

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THREATS AND CHALLENGES FROM A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY

This paper explores and discusses some threats and challenges faced by the Jewish community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article begins with the perspective of Judaism on the tension between individuality and as part of the collective, as one of the direct results of the pandemic outbreak was life in isolation due to closures and fear from infection, a measure that had many implications on our daily life and health. The main part of the article deals with the challenges that the Jewish community faced during the pandemic. The challenges faced by the Jewish Community divided into two categories, general challenges and spiritual challenges. In the general part, the author explores the impact of the pandemic on the Jewish Community, on its structure and the spread of antisemitism. In the other part, regarding spiritual challenges, the author first brings the perspective of Judaism on mental illness and on the mentally ill, then he brings two guiding examples of spiritual challenges faced by the Jewish spiritual leadership during the pandemic.

Key words: Halakha – Coronavirus - spiritual - mentally ill – Torah – Talmud - rabbi

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INTRODUCTION

Since March 11, 2020, the day the World Health Organization announced the spread of the coronavirus as a global epidemic, our world has changed in many ways. The struggle with the epidemic was and still is in waves, wave after wave, new mutations of the virus are being discovered and in our world that has long since become a global village, the virus is moving from place to place at lightning speed.

The world economy has been fatally damaged and is slowly recovering, but the end of the plague is yet to be seen. Even the optimists among us believe that the coronavirus will continue to accompany us for a long time to come.

Deep within the fight against the corona pandemic, humanity has shown its greatness in its preference for health over the economy. This is undoubtedly a huge human achievement amid the brutal corona crisis. Countries that for many years worked hard to build their economies were knowingly willing to bring about the collapse of their economies by imposing closures on their millions of citizens and thus paying a huge price, but preferring the health of the citizens over the state economy. This is indicative of a moral decision, placing the value of the sanctity of life and the value of human dignity far above other interests.

Epidemics do not differentiate between countries, nations, religions or races, however, in this article, we will focus on the perspective of the impact of the epidemic on the Jewish world and on Jewish communities around the world. Although the root of the crisis is epidemiological, it has led to a crisis in many areas of the Jewish world. Many Jewish communities, which in the

past were a model for order and stability, reached a state of physical, mental, economic, spiritual and social harm.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Jews who died so far due to coronavirus, but there are undoubtedly thousands around the world. In cities with a large Jewish concentration - in the US, France and England - mortality among Jews was high relative to the general population. Many rabbis and community leaders died, and this of course immediately affected the communities. The high number of deaths in the Jewish population is due, as we shall see below, mainly to the special nature of life within the Jewish community and the vital, typical and very special connection between the members of the Jewish community.

In this article, we will try to examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the Jewish people on the one hand and the struggles of the Jewish-spiritual leadership with the various challenges that the epidemic posed to its door. Challenges related to public health in general, and mental health in particular. We will start with a brief examination of Judaism's view of the importance of the individual in front of the public, since during the lockdown we were spending a lot of time with ourselves and far from the public, which led to a direct impact on the mental state of many people following isolation and closure.

THE CONCEPT OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY - THE VIEW OF JUDAISM

One of the prominent symbols of the Corona period is the empty streets. The big cities in the world crowded with tourists have routinely become desolate. The Corona

crisis that is plaguing the world these days is forcing millions of people to shut themselves up in their homes. This closure leads to enormous damage to social, cultural and leisure life.

As stated above, one of the hallmarks of Jews in general and Diaspora Jews in particular is: the Jewish community.

The Jewish community gives its members a sense of belonging, helps define self-identity, gives meaning and a sense of a self-worth. Then suddenly, a man finds himself closed within the walls of his house, far from the community framework, from the group identity.

The history of the Jewish people is known to be saturated with crises so that the reality of a crisis is not strange to this nation. However, the uniqueness of this crisis is that it causes the isolation of an individual from the society around him.

