

Covid-19 vs. GOD

By Doris H. Goldstein

Several weeks ago, Jews all over the world commemorated Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av. It is a day that focuses on several calamitous events that have befallen the Jewish People over the centuries. By far, the most far reaching was the destruction of the 2nd Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. That structure and the rituals performed there by the priestly cult was the epicenter of Jewish worship for the residents of ancient Israel as well as those Jews who lived elsewhere. The devastation of a way of life that had been practiced by generations was obliterated almost overnight. It should have been the end of the story for this revolutionary experiment in the worship of an unseen God.

However, this did not happen. A group of eminent rabbis, led by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai (1st century CE) left the ruins of Jerusalem and founded a new center where the tradition of Rabbinic Judaism was born and has endured throughout the centuries. Rather than wallow in their despair, instead, with vision and purpose, they discovered new ways to express a belief and connection to their God. Another revolution occurred. Now, instead of the fixation on physical sacrifices....animals, birds, grains etc.... as a way of expressing regret for sin or thanksgiving for good fortune.... the emphasis was placed on each individual working to repair bad decisions, reaching out to others with compassion and sharing life's bounty. A wholly new code of behavior based on moral law (Exodus 20:2 ff.) and a civil code based on (Deut. 18 ff.) became the foundation of an ordered, just world.

Likewise, our generation has been faced with our own 'Destruction of the Temple.' In a flick of an eye, Covid-19 has forced religious institutions of every persuasions to close their physical doors. To protect each of us from this virulent, quickly spreading virus we are forced to abandon our places of connection with our God, our traditions and each other. An immovable portcullis descended.

Since all religious communities are based on the interconnection with others, both spiritually and physically, the pandemic has forced everyone to become an island unto themselves and those who live with them. The fear of any close interaction with anyone outside of your closed space, including relatives, has forced a certain degree of paranoia on the world. Naturally, attending a service in the confines of a closed, sacred building was out of the question. Even a handshake or hug at a chance meeting of a friend or fellow congregant is not considered safe. The very basis of community has been shattered.

A recent Sunday photo of the interior of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York is emblematic of the isolation. Because of its enormous size it was finally allowed to open after months of emptiness. The congregants could be seen scattered among the hundreds of pews, seated rows apart with not the slightest chance of interaction or recognition of one another.

For clergy the situation presents many challenges. An essential element of their vocation is to be in physical contact to support and counsel congregants in need of 'a shoulder to cry on', to simply 'hold a hand' as well as to provide religious leadership in prayer and ritual. Just a compassionate touch can bring needed healing. For a person hospitalized the comfort of a religious presence is especially important. Even a patient suffering from or recovering from the virus cannot not be seen or touched by close family much less by clergy. Covid has rendered these visits impossible. Any and almost all communication is virtual.

Funerals and mourning rituals present a similar challenge. How wonderful it is when a community comes together to mitigate the pain of the loss of a loved one. Family and friends who typically gather at a funeral show the bereaved they are not alone. The officiant who conducts the service with familiar rituals of a particular tradition reminds the mourners they are part of transcendent values that continue beyond physical life. In Jewish tradition the healing continues with the observance of Shiva, the seven days following the burial when the family is constantly surrounded at home by their community. Just at the very time communal support is vital to overcome grief, that avenue is closed.

Communal and or choral singing is another vital element of the formal religious experience. The music of a beautiful voice or the harmony created by trained voices can transport the congregation from the mundane into the realm of the spiritual. Even for the 'tone-deaf', it is empowering and uplifting to join in familiar hymns, prayers or responses to liturgy. The urgent call to prayer by the Muezzin echoes throughout the Muslim world. A plaintive chant by a Cantor on Yom Kippur resonates each time it is heard. The glorious hymns on Christmas Eve fill the air with hope in the birth of a child. Words set to music in any language, even if they are not fully understood, can evoke memory, emotion and soothe a broken heart or fill the soul with joy.

But science has proved that droplets emitted during singing in a closed space can be lethal.

How has Religion responded to these and past unprecedented circumstances?

After the destruction of the Temple (70 C.E.), the rabbis concluded that it was caused by the 'senseless hatred' of each other. They did not blame God but the actions of the community. Some religious leaders after the Holocaust (1933-45) suggested that God had 'remained hidden' while Man's freewill perpetuated unthinkable evil.

Prof. Adhan Zulfigar, a prominent scholar of Islamic Law asks, "Is it a penalty for something wrong with what we are doing or a trial to make us better people?" Is Covid-19 a punishment or a test from God?

One religious leader suggests that our lack of good stewardship of the planet has made this moment worse by deforestation, drought etc. that has forced populations to live in close contact with each other.

Others posit it is a stark reminder of the fragility of human life.

Everyone is groping for ways to make sense of what has happened and how to live with it.

Perhaps religion has fared the best. It has transformed priests, ministers, rabbis and imams into 21st century Rabbi Yohanans. Viewing the landscape, they have found ways to reach their congregations and let God seep in under the impenetrable cloud of the pandemic.

Using intelligence and ingenuity that tradition views as God-given, men and women have created a host of technologies that connect the world. Although designed for business and entertainment to create wealth and profit, Zoom, Facetime, Live Streaming etc. have all been adapted to create virtual congregations. Weekly religious services can be seen on the screen of a computer, iphone or other device. Weddings, funerals and other rites of passage can be engineered with participants in any city, state or country. People are able to see and talk to each other looking at a string of small boxes. Pastoral counselling can be delivered. Although sometimes the image freezes or the sound becomes muffled, most agree it is better than nothing and continue to 'tune in.'

For those communities, like Orthodox Jews, who eschew use of technology on the Sabbath the path was more complex. Drab, asphalt parking lots have become sacred space for limited numbers to pray and ample back yards have been transformed into a building without walls, an impressive Ark to hold the Torah Scroll or the Ner Tamid, the Eternal Light. In one neighborhood, a sound truck cruises the streets before sundown Friday broadcasting familiar songs and melodies.

It is clear that the need for connection and a spiritual element is especially potent in times of stress and uncertainty. Religious leaders have demonstrated in ways large and small that 'God is bigger than a building' and community is constructed not by a structure but by hundreds of intangible sinews that bind people together.

As long as this invisible to the human eye virus continues to mutate among us, causing illness and death, is in opposition to an unseen God who encourages connectivity, brings solace to the bereaved and joy to the soul the battle will rage on. But the Rabbi Yohanan in each of us allows us to prevail.

So what's the score?

God...whatever you think 'It' is.....INFINITY.

Covid-19.....ZERO.

August, 2020

I would like to express my thanks to the following religious leaders who have shared their thoughts with me.

Rabbi Ilan Feldman, Congregation Beth Jacob

Rev. James Larkin, Northside Baptist Church

Rabbi Laurence Rosenthal, Ahavath Achim Synagogue