

Bible, Theology, and Politics in Times of Pandemics*

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Corona time, end 2021. “Speak not of the rope in the house of the hanged”. This saying appears in many cultures, in this or other variants. Or would you find the metaphor of an (unmasked) elephant standing in the scholarly room, being ignored by almost all others sitting in the room, as appropriate? I feel that it’s our social responsibility, as bible and religion students and scholars, to reflect on the situation from our diverse viewpoints. Ignoring the executed victim, or the elephant, in favor of our usual “classical” occupations is at the moment done at our own peril.

“PLAGUE” IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

There’s no equivalent word in the Hebrew bible for what for us has become an everyday word, that is “pandemic” or “epidemic.” By “pandemic” we now mean a health hazard, a collective hazard, spreading ever so quickly everywhere as it seems, uncontrollable or almost so, an epidemic which affects individuals but mainly collectives of numerous people, potentially fatally.

* The article is a slight reworking of a lecture held at the Swedish Exegetical Days in Uppsala in October 2021. I have preserved the character of the piece as a talk, which means that no footnotes have been added. References to biblical and other sources are instead embedded in the text itself.

In the Hebrew bible the nouns מַגֵּפָה or נִגְף that are usually translated as “plague,” “pestilence,” or “pandemic,” derive from the verb נָגַף *gal*, “strike,” “hit” (also in war). And the plagues of Egypt (Exod 9) are in the Hebrew מַכּוֹת, a plural of מָכָה from נָכַח *hiphil* etc., again “hit,” “strike.”

This doesn't mean that health plagues or epidemics are not known in the Hebrew bible even in the absence of a specifically designated term. On the contrary. For instance, the Hebrew bible narrates, in three places (2 Kgs 18–19; Isa 36–37; 2 Chr 32) how King Sennacherib of Assyria devastated the land of Judah, but miraculously stopped his siege of Jerusalem and returned to his country without completing it. This journey of Assyrian punishment is assigned by scholars to 701 BCE and is variously witnessed also by the extrabiblical sources of the *Sennacherib Prism*, archaeological findings from Lachish and Azekah, the Siloam Inscription, Flavius Josephus, Herodotus, and Berossus. Whereas the Hebrew bible and later Jewish traditions present the sudden lifting of the siege as a divine miracle, the external sources mention natural “plagues” of mice or even Cholera that attacked the Assyrian troops. Note the biblical attribution of this “calamity,” or “blow,” to a divine miracle rather than natural causes.

This instance means that both groups of נָגַף and נָכַח derived terms, serving in both contexts of war and of epidemics, and the extralinguistic concepts behind them, are somehow connected, in spite of serving as headwords in different semantic fields. As an aside: indeed, the exclusive specialization of מַגֵּפָה as “plague” or “pandemic,” as separate completely from the signification “military defeat”—according to the historical dictionary of the Israeli Academy for the Hebrew Language—is no younger than the eighteenth century CE. And while מָכָה may still signify “blow,” מַגֵּפָה is the modern Hebrew term used for epi/pandemic, and never for defeat in war (although the verb is). Now, our first task will be to find out why these two clusters of נָגַף and נָכַח derived terms do double duty in the Hebrew bible.

The Hebrew bible examples that will be cited here are paraphrased from the Hebrew text and mostly follow the JPSS translation. After looking into these relevant texts, gleaned from several layers of the Hebrew bible, we shall discuss some more the Hebrew terms and their lexicological and semantic sources and usage, the theologies and ideologies that they imply, and their meaning in their contexts, before moving on to their utilization for dealing with the present. The list isn't exhaustive but is certainly representative.