Judaism's view of the tension and dialectic between the individual and the surrounding society is unique. On the one hand, the virtue of the individual is infinitely important and great, and on the other hand, there is a vital need for a collective and social belonging.

This tension is felt already at the moment of the creation of the world. We find that in the beginning, God created the heavens and earth, and all that is in between, however man was created last. The first man was created alone and for him, the whole world was created. In the Talmud, the sages comment on this with the following:

"Therefore, Adam [the first man] was created alone, to teach you that [with regard to] anyone who destroys one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him as if he destroyed an entire world, [as Adam was one person, from whom the population of an entire world came forth]. And [conversely], anyone who sustains one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him as if he sustained an entire world. And [this was done] due to [the importance of maintaining] peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father, is greater than your father. And so that the heretics [who believe in multiple gods] will not say: There are many authorities in Heaven, [and each created a different person]. And to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, as all of them are his offspring, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me, as one person can be the source of all humanity, and recognize the significance of his actions".¹

Although the first man was created a single man "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created *him*" (Genesis 1,27), however immediately in the continuation of the same verse it is written: "Male and female He created *them*" (ibid.).

The Torah takes care to point out that male and female were created in one entity, and together as such it was called "Adam". This motif is repeated again later in a different form. Initially it is written, "the LORD God formed man [Heb. 'adam.] from the dust of the earth [Heb. 'adamah]. (ibid. 2, 7) and a few verses later God says that "The LORD God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him." (ibid., Verse 18).

Unlike man, all animals and birds have a mate. Therefore God anesthetizes him, takes a rib from his ribs and builds from it the woman as an additional and separate creature from man. It can be clearly seen from the creation story that an individual cannot live alone and that their true purpose is together at least as a couple.

We see that the dialectic is both ways, on the one hand as man was indeed created as one body to teach about the importance of the individual that is equal to the whole world, but later it turns out that loneliness is not ideal for man and therefore woman was created.

Another idea lies in the words of these sages. Each one has his own special uniqueness and no one is equal to his friend, even though they all came from one person.

The Talmud emphasizes the dramatic importance of the social motif for the human psyche in the following story:

"Rabbi Yohanan said: All the days of the life of that righteous man, Honi HaMe'aggel, he was distressed over the meaning of this verse: "A song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream" (Psalms 126:1). He said to himself: Is there really a person who can sleep and dream for seventy years? [How is it possible to compare the seventy-year exile in Babylonia to a dream?]. One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years [that you expect to benefit from this tree]? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants. Honi sat and ate bread. Sleep overcame him and he slept. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from that tree. Honi said to him: Are you the one who planted this tree? The man said to him: I am his son's son. Honi said to him: I can learn

¹ Mishna Sanhedrin 4,5.

from this that I have slept for seventy years, and indeed he saw that his donkey had sired several herds during those many years. Honi went home and said to the members of the household: Is the son of Honi HaMe'aggel alive? They said to him: His son is no longer with us, but his son's son is alive. He said to them: I am Honi HaMe'aggel. They did not believe him. He went to the study hall, where he heard the Sages say about one scholar: His halakho² are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Honi HaMe'aggel, for when Honi HaMe'aggel would enter the study hall he would resolve for the Sages any difficulty they had. Honi said to them: I am he, but they did not believe him and did not pay him proper respect. Honi became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died. Rava said: This explains the folk saying that people say: Either friendship or death, [as one who has no friends is better off dead.]"³

Honi the righteous falls asleep for a period of seventy years, thus passing the period of his contemporaries asleep. Honi wakes up and discovers how the world has gone without him... The grandson eats from the carob fruits that his grandfather planted, and even in his house he finds that his grandson was the elder of the family. However, the main confrontation is expected in the Bet Midrash, the study hall, where he sees that his name is well remembered as the one who was able to solve difficult questions. Honi sees that his memory is well respected but not himself, because they do not recognize him, he is so disappointed that he asks for his death. And from this Rava concluded that a person without a society around him prefers his death, since the individual has no existence without the society to which he belongs.

