

## Justice, Justice: Even during a Pandemic

### *Shabbat Shmini 5780*

April 17, 2020

Rabbi Barry H. Block

When this week's Torah portion opens, the two eldest sons of Aaron the High Priest, Moses's brother, offer an "alien fire" to Adonai, "one which [God] had not commanded them." This ritual infraction evokes a fire of God's own, killing the brothers. Moses explains to Aaron: "This is what Adonai meant in saying: Through those near to Me will I show Myself holy."<sup>i</sup>

In short, Moses is saying that community leaders are subject to harsher consequences than others in similar situation.

The human family of planet Earth today faces an "alien fire," if you will, a virus none of us has previously known, wreaking untold havoc on this nation and the world. The consequences, though, are not falling primarily on world leaders. Instead, the poor and people of color are dying in numbers disproportionate to their share of their population and are paying the steepest costs of the accompanying economic collapse.

The Washington *Post* reported, "Majority black counties have three times the rate of infections and nearly six times the rate of deaths as majority white counties..." President Trump has noticed. He asked, "Why is it three or four times more so for the black community as opposed to other people? ... It doesn't make sense and I don't like it."<sup>ii</sup> Analysis in the *Post* suggests several contributing factors: Black Americans have higher rates of underlying conditions, less access to care, are disproportionately represented in "essential" jobs, lack important information, and suffer housing disparities.<sup>iii</sup> At a time when social distancing is required to slow rates of infection, living in crowded conditions is deadly dangerous. To be specific about access to care, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that in 2018, 8% of white non-elderly Americans were uninsured, compared to 11% of blacks and 19% of Hispanics.<sup>iv</sup>

We are not surprised that economic hardship falls hardest on the poor. The New York *Times* put it best yesterday: "Well before the coronavirus established a foothold, the American economy had been playing out on a split screen. On one were impressive achievements: the lowest jobless rate in half a century, a soaring stock market and the longest expansion on record. On the other, a very different story of economic weakness unfolded. Years of limp wage growth left workers struggling to afford essentials. Irregular work schedules caused weekly paychecks to surge and dip unpredictably. Job-based benefits were threadbare or nonexistent.

In this economy, four of 10 adults don't have the resources on hand to cover an unplanned \$400 expense.”<sup>v</sup> The result in the current crisis? “[L]ines of cars stretch for miles to pick up groceries from a food pantry; jobless workers spend days trying to file for unemployment benefits; renters and homeowners plead with landlords and mortgage bankers for extensions; and outside hospitals, ill patients line up overnight to wait for virus testing.”<sup>vi</sup>

This crisis has opened fault lines of gross injustice—some based on wealth and race, others not at all. I think of our congregants whose loved ones live in care facilities. In a move that properly protects health in those most sensitive environments, Temple members can't visit even their most immediate family members. Worse, one can only imagine the loneliness and boredom that afflicts the residents, confined to their rooms. This particular injustice cannot be helped, but it remains an example of the unjust reality that the burdens of the pandemic fall more harshly on some than on others. Seniors and those with preexisting medical conditions must isolate themselves even more stringently than the rest of us. Again, the hardships of the epidemic are not borne equally.

Some of our congregants are among those who have lost their jobs at this difficult time. They have reported to me long waits to access government assistance that should, and probably ultimately will, be available to them. The difficulty of accommodating a dramatic, sudden, and unexpected increase in unemployment and food assistance claims is understandable, but the fear and privation faced by people who can't access replacement income quickly is real. We can and do support our own congregants through this kind of crisis. Still, as I work with partners to meet the needs in our congregation, I'm acutely aware of the millions of suddenly unemployed Americans who don't belong to houses of worship the majority of whose members enjoy secure incomes and can help the needy among them. The burden is not evenly shared throughout our society.

One of Judaism's most enduring commandments is found in the words of Deuteronomy: “Justice, Justice, shall you pursue.”<sup>vii</sup> Torah commentators insist that the word “justice” is not repeated merely for emphasis. Instead, it means that one should pursue justice not only for oneself, but also for the other party in a dispute.<sup>viii</sup> We should take care of our own during this crisis, to be sure, but we must also care for others.

The Centers for Disease Control lists “Harmful Actions Brought About by Crisis-Related Psychological Issues.” The first two items are “Misallocating treatment based on demand rather than on medical need [and] Accusations of providing preferential treatment and bias in providing aid.”<sup>ix</sup> People with more resources are in a better position to demand, and therefore receive, care. Yes, as the

maxim goes, charity does appropriately begin at home, but our concern for harms in this pandemic must stretch beyond ourselves to those most in need—in our community, across Arkansas, throughout the United States, and around the world.

People have asked me about donations. I am grateful for gifts to our Vogel Caring & Sharing Fund, which permits us to help congregants in distress. More broadly, I’m suggesting contributions to the Covid-19 Relief Fund established by Arkansas Community Foundation.

At the same time, as advocates, we must insist that our national and state governments make a priority of our fellow citizens who are most profoundly harmed. Government health agencies must enhance information and testing, particularly in communities hardest hit. Health care must be available to all, not only during this crisis but always. We should have little doubt that part of Arkansas’ relatively low infection rate to date is Medicaid expansion in our State, dramatically decreasing the percentage of uninsured Arkansans and sustaining rural hospitals, thanks to Governors Beebe and Hutchinson. But more remains to be done. At this terrible time, unemployment benefits must be easy to access and must last longer than usual.

Casting about for something to do, I have volunteered four afternoon this week and last at the Clinton Center. My job is anything but glorious, loading and unloading bins from food trucks, and disinfecting the used bins. That kind of work, though, is critical to an effort that brings some 7,000 meals every weekday to the neediest residents of our city. If you’re between ages 18-64 and healthy, please join me by going to [littlerock.org/volunteer](http://littlerock.org/volunteer).

This coronavirus pandemic has unearthed and amplified countless inequities in our society. At this terrible time, our primary responsibility continues to be staying at home, sheltering in place to preserve our own health and that of our loved ones and community. That critical task, though, must leave room for the job the Jew must also pursue: Justice, justice—even or perhaps especially, during a pandemic.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Leviticus 10:1-3

<sup>ii</sup> Eugene Scott, “4 reasons coronavirus is hitting black communities so hard,” *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2020.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> “Uninsured Rates for the Nonelderly by Race/Ethnicity,” accessed on April 17, 2020 at

<https://www.kff.org/uninsured/state-indicator/rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&selectedRows=%7B%22wrapups%22united-states%22:%7B%7D%7D%7D%7D%7D&sortModel=%7B%22colld%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>.

---

<sup>v</sup> Patricia Cohen, “Struggling in a Good Economy, and Now Struggling in a Crisis,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2020.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides to Deuteronomy 16:20.

<sup>ix</sup> “Psychology of a Crisis,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019, p 11.