- In Num 25:6–9, an Israelite man brings a Midianite woman to the Tent of Meeting. Phineas the Aaronite priest kills both man and woman. The plague, having killed 24,000 Israelites, is checked. There's more on a "plague" in this chapter, and its end by the Aaronite priest, who kills the transgressors and appeases god. This desert incident is mentioned further in Josh 22:17 and Ps 106:29–30.
- Moving to Num 14:36–37, to the fate of the skeptic spies returning from viewing Canaan after being sent there by Moses, the men who spread opposition to entering the land die by a plague sent by god's will.
- In Num 17:8–14, on the rebellion of Korah and company, again a priest (Aaron himself this time) helps lift the plague caused to the congregation, not before 14,700 people die, apart from the immediate Korahite rebels themselves. Such passages no doubt are etiological, explaining the ascendancy of Aaron's priestly house; however, they serve to explain that plagues come from the divine, and can be alleviated by priests according to his command. As summarized in Num 8:19:

And from among the Israelites I formally assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons, to perform the service for the Israelites in the Tent of Meeting and to make expiation for the Israelites, so that no plague may afflict the Israelites for coming too near the sanctuary.

- The prophet Zechariah threatens the gentile nations—and their domestic animals—by plague, if they fight against Jerusalem. God will also so punish the Egyptian community if they decline to come on pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Zech 14:12–19).

- Carelessly and directly taking a human census, as god tells Moses, will entail a plague (Exod 30:12). This happens when King David sends Joab to take a census of Israelites (2 Sam 24). Here too cultic action is necessary to check the catastrophe: a divine messenger kills 70.000 Israelites.
- Human but also animal health catastrophes are mixed not only with violent death as a result of military action but also with natural catastrophes, as in the “curses” chapter in Deut 28, or in the so-called “plagues of Egypt.” Here, in these two sources, some details are supplied. In Deut 28:20,

The LORD will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out because of your evildoing in forsaking Me.

And so on and so forth, until you are wiped out (v. 24). Similarly, in Exod 8–11, details are given of the Egyptian Passover “plagues,” not called מַגֵּפֹת in the Hebrew apart from in 9:14, although several of them do qualify; and see specifically in 9:14:

For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world.

Interestingly, *qal* isn't used at all in the two parallel accounts of the Egyptian plagues (Pss 78:43–51; 105:26–36), whereas *naḥ* is used sparingly: once (in Ps 105:32); and twice (Pss 78:51; 105:36) in a virtually identical verse.

- In 2 Sam 12:15,

The LORD *afflicted* the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and it became critically ill.

And in 1 Sam 25:38, in the Abigail story, ten days after she returns from her trip to David,

God *struck* Nabal and he died.

In both instances the Hebrew *qal* (“cause to fall,” “be defeated”) is used but variously translated.

- Instructive is the *double entendre*, the verb נגף *niphal* and the noun מַגֵּפָה, in both senses of loss—malady and loss in war—in 2 Sam 18:7, when Absalom loses his war with his father David:

וַיִּגְפוּ שָׁם עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי עֲבָדֵי דָוִד
וְתִהְיֶה שָׁם הַמַּגֵּפָה גְדוּלָה בַיּוֹם הַהוּא עֲשָׂרִים אֲלֶף

The men of Israel *were defeated* by the servants of David,
and the *slaughter* there was great on that day, twenty thousand men.
(NRSV)

SHORT ANALYSIS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE EXAMPLES

The examples briefly summarized here are not organized in any text order, since I wished to show that they, and the concepts behind them, aren't specific to a period or genre—although, to be sure, “plagues” in the literature about the Desert period (Numbers!) abound.

Much can be gleaned from looking at the syntax of these examples, namely: Who is the subject of “striking”? Who is the subject who effects the “strike” or “plague”? Who is the object affected? Or, if you wish, in literary terms: Who is the perpetrator/actant? Who is the victim/acted upon?

The answer is not surprising. When using the terms in a military context, such as in the last example, humans are both the *subjects* and *objects* of the action, actants and acted upon, killers and killed, initiators and sufferers. But, when the divine or his messenger(s) are the actants, the *subject* of the verb or the ones sending or activating the מַגֵּפָה, with or without additional military action, then the מַגֵּפָה seems to qualify as a fatal catastrophe, and therefore is often translated into English as “plague” or the like. Such “plagues” are:

- always, always caused by god and activated by him or his messenger(s), human or divine. The plague/pandemic is neither ever caused by a human agent, nor mended by such an agent directly without god's command or agreement;
- as angry divine punishment for human behavior he dislikes;

- fatal;
- may be directed at individuals;
- but mostly affect a great number of humans involved, and may be so for animals too;
- are non-specific in origin and nature, aside from being life catastrophes; and
- stop when god reckons his demands are met.