Maimonides, one of the greatest thinkers and Jewish law authority of all time, writes that the natural tendency of man is to seek a connection with the society around him:

*"It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior."*⁴

And since we do not live in isolation from the world and the environment, and our way of being is influenced by the environment, we must make sure that we are in a proper environment so that we can influence and be positively influenced.

*"Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds."*⁵

But in case the society around us has negative values, Maimonides states an exception:

*"Conversely, he should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds. This is [implied by] Solomon's statement (Proverbs 13:20): 'He who walks with the wise will become wise, while one who associates with fools will suffer.'" Similarly, [Psalms 1:1] states: "Happy is the man who has not followed the advice of the wicked." A person who lives in a place where the norms of behavior are evil and the inhabitants do not follow the straight path should move to a place where the people are righteous and follow the ways of the good. If all the places with which he is familiar and of which he hears reports follow improper paths, as in our times, or if he is unable to move to a place where the patterns of behavior are proper, because of [the presence of] bands of raiding troops, or for health reasons, he should remain alone in seclusion as [lamentations 3:28] states: "Let him sit alone and be silent." If they are wicked and sinful and do not allow him to reside there unless he mingle with them and follow their evil behavior, he should go out to caves, thickets, and deserts [rather than] follow the paths of sinners as [Jeremiah 9:1] states: "Who will give me a lodging place for wayfarers, in the desert."*⁶

The above sources reflect a position that claims that a person has a deep mental need for connection and belonging, and on the other hand, an equally essential need to maintain a unique definition of his self and personality. There are exceptional situations in which a person is required to sit alone. In this context, a unique situation was witnessed in the Jewish ultra-Orthodox Community.

The coronavirus marks the boundary between a person and his friend, between family and family, and even within the family, between the youngest and the oldest. Any initiated or forced isolation sets new boundaries, who is inside and who is outside. While the coronavirus forced society as a whole to withdraw from the collective in order to preserve the individual, there were those who tried even at the cost of sacrificing human lives to preserve the idea of community, in the face of the perception of the private home and family. And we mean the ultra-Orthodox community.

According to the publications of the Israel Democracy Institute,⁷ it seems that in relation to the general public, the crisis has affected the ultra-Orthodox society more than other groups in society. It is estimated that 37% of all those infected in Israel in 2020 were ultra-Orthodox - a much higher percentage than their relative share of the population (12%). The ultra-Orthodox

² Halakha – 1. the legal part of Jewish religious literature. The name comes from the verb halakh (to go), because Jews are going or following the Jewish law; 2. a particular provision from the system of halakha.

³ Babylonian Talmud Taanit (Steinsaltz) 23a.

⁴ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Hilkhot De'ot 6,1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), *Shnaton Hachevra Hacharedit* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, December 31, 2020.

population at the beginning of the epidemic behaved in a very irresponsible manner and the ultra-Orthodox leadership was in no hurry to cooperate with the state guidelines. This ultimately led to the collection of many victims in the ultra-Orthodox community. There was an active opposition to the government guidelines and even ideological ones, leadership that explicitly called for ignoring the warnings of the Ministry of Health because they saw the closure of yeshivas and synagogues as a danger to the continuation of Torah study, and in any case, to the existence of the Jewish people. However, most of the opposition in the ultra-Orthodox Community was passive, and while the directives were to close schools and synagogues, not to gather at weddings and funerals, some of the ultra-Orthodox educational institutions and synagogues continued business as usual and even held mass weddings and funerals. It took time for the ultra-Orthodox spiritual leadership to recover and internalize the harsh reality, when it reached a situation where "there was no house where there was not someone dead." (Exodus 12: 5), they aligned themselves with the recommendations of the Ministry of Health. On the other hand, it should be remembered that some of the reasons that caused the epidemic to spread in the ultra-Orthodox population are related to physical conditions that make it very difficult for them to keep measures of isolation and closure. It is an intensive community lifestyle (prayers, shared study) poverty, overcrowding (families with many children in small apartments) and a lack of social organization.

