

The error of piety

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

One of the most disturbing features of the pandemic has been the behavior of huge swathes of the Charedi community across the globe. There have thank goodness, been exceptions. Rabbis of significant standing who have insisted their communities obey the laws of the land and limit public gatherings and services even at a cost to religious observance. But there are others who steadfastly refuse and encourage their followers to do disobey. I have seen several learned opinions, She'elot Utshuvot (Responsa, Legal opinions), from both Israel and the USA that insist that God will protect anyone studying Torah and praying, in defiance of restrictions. Despite the tragic loss of Charedi life. All this achieves, is to undermine their religious and moral authority. I want to stress that this is not a matter of which doctor or which politician is right or wrong. It is about perception and ethical consideration for others. Not acting like backwoodsmen men from Montana, fighting the law, and everyone else.

The disdain for wearing masks and social distancing has been the greatest *Chillul HaShem* (Desecration or bringing Judaism into disrepute), that I can remember. Blasted across the already unsympathetic media, hardly a day goes by without newspapers, and channels showing Charedi communities not just ignoring the rules, but actively opposing them. Charedi friends (I still have a few) have come back from funerals and other public gatherings, absolutely shocked at the disregard for masks and distances.

This week Governor Cuomo has announced lockdowns on seven communities in New York, most of whom are Charedi. Because of a rebound of cases of infection and death. The large gatherings over the Holy Days and Festival season will not have helped. As a result, there have been Charedi riots, burning masks, refusals to disperse. Of course, it will only increase anti-Semitism and hatred. It has reached a point where people cross over the street when they see a Charedi approach. You'd have thought they would have learned from the first wave which affected Charedi communities much above the average. As usual, they claim that they are being picked upon.

Whereas previously Charedi communities were respected for being law-abiding, non-violent, and socially supportive. Now they are portrayed as insensitive and uncaring. All the good things that they do; charity, social support, cohesion, passion for study, and religious life, are ignored as day after day in Israel, Europe, and the USA they appear to show no concern for others. I am deeply embarrassed and disappointed.

I concede that, everywhere, the medical opinion is divided and contradictory. All over the world opinion has been wrong over the past six months and there is still a question hanging over lockdowns. Even Sweden touted as the great success for not locking down, has seen new spikes and instituted changes. Only China, the autocratic, police state that monitors everyone has succeeded in getting it under control. But that is the penalty we pay for the freedoms we value. Sadly almost everywhere relaxation has led to rebound. Those who might have intended well also got it wrong whether through misinformation, conflicting medical opinions, misguided attempts to avoid panic, or get the economy going again. But this is not an excuse for ignoring governmental authority. Without which, even the Mishna agrees, that "people would eat each other alive" (Avot 3.2).

One can point to the sheer hypocrisy of secular political leaders, so blinded by their desire to suck up to the "woke" and their own constituencies that they allowed mass protests and indeed violence, in the name of freedom of speech. They could have blamed the culture of the gilded, spoilt, and loose younger generations whose sole value in life seems to be partying, drinking, and dancing in crowded bars, clubs, and beaches. And similarly, careless holidaymakers around the world have brought infection back home with them. I am not hearing politicians attack them.

Instead, they refused to allow gatherings for religious worship. They compared small private schools in the same way as schools with thousands. In Montreal, theaters were allowed to be open for 250, but synagogues only 25. They picked on closed, poorer Jewish enclaves to criticize but not on other minorities. Even so, two wrongs do not make a right.

Nevertheless, the Charedi world touts the idea of Jews being responsible for each other and for all Israel. The holy protectors are supposed to be setting a superior moral example. Manifestly as with the Holocaust, many of them have failed. Their pious claim that God will save and protect them because they are the guardians of His will, shows utter disregard for everyone else. However much they revile the secular culture, goodness knows they are happy to benefit from secular state handouts and from soldiers defending them, despite their belief that God will stop suicide bombers and rockets.

What I object to most strenuously is when their actions impact on the wider society. The Talmud time and gain uses very specific terms to justify leniency to encourage good relations with others. They allow the forbidden in the interests of Eiva (to avoid ill feeling or envy in the non-Jewish world), Mipnei Darkei Shalom (in the interests of peace with non-Jewish neighbors), Tikkun Olam (so that society can function equitably, HaTov VeHayashar (that one must do what is seen to be good and upright), Lifnim MeShurat HaDin (to ease the strictness of the law for the sake of

compromise). All reasons to avoid giving the wrong impression, that we only care about ourselves. We can argue statistics and nothing is rarely as it seems. But the impression is what counts. *Maarit Ayin*, appearances, is a serious matter in Jewish Law.

The clearest source for our relationship with the outside world can be found in Deuteronomy (4:6). " You should keep these laws because they will emphasize your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of other nations of the world ... who, when they hear of these laws will say what a wise people this is, so close to God that they have such wise and righteous statutes and laws." Frankly most people in the world today are more likely to think we are backward and seriously challenged if we think we do not need to take precautions but rely on miracles to protect us from natural disasters.

Certain sections of the Charedi world have got away for too long with its defensive isolationism. Once upon a time, it was argued that if they got more involved in the life and culture of power, they might become more tolerant and sensitive. Instead, they have become even more intolerant and aggressive and to hell with anyone who disagrees with them.

Perhaps the anger and scorn directed at them from the outside might just get them to realize what a disservice they have done to the cause of Charedi Judaism. Now that they have been shown to be spreaders of evil too, they might begin to see the light. Although I doubt it. Closed minds are not open to logic or others.