In other words, such is the Hebrew bible theology behind epidemics, plagues, calamities, and the like. When not designated specifically as “natural” (such as a draught, flood, fire, earthquake), or even when they are, they are often linked to wars and acts of physical hostility. They are caused by god, like everything else in the world, in such instances as punishment. They can only be lifted when human guilt is taken care of. Such plague/pandemic is never caused by a human agent, nor mended by such an agent without god’s involvement: just as in the case of draught, or other pestilences or diseases. Finally, the change is activated through a cultic functionary or a religious act.

To be sure, this concept of divine punishment by epidemic that is inflicted upon humans, as well as other communal punishments, is not an original biblical invention. Neither is the firm link between violence/war and epidemic. Suffice is to mention the beginning of the Iliad, or Sophocles’ Oedipus. It won’t be re-inventing the wheel to state that in ancient times, and in pre-technological societies, and in deeply pious communities, large-scale health catastrophes were and are understood as religious and ethical, also political emergencies, rather than medical; and attributed to human failure that causes divine anger and retribution.

HERE AND NOW, ISRAEL 2020/2021

How does the biblical concepts of human-destructing plague connect to times of global Corona? Intimately and forcefully, especially for faith

communities. But facts first, personal before the religio-political, going back to the beginning of 2020.

My own personal situation is: living alone, moving with dual citizenship between Israel and the Netherlands, since early 2020 mainly in Israel without possibility of leaving (until quite recently). My only son lives in Canada. I haven't seen him since September 2019 and am not happy about it. And yes, the personal is political and vice versa and I have no claim for objectivity about or patience with whatever or whoever I consider exacerbated the Corona situation: in general and for me.

Moving to the Corona situation in Israel, including its religio-political complications. Corona in Israel has been severe, and in some ways unlike in other countries. We've had three strict lockdowns, heavily enforced by law, police, and even army agencies. On the other hand, we were early in getting vaccinations; this started here in December 2020. We paid a heavy price for the early vaccination drive, in fiscal terms as well as in terms of privacy (Israel Corona data is, lock and barrel, available to the Pfizer company). Vaccinations were indeed a game changer, though, and the price is worth it, I think (Covid-19 seemed to be finally contained, until recently, although now we seem to be on the tail end of a fourth wave; and another vaccine).

Israeli law and life is unique in its privileging of Jewish *halakhah*, as interpreted by rabbinic authorities. And even a secularist like me would hasten to state that Jewish *halakhah*, in addition to biblical interpretation, contains much that can be mined in a communal health emergency. Most important, sanctity of life is a basic tenet of Jewish *halakhah*. First and foremost, an old Jewish dictum, attributed already to Maccabean times (1 Macc 2:29–44), states that (for instance b. Šabb. 151b):

פיקוח נפש דוחה שבת

Saving a life cancels [keeping the] Shabbat.

This maxim, widely discussed in the traditional sources, was later extended to other commandments apart from the Shabbath, including

medical emergencies (b. Yoma 85b and more). Another maxim that could have been adopted for dealing with the Corona in Israel 2020 was

(or, in later versions, כל ישראל ערבין זה בזה זה לזה)

all Israel are responsible to/for each other,

which, like the previous maxim, was extended over time from a specific case (debt paying) to a general community responsibility, and even beyond it (for instance b. Sanh. 27b). More dictums and maxims will be referred to later; and although it does seem, on the surface, that the largely secular and ostensibly Zionist state of Israel could have done well with the Corona virus even while cooperating with its Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities according to a Jewish tradition of compassion and responsibility, things in praxis were not so simple. Not so fast. This was not totally so. And before we commence, some more and more specific facts.