This pandemic period, which put us all in forced isolation and a lonely lifestyle, is a special opportunity to reconnect with ourselves, to live a life free from any kind of influence and social coercion. As King Solomon said: "A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven." (Ecclesiastes 3,1). There are times when the individual must be in units with himself, and there are times when the individual must be included in the public. Man is a social being, but he also has an individual inwardness. Each of these aspects of a person's personality has pros and cons. In the individualistic aspect of our personality, there is sincerity and truth, while in our social aspect we have the stability we have built, and we must find the right balance between them.

GENERAL CHALLENGES

The impact on community structure

Community life in the State of Israel and the Diaspora is based on the continuum of the Jewish cycle of the year and the Jewish cycle of life. It is important not only to the observant religious part, but also for the non-religious public to participate in community life at festivals, ceremonies, and various events that create a sense of belonging and strengthen personal and family identity. In this sense, the coronavirus has fundamentally changed the situation.

The coronavirus suddenly changed the rules of the game. The social element, one of the characteristics of the Jewish world and its source of strength in times of crisis, has suddenly become a disadvantage.

Holidays that are celebrated in a community and a public manner such as Purim⁸ parties and Passover Seder⁹ were celebrated in a family manner. Family celebrations like Brit milah¹⁰, Bat Mitzvah¹¹, Bar mitzvah¹² and weddings were celebrated within the family or canceled or postponed. Burial and condolence mourners have become a virtual ceremony. Holocaust Remembrance ceremonies and Kadish prayers for the victims were also held virtually. Schools and activities of youth movements have become virtual as well. Much of our lives have become virtual. The harm is much more than just a social harm, there is a severe harm here in the sense of belonging to the community, the family and the Jewish identity. The social isolation imposed on us has hurt many mentally. The sense of togetherness that is so vital in the Jewish community has been fatally damaged.

Another difficult phenomenon was the hermetic closure of houses of worship all over the world, for quite a long time, and in our case synagogues. This is probably an unprecedented reality in Jewish history. As is well known, synagogues were closed in the past in Europe following the world wars, but in other parts of the world, prayers were held, especially for the success and health of the warriors and the civilians. The coronavirus has closed houses of worship all over the world. The importance of synagogues in Judaism is immeasurably great. This is the heart of the Jewish community, the synagogue creates the feeling of social belonging and gives the spiritual meaning. With three daily prayers, the more traditional the community is, the greater the significance of the synagogue in its life. A virtual

⁸ Purim - A Jewish holiday commemorating the salvation of the Jews from their enemies, led by Haman, who wanted to kill all the Jews during the Diaspora in the Persian Empire.

⁹ Passover seder - in Israel the first eve, in the diaspora the first and second night of the Passover holiday, a ritual dinner whose essence is the memory of the exodus from Egypt, among other things by eating Matza (unleavened bread), herbs of bitter taste, drinking four glasses of wine and reading the Haggadah - the story of the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt.

¹⁰ Brit Milah - Circumcision - a Jewish child on the eighth day of his birth is included based on the the covenant (heb. Brit) between God and the Patriarch Abraham, the practical meaning of this covenant is the cutting of the foreskin over the genitals of the baby boy by the mohel.; See more about it in K.D., *Židovstvo*, pp. 415-428.

¹¹ Bat Mitzvah - A girl at the age of twelve years and one day, is a bat mitzvah the day she become obliged to keeping the commandments (heb. Mitzvah) in which a woman is obliged. ; See more about it in K.D., *Židovstvo*, pp. 434-436.

