic feels like a never-ending night—indeed, a nightmare—and certainly not a time to celebrate a wedding. And what kind of celebration is a wedding in a cemetery?

Yet a *shvartze chasene*—a wedding in a cemetery as it is called in Yiddish—is precisely what East European Jews sometimes organized when cholera, typhus, influenza, and other epidemics would strike. A black chuppah (wedding canopy) was set up in the midst of the graves in the town's cemetery, the rabbi performed the service, and the townspeople rejoiced and brought gifts of everything the new couple might need to set up a household.

The *shvartze chasene* was also distinguished by the bride and groom: not an engaged couple in love, but two people chosen by town elders, often impoverished orphans, marginalized and neglected by [society](#), as Natan Meir describes in his new book. The [first shvartze chasene](#) seems to have occurred in late eighteenth century Ukraine in the town of Berdichev, famous for its Hasidic rebbe, Levi Yitzchak (1740-1809), continuing during repeated cholera epidemics in Eastern Europe, in [America during the 1918 flu epidemic](#), and also [during the Holocaust](#). The most recent took place in [Israel in March of 2020](#), and the custom lives on in Jewish memory, [film](#), [art](#), and Yiddish literature, including stories by [I. B. Singer](#) and [Mendele Mocher Sforim](#).

Some rabbis like to blame sin, especially by women, and violations of Jewish sex rules for death. A wedding supposedly restores hegemonic heteronormativity. Still, the custom is absurd: no wedding ever brought an end to an epidemic, yet it touches a chord. Its weirdness mirrors the

horror of an epidemic. While an epidemic demands quarantine, the *shvartze chasene* requires leaving home, celebrating together, and bringing two marginalized people into the community.

II

Epidemics frame Jewish historical identity. The Jewish story begins with the biblical Exodus of the Israelites liberated by God from enslavement by Pharaoh in Egypt, a liberation that occurs after God inflicts ten plagues on the Egyptians. That is the Bible's version. Hellenistic writers tell a different story: Egypt had been hit centuries earlier by an epidemic, and the king was advised by an oracle to expel the Israelites, accused of spreading leprosy and false religion. Moses then led the Israelites through the desert to start a new religion, monotheistic and aniconic. For the Egyptians, rejection of idolatry was a dangerous plague. The Bible inverts that danger, making idolatry and immorality punishable by God with plagues. In the Talmud, however, epidemic is brought by the Angel of Death. While the Bible commands quarantine for the ill, the Talmud ([Baba Kamma 60b](#)) warns the healthy: in times of plague, stay home! The Angel of Death is prowling the streets and makes no distinction between pious and wicked; all can be its victims.

The Talmudic warning was reinforced through the centuries by rabbis during the innumerable epidemics, from undefined plagues to influenza, typhus, and cholera: stay home, care for the sick, give to charity, wash yourself and your home, recite psalms, pray with devotion—but do not go out. Safeguarding life takes precedence over praying in the synagogue. Even eating on Yom Kippur during a cholera epidemic was permitted by [great rabbis](#), including Akiva Eiger, Moses Schreiber (Hatam Sofer), and Israel Salanter. Staying home could also make Jews targets during epidemics. Associating Jews with leprosy was revived in Southern France and Aragon in 1321 with the Shepherd's Crusade that brought murderous pogroms to Jews and lepers. Those pogroms set the stage for attacks against Jews during the Black Death that spread through Europe in the mid-fourteenth century and led to a European pandemic of torture and horrific execution of Jews, "[unprecedented in their extent and ferocity](#)," which eradicated over a thousand Jewish communities.

Jewish memory of the Black Death was less of death by plague than of death by pogrom. The attacks were so rampant that it remains unclear if more Jews were killed by the disease or by the marauding Christians. A [medieval glossator](#) on the Talmud states that roads out of the city were as dangerous as the plague, since those who flee are susceptible to marauders and thieves. By contrast, [Thomas Devaney has shown](#) that when the Black Death hit Cyprus, Christians organized religious processions to plead for God's mercy and invited Jews to join. [Alexandra Cuffel relates](#) that in Cairo, Muslims included Jews and Christians in religious processions. Violence against Jews was episodic, not continual, and the recurrence of epidemics throughout the world, over and over again, was only sporadically accompanied by violence.