The state of Israel is supposed to be a secularist Jewish state, if not entirely secular. While most Jewish citizens—75% of the Jewish population—would define themselves as tribal/traditional to a degree, 25% would fall under the general classification “observant.” This classification is broad and includes many shades and types, from observant-Zionists to Orthodox to non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox to Hassidic of many hues. We cannot enter into factional differences here, although they are serious. Suffice is to say that the previous government, the one ousted into a parliamentary Opposition several months ago (June 2021), was based on a coalition with the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox parties, including the non-Zionist ones, and took their wishes and demands into account in a manner that far outweighed their contribution to the societal texture. The ultra-Orthodox see the authority of their ageing rabbis, mainly of Ashkenazi descent, as higher to and overriding that of state authority. This doesn’t stop them from participation in the state government they don’t recognize as valid, and from demanding special economic concessions for their constituents. In fact they have successfully constructed a state-within-a-state that fully participates in Israeli social entitlements,

but much less so in social obligations. And my, even the minister of health was a non-Zionist Hassid (now facing a criminal charge). Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities are conservative, heavily male-oriented societies; and a male's role in life is to study Torah and Talmud and later Jewish religious literature, if he can, not work in the general economy. Because of their belief that Torah (read: mainly Talmud) study is crucial for the continuation of the world and god's wish for male careers, and the enthusiastic adherence to the commandment "be fruitful and multiply," most ultra-Orthodox families are poor and suffer poor living conditions despite state social insurance support. The economic underperformance, coupled with other demographic issues, hurts the ultra-Orthodox themselves first and foremost, but it also hurts every member of the Israeli population. And all this is before we even discuss the monopoly they have on the "correct" guardianship of Judaism against other current Jewish religious streams, such as Reform, Conservative, Constructionist or, heaven forbid, secularist.

How does this pile of dry facts relate to the current global pandemic? Again, intimately and forcefully. Following science, it was early recognized by most that keys to controlling the pandemic were wearing masks, keeping social distance, undergoing frequent tests in case of doubt, and quarantining sick or suspected-as-sick persons. It was also assumed that children were carriers, although less affected by the illness itself, so the Israeli national state in-person education system for all ages, from kindergarten to university, was in effect shut for over a year; let's not talk about the Zoom alternative. Please believe me: As Europeans, you have no idea how severe the lockdowns in Israel were, including at times not being able to go beyond 100 meters from your house, unless for groceries or medical supplies.

How did the rabbis react to the pandemic situation and what were the results?

- Most rabbis forbade closing their own education institutions, from *cheider* (literally: "room"; for young male children) to *yeshiva* (for male adults). The reason given was that Torah study was the foundation of the

world (and performed also for the benefit of my ilk, and yours). This reason was recited, again and again, by children and adults, and caused widespread infection in and out of the faith communities. Needless to say, social distance cannot be implemented in such environments. Later the rabbis agreed to a temporary closure of educational facilities, then recanted again, and the facilities were open earlier than state facilities. Opposition to closure was at times violent and sly. This actually amounts to denial of personal and collective responsibility to fight the pandemic, not to mention disregard for state rules and civic obedience.

- It was forcefully declared that god will look after his own when he's done punishing them, see the biblical texts. It was also asked, time and time again, why this has come to us as punishment for imagined sins, and non-practice of various commandments by the non-observant population was given as reason. And god was of course expected to manage herd immunity for his followers.
- Enforcement of regulations by police and army was met by physically violent demonstrations which, like other mass gatherings, enhanced the chances of virus transmission. The same is true for densely populated (by the thousands!) weddings and other occasions celebrated by religious leaders and their devotees.
- Pressure was put on the government not to close synagogues, whereas all other indoor public gatherings was forbidden beyond gatherings of 2–3 persons in enclosed spaces.
- Also because of poor living conditions, the percentage of Corona patients in the Orthodox/ultra-Orthodox communities far outweighed their proportional share of the Israeli population. Places such as Bnai-Brak, Beit Shemesh, El'ad, suburbs in Jerusalem and Haifa, and elsewhere, were a hothouse of infection. Even now (October 2021), when the percentage of infection in the whole Israeli population is about 2%, infection percentage in such locations is 12–17% (similar to rural Arab locations).
- Ultra-Orthodox refused to leave their poor living conditions for state-owned isolation hotels outside their own locations, citing *kasbrut* and other concerns.