¹² Bar Mitzvah - A boy at the age of thirteen years and one day, is a Bar Mitzvah, from that day on he is obliged to the observance of all the mitzvah. ; See more about it in K.D., *Židovstvo*, pp. 434-436.

synagogue can in no way be used as a substitute. Despite this, rabbis who normally influence members of their congregations to attend synagogues now ask them to stay at home.

Antisemitism and leadership

Unfortunately, as if the epidemic itself and the crisis we are in are not enough, there are those who have already found the culprits for the spread of the virus.

The plague of anti-Semitism has already become a malignant disease, the antisemitic poison is spread by anti-Semites mainly on social networks who have found fertile ground in the Corona period for conspiracies where the Jews are guilty of creating the virus.

Unfortunately, as is well known, blaming the Jews for creating epidemics is not a new phenomenon. Already in the Middle Ages, the Jews were accused of bringing the black plague.

With regard to the dramatic rise in the expression of antisemitic hatred, most often across the network, Elan S. Carr, special envoy to monitor and combat anti-semitism, in the US department of state, confirmed the spread of anti-Semitic accusation against Jews, accusing them of inventing this virus, deliberately spreading it, at the profits derived from it, as well as using it as a tool for world domination. The anti-Semitism on the one hand and the economic crisis that followed the epidemic on the other hand, have made many Jews think about leaving their homes and communities in the diaspora and move to the State of Israel.

The desire to be in a safe environment, high-level health services and other reasons have made many Jews think about it. Various publications speak of the expectation of one hundred thousand immigrants in the next two years. Such a transition will inevitably lead to a demographic weakening of the Jewish communities in the world. The coronavirus has undoubtedly led to various challenges in the relationship between the State of Israel and Diaspora Jewry. The future of Jewish communities as their future character faces difficult challenges, the reality is complex and characterized by uncertainty. It seems that the changes we are experiencing today in Jewish communities and education will leave their mark on the Jewish world for a long time to come.

SPIRITUAL CHALLENGES

Following the Corona pandemic, the spiritual leadership of the Jewish communities around the world is also facing new and complex challenges. Rabbinate is a dynamic role that is very much related to a specific time and place. The role of the rabbinate is very much related and attentive to the situation of the Jewish people. The role of the rabbi during the coronavirus changed and adapted itself to the special situation created. The rabbi, whose main role is to provide a solution to the community and its members in matters of

Jewish law, also “becomes a psychologist and sociologist,” he is facing an increase of cases of mental injury and post-trauma.

This period requires the rabbinical leadership to take the lead and think out of the box, a few steps ahead in finding the way to the Jewish heart and ruling on a halakhah that fits the special reality created. At the height of the coronavirus outbreak, rabbis faced a variety of halakhic questions and challenges posed to them by community members and community leaders. The questions are complex and relate to personal, family, and community areas. The following is a partial list of the questions:

Jewish religious doctors asked, how should coronavirus patients be treated in the hospital, when there are young patients and older patients, is there a priority in medical care for them?

A family asked, what to do about circumcision on the eighth day of a Jewish baby born when the borders of the state are closed and the mohel¹³ cannot arrive? Should the circumcision be rejected or performed by a non-Jewish doctor?

Ordinary Jews asked do they have to get vaccinated?

Families who lost their dears asked, is it permissible to burn the bodies of coronavirus patients who have died despite the severe prohibition according to Judaism on cremation, if the state has enacted a law that the bodies of people who die from the coronavirus must be cremated?

Is it permissible to celebrate a holiday virtually using technological means that are prohibited from being used during a holiday?

Is it permissible to postpone a wedding date due to a ban on gathering due to the coronavirus or is it better to have a limited ceremony?

Many rabbis in their rulings on these questions went in an independent way and gave great weight to the local community situation and did not always consider the rulings of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel because the coronavirus further strengthened the local community feeling at the expense of the global Jewish feeling. In this part of the article, we will give general guidelines for the issue of the mentally handicapped in Jewish law, and later we will present two examples of challenges that the Jewish spiritual leadership faced.

