

Israel's Response to Coronavirus, and Ours

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Having lived in Israel, I can attest that personal space is “not a thing” there. People get close to one another to share affection and more. When waiting for service, the concept of an orderly line is almost entirely unknown. People gather in tight bunches, pushing toward the front. Sharp elbows are an asset in Israel.

Imagine, then, the impact of social distancing! Judy Maltz, writing in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, cites Hebrew University sociology professor Gad Yair: “The mandate to create social distancing challenges Israelis in ways they have never experienced before...People in this country—when they embrace, they really embrace. There’s no doing it with just one arm. Meetings tend to be close and intimate. It is common in Israel when you see a pregnant woman to put your hand on her stomach. There’s no social distance between people because there’s this feeling that we’re all the same family and we’re allowed to touch.”ⁱ

Yair goes on to explain the impact on shared meals: “Even the most secular Israeli families get together with their parents and grandparents for Shabbat lunch and dinner...Sharing food is considered a sign of love. Compare that with places like Germany or the United States, where families rarely get together more than twice a year.”ⁱⁱ

As of midday today, Israel time, the nation had 705 confirmed cases of Coronavirus. I did the math. That’s a smaller percentage of the population than the infection rate in the United States, now including some 15,000 confirmed cases. Most infected Israelis and Palestinians have mild cases, with ten in serious condition.ⁱⁱⁱ All of Israel’s restrictions were enacted prior to the State’s first fatality from the illness just today.

At considerable cost to Israel’s economy, Israel has prohibited visitors from outside the country, “unless they can prove that they are able to self-quarantine for 14 days upon their arrival.”^{iv} Foreign students have been asked to leave, and participants in our Reform Movement’s programs were flown home on a charter flight, which was also opened to other American students. Now, “Israel’s government [has] approved additional measures to limit movement of citizens and trade, shuttering cultural and recreational establishments as well as schools and universities and banning gatherings over 10 people.”^v Importantly, these restrictions have the force of law. The government even “approved the tracking of

cellphones by the Shin Bet security service in order to inform people who unwittingly came in contact with confirmed coronavirus patients.”^{vi}

Israel acted strongly and early. The journal *Foreign Policy* reported last week, “In some ways, the Israeli response has resembled a tactic favored by its military: preemptive actions, disproportionate in scale.”^{vii} In other words, the Israeli government took steps far earlier than other countries, including our own, with more significant percentages of the population infected. While numbers of infected Israelis and Palestinians continue to grow, those numbers are growing slowly. God willing, the government’s restrictions will save countless lives.

We may be encouraged by a report in *Al-Monitor*: “The coronavirus outbreak has done what local and international politicians and activists have been unable to do. It has sparked an extraordinarily high level of cooperation and coordination between Palestinians and Israelis.”^{viii} For example, Palestinian workers typically must return home to the Territories each day after work, enduring long lines daily at checkpoints when they go to their places of employment. Now, though, an agreement will permit 45,000 Palestinian workers to remain in Israel for at least a month.^{ix} With an outbreak of the virus in Bethlehem, “Israeli hospitals have trained Palestinian medical workers and analyzed coronavirus tests of Palestinian patients in the West Bank.”^x

Not all segments of Israeli society have been as responsive. Earlier this week, *Ha’aretz* reported that, “in hundreds of ultra-Orthodox yeshivas, Torah academies and *hayders*, or Hareidi primary schools, study continued as normal... [M]ost of the institutions linked to the main Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox groups were ignoring the government’s orders... Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, the... most senior of the Lithuanian rabbis who uphold the standards of ultra-Orthodox ideology and piety, had decided that suspending Torah study, even for one day, was a greater risk to the survival of the Jewish people, even to the very existence of the world, than the fears of infection from the new coronavirus.”^{xi} Thankfully, the authorities have begun to act. Police made arrests after an ultra-Orthodox wedding with more than 150 guests.

Closer to home, as the numbers of infections in Arkansas have grown, our Governor and Mayor have acted, most often in concert, to save lives, even at the sacrifice of our economy. I was distressed, though, to read in this morning’s *Democrat-Gazette*, “To respect the separation of church and state, [Governor Hutchinson] said he wasn’t placing restrictions on churches, but recommended that they also take steps to prevent spread of the virus.”^{xii}

To be clear, under the provisions of the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a compelling state interest may indeed legally restrict the free exercise of religion. Last Sunday, Mayor Scott tweeted support of churches that had moved to streamed services, rather than unsafely gathering communities. This morning, I offered to help him arrange a press conference, with the Mayor in the lead and religious leaders participating remotely, to emphasize the importance of not going into crowds, including to attend religious services.

Our own response, as I've said before, quoting Rabbi Joel Mosbacher, is guided by three Jewish principles:

1. *Pikuach nefesh*. Saving a life is the most important *mitzvah* in Judaism, superseding all others, including Torah study, that Israeli ultra-Orthodox rabbi's ruling notwithstanding.
2. *Al Tifros min ha-tzibbur*, "Do not isolate yourself from your community."^{xiii} We are streaming this service, and we are planning to hold real-time, interactive Torah Study tomorrow morning, giving us an opportunity to "be together" as a congregation in the best way that we can. Eileen Hamilton and Keila Patton are sending our congregants more emails than usual—for example, sharing a videotape of this sermon later tonight, and providing Religious School activities for families every Thursday—to keep us connected to one another and to our faith. Tomorrow morning, you will also receive a video of my D'var Torah alongside Dr. Carmen Arick's beautiful chanting of the portion. Carmen used a *yad* gifted to her by our beloved Wilma Diner, of blessed memory, and wore a *kipah* given to her by our dear Aniko Diamant, symbolically bringing our community together.
3. *Chesed*, lovingkindness. Temple and JFAR volunteers are mobilized to provide grocery shopping, pick up prescriptions, and fulfill other needs for older or medically vulnerable congregants. Our Vogel Caring & Sharing Fund stands ready to help congregants who face economic dislocation in this crisis. Janet Korenblat has utilized our Pfeifer Fund to provide breakfast at Our House for two weeks.

This week, we conclude the reading of the Book of Exodus. The Israelites complete construction of the Tabernacle, the holy worship space that they will carry with them from place to place throughout their desert wanderings. We are now in the wilderness, all of us. We can imagine a Promised Land, a return to life as we knew it, before and hopefully eventually without, Coronavirus. In the meantime, we journey through life with a great deal of uncertainty. Let us carry our own tabernacle—Torah, our faith, our own virtual community with us, everywhere our journeys take us. Let our leaders, like those in Israel, take strong

steps to protect every member of our society. And let our faith communities lead—saving lives, helping people feel connected, and caring for the most vulnerable.

Amen.

ⁱ Judy Maltz, “Coronavirus Crisis: In Touchy-feely Israel, Social Distancing Creates a Big Challenge,” *Ha’aretz*, March 16, 2020.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ “Israel Confirms Over 700 Coronavirus Cases; 10 in Serious Condition,” *Ha’aretz*, March 20, 2020.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} Joshua Mitnick, “Israel’s War Footing Against the Coronavirus,” *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2020.

^{viii} Daoud Kuttab, “How coronavirus outbreak has boosted Palestinian-Israeli cooperation,” *Al-Monitor*, March 19, 2020.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Mitnick.

^{xi} Anshel Pfeffer, “Israel’s Leading Rabbi Thinks Not Studying Torah Is More Dangerous Than Coronavirus,” *Ha’aretz*, March 15, 2020.

^{xii} Andy Davis, “Governor orders gyms, restaurants, bars closed,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, March 20, 2020.

^{xiii} Pirkei Avot 2.4.