- At the height of the pandemic, more than 50% of the sick and of hospital patients were of these communities, as were the proportional numbers of dead from Corona and Corona-related causes; compare please with their proportional number in the population.
- Ultra-Orthodox *yeshiva* students from abroad, especially from the US and Russia, continued coming into the country. The airport was closed for the likes of me, but not for them. Also, Israeli Hassidic males could continue to do pilgrimages to Ukraine, for the Reb Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810) grave, which is considered a *mitsvah* (commandment). Please don't ask if they brought in disease transmission when they came back.
- The ultra-Orthodox refused to be “ghettoized” by collective quarantine into their locations, so as to stop disease transmission. As a result, and the political pressure, instead of selective spot-locking outburst centers, the whole country was on lockdown—three times. The price for all, economic and social and mental, is of course horrendous.
- These communities were at first reluctant to vaccinate: God will look after his own in due course. Later even Rabbi Kanyevsky, a 94-year old Ashkenazi leader who himself contracted Corona last year, called on his flock to vaccinate at their earliest. This instruction is still not hugely followed, although some ultra-Orthodox now instruct even to receive the booster, the third vaccination.
- During the height of the pandemic, the ultra-Orthodox community organized its own private medical support system, including a wide array of ACO machines available to its members. Whereas they used the general health system and hospitals freely, their own resources remained available only to their community members.

SUMMARY

So, all in all, how did religio-political clout damage Israel's struggle against the pandemic?

There can be no doubt that, in Israel, radical Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox attitudes towards the current pandemic damaged especially

the members of those same communities. There can also be no doubt that the mixture of biblical and political motives in such attitudes proved literally toxic: first and foremost for that complex and many-part cluster of communities, and then to the whole Israel state pandemic enterprise. As a secularist Jew, it outrages me that I had to observe the demand “all Israel are responsible to/for each other,” while this basic religious and ethical instruction was not respected by the other side. All of us suffered the consequences of the political Corona theology-in-the-making. It was painful to go through three lockdown periods knowing full well that part of this could have been avoided had those attitudes been checked, and centers of infection been isolated instead of extended for political reasons. It was and is painful to be responsible for people and ideologies that don't feel responsible to the social contract I sign onto, but onto a “higher” contract, while in fact demanding from the likes of me to support them. Frankly stated, once again: lockdowns should and could have been localized to infection centers. It leaves a bitter taste that they were not. It was a political power game, far beyond the legitimate aspirations to conduct proper worship behavior, for instance: as we all know, prayer alone in the forest—even according to Hassidic lore—is as worthy to god as synagogue *minyán*. So why fight for a synagogue opening in times of Corona if not as a power game? And saving a life, well... And who really knows what god wishes for or wants? A discussion to be continued no doubt. And let's also note that vaccination refusal in the West, not only in Israel, often highly correlates with religious conservatism on the one hand, and civic conservatism on the other.

WHAT COULD AND SHOULD BE DONE?

You may have read this piece so far, thinking it's a rant against religious conservatism. In part, you're right. But there's an extra dimension to it. Religious radicalism is foreign to me personally. And yet, in times of emergency, cooperation between diverse sociocultural groups is essen-

tial. There's no absolute separation between radically religious people and secularist ones; it is the duty of science believers to convince practitioners of more traditional, according to them "higher," beliefs to behave differently. And this convincing effort, so it seems, would be efficient if religious traditions are invoked in addition to medical ones. In other words, collaboration is possible only if the reasons given to it will be pointed out from *within* religious traditions. As scholars of the Humanities, this is a good opportunity to deal with arguments against Corona misbehavior and to contribute to the battle against it. This way, who knows, we might even make our work more relevant to society outside Academia, even if in a small way.

