

## The Benefits of the Coronavirus Crisis

For the first time in living memory, we are forced to celebrate Passover almost individually, away from all other people, instead of in joyous family get-togethers. The coronavirus pandemic is forcing us to stay away from others. People are getting sick and dying all over the world, hospitals are overwhelmed, the economy is taking huge leaps back, unemployment is soaring, the country is paralyzed, people are practically barricaded in their houses, and children are schooled much less effectively.

Some people believe the evil and suffering in this world will be balanced by the good of the afterlife, in what Judaism calls *Olam Haba*, the "World to Come".

Others believe there is always some good behind the bad; that good things always emerge from bad things, and justifies them; that all suffering is for some greater good. After all, the Torah tells us, at the very beginning:

וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד

*Vayyar Elokim et kol asher 'asa v'hinne: tov me'od.*

And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.

[Genesis 1:31]

We read in the Book of Psalms:

טוֹב יְהוָה לְכָל [יְרַחֵם] עַל-כָּל-מַעֲשָׂיו

*Tov HaShem lakol, verachamav 'al kol maasav.*

The Lord is good to all and his mercies are over all His works. [Psalms 145:9]

So we must have faith that, somehow, it's all to the good.

An objection can quickly be made: Why can't we see the good? Some answer: Because of our limited understanding. A primitive man in a dentist's chair or a surgeon's table only knows he is being hurt. He does not see it's for his own good. In the Torah, Moses could not see the good either. As soon as he complained to Pharaoh, Pharaoh made the life of the Israelites worse. Moses tells God:

My God, why have You done evil to this people? Why have You sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, [Pharaoh] has done worse to this nation, and You have not saved Your people! [Exodus 5:22-23].

A rabbi in the first century, by the name of Nachum ish Gamzu, was severely handicapped, yet he was always optimistic. No matter what happened to him or around him, he would say: “*Gam zu l'tovah* -- This, too, is for the good”. He always saw a silver lining. Here is what the Talmud says about him:

Nachum of Gamzu was blind in both his eyes, his two hands and legs were amputated, his whole body was covered with boils, and he was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed whose feet were standing in bowls of water to prevent the ants from crawling on to him...

Why was he called Nachum of Gamzu? Because whatever befell him he would declare, “*Gam zu l'tovah* -- This, too, is for the good.” [Taanit 21a]

Rabbi Akiva, a student of his and arguably the greatest rabbi in the Talmud, followed in his footsteps. He used to say:

כָּל דְּעָבִיד רַחֲמָנָא לְטָב עָבִיד

*Kol d'aved Rachmanah l'tav 'aved.*

Everything God does is for the good. [Berachot 60b]

Can one really always find a silver lining, no matter what tragedies occur around us? Long after the event, one can sometimes say “yes”, especially when there is plenty of uncertainty. For example:

- The destruction of the Temple led to a Judaism centered on synagogue, prayer, study, and spiritual matters, rather than animal sacrifices.
- The Diaspora helped us learn new skills from the host countries, and prevented the destruction of all the Jews. When some countries were hostile to Jews, others were friendly.
- The various expulsions, from Spain and elsewhere, led us to seed our knowledge and bring new skills to the world at large.
- The Holocaust led to the world allowing the creation of the State of Israel.
- The State of Israel may be under perpetual siege and surrounded by implacable enemies, but this keeps the country together, increases the determination to keep the state Jewish, and reduces internal strife.

Some will object and say, “Even so, it’s not worth it.” I am not arguing that it is, just that some might consider it so. It is, of course, a subjective matter.

Some people argue that when bad things happen to us, it means we did something wrong. But the Torah tells us that that is not always the case. Take slavery in Egypt, for example. God tells Abraham in the Book of Genesis:

Know for certain that your offspring will be strangers in a strange land, and will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years. [Genesis 15:13-14]

It does not state a reason, and none is obvious. It is not punishment. So evidently God thought slavery was necessary and led to some good. But *what* good? There are many possible answers, which I gave in another d'var Torah. In brief, slavery was necessary for our protection. Jacob's clan in Israel was an easy target for neighbors, but in Egypt, a superpower protected us, albeit to exploit us. Slavery allowed us build up our numbers in safety, to build up our identity and community spirit. Slavery minimized contact with the outside world, which reduced the practice of idolatry and eliminated the possibility of intermarriage. Slavery created a scenario that allowed God to show the Jews and the whole world that He was in charge. Also, the gratitude that we felt upon liberation and the slave mentality we had acquired made it easier for us to accept the Torah.

