

Religion and COVID-19

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There has been a great deal of negative publicity that religious communities in Israel and the United States were disregarding state and medical laws about social distancing. And it has given ammunition to anti-Semites (as if they need an excuse) to blame Jews and Israel for the virus. As this has created an unfavorable image of religious life, I think there's a need for some objectivity. As well as condemnation of the few who dishonor the majority.

All over the world and across all religious, strict and reclusive communities are regarded with suspicion. They are considered exotic. Sometimes they deserve scorn when they breed violence and ignorance. But most of the time, they just want to be left alone to practice their religion and ways of life in contrast to the wider world around them. And every community has a full spectrum from saints, sinners and the mentally challenged. I do not pass judgment on them for their beliefs that God alone will save them, or a messiah. It is their choice. But when it affects others, that is a different matter and one where coercion, for the greater good, is necessary.

All closed communities, that are socially cohesive and predominantly poor are suffering more than anyone else from the virus. They may indeed be supportive and protective but they can also be claustrophobic and insular. Their members tend to live in close proximity, in smaller more confined spaces and rely on communal interaction, church, mosque or synagogue, several times a day. Thus they become more open to the transmission of viruses. And they are more reliant on their religious leaders for guidance.

When one looks at the figures around the world one sees that most of the casualties have been coming from poorer populations or those with pre-existing conditions, retirement homes, shelters, shared living, working in crowded situations, even militaries. And many have been the victims of their devotion to sports events.

The rich are doing much better in their splendid isolation, on their estates, holiday homes, boats and islands. The wealthy sections in New York have the lowest rate of infection. If for no other reason than most of them have fled! In my building of 300 apartments, only 25 are currently occupied.

But yes some religious leaders and their followers have been making a huge mess of this crisis for lots of different reasons. Let's take Israel, which in general has done an amazing job in limiting the damage. No one has been a greater fool or arrogant idiot than the Charedi Minister of Health who poo-pooed the threat. He dismissed social distancing and then succumbed himself. But it is not as though everywhere, plenty of other politicians and people who should have known better, did not do the same and underestimate the scale of the danger.

In Israel there is another reason why the Ultra-Orthodox world was so slow to react. The Old Yishuv, the pious Jews who lived in the Land of Israel long before political Zionism, objected to a secular State. This mentality has remained in the many Charedi enclaves. So anything that comes from the *Tziyoinim* is automatically and viscerally resented and suspect. Many religious minorities in Israel and elsewhere are infected with another kind of virus. Disregard for State instructions and institutions. In some cases because in Eastern Europe and in many Muslim countries, the State was an enemy and its regulations oppressive and punitive. They and many secular immigrants have brought that culture to Israel and indeed parts of the USA. And without wanting to overplay the Holocaust card, their sense of victimhood and suspicion remains strong.

Yet within the USA, there are also many small groups of fanatics, survivalists, religious isolationists, racist, and neo-Nazis who hate government in general and who are preparing for the Apocalypse. All of this prevents a coordinated or immediate or controversial decision-making process.

There are politicians and other criminals and crooks of all kinds and faiths trying to benefit from this situation. A plague brings out the worst but also the best in people. And this applies to every race, every religion, and country. It would be a shame if we only focused on frat parties on the beach in Florida, or those who insist on gathering in public to put themselves and others in danger. The vast majority are law-abiding and doing much to help. Many religious communities have been in the forefront of volunteering and helping, financially and with manpower.

At this moment we still do not know the extent of the disaster and its financial and social impact on us all. There are doomsday voices saying this will be the worst disaster and depression for a hundred years. And others that we will emerge better for it. I have read so many opinions that predict sea changes, revolutions, and new eras. Both secularly and religiously. I am reminded of the Talmudic dictum that prophecy since the Temple was destroyed, has been handed to fools. I am not holding my breath.

New York at this moment is enjoying its cleanest air and its healthiest environment in fifty years. But do you think as soon as it's over the emissions, the foul air and the polluters won't be back? Do you really believe that nurses, health workers and others who put their lives in the line will then be paid as much as bankers? As for a new more tolerant face to religion, how many times have rabbis and priests predicted the arrival of the Messiah and nothing happened. It didn't seem to affect their popularity. Things returned to normal even if nothing happened.

Meanwhile, everyone wants to blame someone. Or to explain the mystery of what has always been a part of human life. Or make political capital out of it. I like to think this crisis might change things for the better and bring us together.

All societies have problems, cycles up and down. We have been extremely fortunate for a long time. All reverses are wake up calls to get us to look at ourselves. What changes are the actions that individuals have made and go on making, to bring out the best in people, to improve our world for everyone. That is what I believe is meant by talking about a messiah. Not ignoring danger because God will save us like Superman. Or punishing people who do not share your opinions or way of life. It is the drive to improve our world. I am optimistic. Happy Festival wherever you are.