SOME EXAMPLES: JEWISH TEXTS THAT CAN BE ACTIVATED AGAINST CORONA CONSERVATISM

It has already been mentioned that two *halakhic* texts, harking back to the Hebrew bible, can be enlisted in favor of calling for general societal responsibility of believers and non-believers alike. The first is "Saving a life cancels [even observing] the Shabbath," which deals with the problem of when work prohibition on the Shabbath—the holiest recurring rest day—is allowed, harking back to the biblical commandment (Gen 2:1–3; Exod 20:5–11 = Deut 5:12–15; Lev 23:3; and many more); this may be taken to indicate that dealing with a pandemic in a proper manner is a commandment to surpass all others. The second is "All Israel are responsible to/for each other," harking back inter alia to fiscal responsibilities of community members for each other's personal freedom (for instance Lev 25:25–28) and extended in the *halachah* to ransoming captives and other emergency actions, again applicable to the situation.

Additional bible-anchored *halakhic* principles can be adduced for achieving common ground in this fight. A famous dictum, heavily quoted in postbiblical sources including the New Testament and used in postbiblical rabbinic Judaism as a basis for communal life, is:

ואהבת לרעך כמוך

Love your רַעַךְ as yourself.

(Lev 19:18; see also Matt 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:3–33; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9; and more in the New Testament)

This saying, almost universally translated into the equivalent of “Love your *neighbor* as yourself,” misses the point of the Hebrew רַעַךְ, which means “friend,” “colleague,” “peer,” even “lover” (as in the Song of Songs). It is, of course, specific to neither Judaism nor Christianity and can serve in the fight.

In Judaism, there’s a path, albeit a limited path, for human choice. Yes, god is omnipotent and omnipresent and omniscient. Everything emanates from him. But there’s also an opening of sorts: there’s a certain choice for humans on the “good to bad” spectrum, as exemplified in the Eden Tree narrative (Gen 2–3) and elsewhere in the Hebrew bible. There’s a saying attributed to Rabbi Aqiva (m. ’Abot 3:15):

הכל צפוי והרשות נתונה.

This is often translated as “everything is predetermined but there’s [human] free will.” Having read a substantial amount of traditional commentators, including Maimonides, this translation seems too easy. A more appropriate understanding of this faith paradox will be: yes, everything is divinely ordained (as in the biblical Qoh/Eccl), but there’s still leeway [for humans]. In other words: God knows—who is a secularist like me to dispute that? But, as in the Hebrew bible, you, and you, and you, as an observant Jew or Christian or Muslim, can use your faith and logic ethically to consider your own community and the communities parallel to yours. And, once again, many biblical narratives show how human choice, following one option out of several, is possible and also expected in order to advance divine plans. Think, for instance, about the Joseph stories in Genesis, or Esther.

It would seem, therefore, that *halakhic* Judaism supplies well-formulated guidelines, harking back to biblical passages, for dealing with public emergencies by way of internal effort and also integration with other

communities. Mutual communal responsibility, danger to life overriding *mitsvot* (commandments), a limited choice for humans to behave as life contexts require. Translated into Corona attitudes, such concepts may help. Let's add another one to these. The Mishnah states that saving a human life, even one life, is like saving an entire world:

כל המקיים נפש אחת מעליו עליו כאילו קיים עולם מלא

Whoever saves one [human] life, it is thought about him as if he sustains the whole world.

(m. Sanh. 4.5; Kaufmann and Parma MSS)

Later texts, such as Talmud b. Sanh. 37a, limit this instruction from “human life” in general to “Jewish life”: this is certainly chauvinistic and secondary. However, it does leave a limited sense of mutual social responsibility in matters of life and death.