On the personal level, I can say that without the expulsion from Spain, my parents would not have met and I would never have existed. The Haggadah of Pessah enjoins us to recall the words of the Mishnah:

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיִּיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם

*B'chol dor vador, hayyav adam lir'ot et 'atsmo, k'illuhu yatsa mimmitzrayim.*

In every generation, every Jew must regard himself as though *he, himself* was *personally* rescued from Egypt. [Pesachim 10:5]

That's easy for me to say, since I grew up as a Jew in Egypt. Indeed, if I, myself, had not personally been forced out of Egypt, I would never have met my wife, had my children and grandchildren, and led a productive and satisfying life. Our forced Second Exodus led us to better lives.

Now let's apply all this to the coronavirus crisis we are in today. Can any good come out of it? Yes, plenty. Let's talk about eight good things, one for each of the eight days of Pessah.

**First**, we must be thankful because it could be far worse:

-We could be cut off from the Internet, or have no telephone, no TV, no radio, no electricity, no water, no gas. But we have all these things. We are not facing this crisis alone, cut off from everybody.

-We could be in the dead of winter, with freezing weather outside, or suffering hurricanes and tornadoes, new Katrinas or Sandies. Instead, most of us are enjoying great springtime weather.

-We could be in wartime, as in 1918 with the Spanish flu.

-We could be living in a time when there is *no* hope for a cure or a vaccine, such as the time of the Black Plague in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, or the Spanish flu in 1918-1920. Today, most people firmly believe that science *will* come to the rescue, as it has for so many other diseases, and produce a vaccine and a cure. Faith in science has never been higher.

Hope is ever-present, sustains us, and keeps despair at bay.

**Second**, even if you catch the virus, the chances of dying from it are extremely low. The death rate could be a lot higher, as it was in the past. But it is only 1.4% on average for all *diagnosed* cases, certainly an order of magnitude higher than the 0.1% for the seasonal flu, but still very low.

And it is probably much lower if we include *undiagnosed* cases. Indeed, the top US immunologist, Dr Anthony Fauci confirmed last Sunday that half the people infected with the coronavirus do not have any symptoms at all and don't even know they are sick, a much larger fraction than previously believed.

The death rate *does* go up with age, to be sure, but that means our children and grandchildren are far safer than we are. We would not want it any other way. That's still a lot of people dying on a worldwide scale, but at the *individual* level, the chances of recovery are extremely high.

**Third**, the medical establishment will learn its lessons and be better prepared next time. Consider this crisis a "vaccine" of sorts against a bigger epidemic or a biological terrorist attack. Lots of rogue states and terrorist groups have been preparing to conduct biological warfare attacks, and this crisis will heighten awareness and allow better preparation. I

personally spent a lot of time in the Defense Department building defenses against biological threats. And washing hands, something we Jews have been doing since time immemorial, is back in fashion.

**Fourth**, air pollution is way down because most cars are off the road and factories sit idle. NASA satellite images show clearly that pollution is dropping rapidly in cities across the globe. The canals of Venice are crystal clear for the first time in ages. We have cleaner water and cleaner air. Cleaner air will reduce respiratory infections perhaps even more than the coronavirus increases them. Traffic deaths and accidents have fallen by half.

Is this God's way of forcing us to tackle global warming?

**Fifth**, the digital transformation is accelerating. When this is over, the new normal will be working from home, telecommuting, teleconferencing, telemedicine, distance learning, and even televoting. People, businesses and institutions are being forced to adapt fast to the technological wave of the future. Most will not leave it. I doubt our electronic get-togethers will end when this crisis ends.

**Sixth**, political enemies are forced to work together for the benefit of all. A few months ago, who would have thought that Congress would pass anything important almost unanimously?

**Seventh**, the crime rate is down. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the New York Police Department reported that criminal incidents fell by 20% in March. Murder went down 25%, robberies 10% and grand larcenies 37%. Also, warlike actions across the globe have decreased. We celebrate heroes of a different kind: Health care providers and providers of other necessities who put their lives at risk to serve the public.

For all the reasons mentioned above, the coronavirus may be saving more lives than it takes.

**Eighth**, and perhaps most important, we are learning the true meaning of family and community. Households stay together, spend quality time together. The Mishna tells us that the Messianic Age will be *Yom shekulo*

*Shabbat* – A time that is all Shabbat. [Tamid 7:4] That's how it feels today.  
Could it be that we are already *in* the Messianic Age?

Speaking of which, let us make this time of confinement a time of reflection,  
a time to take stock, a time to return to faith, and a time to return to God.

Chag kasher ve-sameach.