DISCLAIMERS AND EPILOGUE

Far be it from me to condemn *all* religious or ultra-religious communities, or to condemn them equally. I know full well that there were differences and developments, and that the attitudes of Zionist religious people and parties were different. I'm well aware that religious fundamentalists of any hue tend to be skeptical of Corona and its impact; attribute it to god's anger or, alternatively, eventual miraculous healing; and refuse cautious regulations and vaccinations—to their own cost and everybody else's. This is shown, *inter alia*, by the situation in the United States, where Christian fundamentalists supply a partial mirror image to the situation in Israel, including requests from legal courts for exemptions for Corona vaccinations on religious grounds. There too, the institutional help offered to Corona and vaccination religious resisters by religious and non-religious authorities is simply astounding. The privilege given to fundamentalist, radical notions about “the plague,” by conservative authorities is a power game played up to skeptic, conservative, often ignorant audiences. Still, it's simply difficult to comprehend.

It is also recognized that secularists anywhere may develop religious zeal about their belief systems in general and Corona/vaccination denial in particular, with similar results. A regular battle cry here is the opposite of religious claim of obedience to an authority higher than state authority: notions of civic “personal freedom” and physical autonomy that can be named civic fundamentalism. These attitudes, so different in origin but equally loud and dangerous to us all, actually are mirror images of each other. This has happened in Israel as well as elsewhere. Add to this fatalism, a non-active “let’s see what happens” attitude, that seems to me as risky and as religious as faith or civic fundamentalism, a religiously politicized concept in Western culture. At a recent visit to the Netherlands (finally), I was astounded at people’s willingness to debate the need for masks and vaccines, seriously and at length, as if these were unproven academic points. Such discussions are, more than a little hypocritically, linked to personal freedom: they flood the issue of the social contract, of civic impatience and discontent, of frustration with Western social orders. But this, again, deserves further work and psychological exploration.

Here I’d also like make a comparison and to mention, briefly, what happened in Arab Israeli communities, which—especially in rural areas—are as densely populated and suffer from other conditions similar to the Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities. Most Israeli Arabs are rural Muslim (a minority is Christian, of many denominations, and mainly urban), and define themselves as observant. At the beginning of the pandemic, their situation was similar to that of Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities, that is, a much higher percentage of disease than in the rest of the population. This was quickly taken care of through a combination of special state care, local councils’ efforts, obedience to regulations. But mainly, the change was made possible by the actions of religious leaders, who used their religious authority to help the struggle for virus containment. Unfortunately, vaccination rate in the Arab sector still lags behind that of the general population, and disease rates are climbing again, even with the religious (and civic) leaders completely on

the government's side here, although in most locations with a strong leadership the disease is dwindling again. This does show, however, that obedience to leadership, and the collaboration of civil and religious leaders helps the struggle, enormously.

To go back to one of the main points advanced in this article. *Halakhic* Judaism supplies emic (from the inside) alternative guidelines for dealing with public emergencies: it may even allow for or recommend action that transgresses some cherished commandments. A big personal disappointment for me is the apparent failure of the communities that tout Jewish traditions as their very own and present themselves as the custodians of ostensibly "proper" Judaism, to observe their own *halakhab*—to their own cost, and to the cost of all of us. The leaders, and their flock, failed their *halakhic* duty.

But I also have another disappointment, one connected to my vocation, which is Hebrew bible study. Most colleagues continue to work as usual—on classical criticism, on issues of globalization and marginalization and a host of other "isms," in the name of imagined normalcy and preserving/creating knowledge no doubt. A recent personal experience: a similar paper was originally given in a recent (July 2021) Bonn University Zoom meeting. It interested most participants, apart from three out of sixty or so, much less than, say, their own place round the Euro-American scholarly table. In my view, the latter is a cluster of worthwhile topics. However, limiting the discussion is thus very short-sighted in the present context of a global health and social emergency (and now, June 2022, the war in Ukraine is not getting much scholarly attention either). Do you want to be relevant, given your specialized field of study—be it bible study, theology, religion, or any other Humanities research? Think about the Corona situation. Create a theology of Corona that will use loopholes in your traditions, especially if the attitudes around you are fundamentalist and conservative and virus-denying in theory or action, so that emic and etic cooperation between radical religious communities and civic authorities is conceivable. Mine your knowledge as an academic to that effect. Help, even if a little, in ushering in a change.