The perspective of Judaism on mental illness and on the mentally ill

The Corona pandemic has led people to face particularly difficult basic experiences, such as trust in the order of the world. Humanity has worked hard to turn the world from a place where we must fight to survive into a safe place. The pandemic undermines our

¹³ mohel - a man who performs Brit Milah. ; See more about it in K.D., Židovstvo, pp. 415-428.

existential security and presents us with a new mental challenge. The danger of the coronavirus is not only in its physical threat. The coronavirus threatens our mental existence. The suffering that results from the disease and the fear that accompanies it can damage our personality and character. We may become selfish and lose touch with others, but we may be able to open our hearts, and rather grow out of suffering and be more open to others.

The Corona period led to an increase in mental injury, depression, anxiety and medication use. Therefore, we have a duty and a need to discuss the question of what takes place in the encounter between religion and faith and mental illness? Does religious life help or make it difficult to cope with the disease? What is the role of rabbis in dealing with mentally ill students and community members?

Mental illness is a disease, even though sometimes the environment and even the patient himself find it difficult to define and admit it. Suffering is mute, suffering that does not always seep into the consciousness of the environment. External signs of illness are not always noticeable, the person looks perfectly healthy despite their broken soul. The lack of recognition of their illness and suffering not only complicates the treatment, but intensifies the patient's difficulty, suffering and frustration.

The pain and distress of the mentally handicapped have unique characteristics. The first characteristic, as stated, the mental injury and distress cannot be seen from the outside as one can see the vulnerability of bodily injuries, and therefore it is difficult to understand the degree of suffering and pain. It is very difficult to imagine the patient's inner feelings and identify with their pain. The second characteristic is related to the erroneous feeling of those facing the mentally handicapped that it is as if it is a person's free choice, and therefore tends to even blame the patients for their condition. The characteristic of shame is also special to the mentally ill, shame involving defining the person as suffering from mental problems becomes an integral part of the distress itself, as it is not enough that the victims suffer from the injury itself, the pain is added to them not paying attention and even ignoring them. Shame also denies the need for counseling and treatment, moreover, the stigma that marks the need for the field of psychiatry is negative, and many do not turn to it because they do not want this stigma. As long as there are public primitive views on the nature of mental disabilities, it will be hard to make progress. Raising the cultural and moral level of the general public and a closer and deeper awareness of the nature of mental disabilities in their various forms, are a precondition for any change.

Mental injuries may occur in the psyche of any of us. Many who were injured can testify that they knew nothing until the injury broke out. Many researchers are looking for clear scientific evidence that would allow accurate identification of the potential for disease

outbreaks, but achievements so far are relatively poor. Many times a person has no responsibility for his condition and is not guilty of it. These are diseases that often have genetic roots, but these are not the only cause of diseases. When it comes to mental illness, more is obscure than visible.

Undoubtedly, situations of stress, isolation and closure, which are unfortunately quite common these days, are a contributing factor to the onset of mental illness.

The healing process is also very complicated: psychiatric drugs require a long period of adjustment and balance and it takes a long time to take effect, a large amount of psychiatric drugs have side effects, which also make it difficult for the patient. The mentally ill person can sometimes lose his or her socially respectable status. Behavior that lacks self-esteem, modesty, and control is a line that characterizes mental illness. These situations bring shame to the patient and especially to their relatives - their family members. The Talmud, in its discussions of the obligation to pay damages, also states:

"The Sages say with regard to an imbecile¹⁴, you can have no greater humiliation than this. It is impossible to degrade him further."¹⁵

The field of mental health is a very complex field. The literature of Jewish law in the field of mental vulnerability is very small in the quantitative context compared to physical vulnerability. Few are the ancient halakhic sources that recognize the definitions of the mentally handicapped as we refer to them today.¹⁶ However this picture has changed in recent generations.

The Jewish law deals with various aspects of mental illness, such as: the signs¹⁷ of the mentally ill and those that partially recovered from mental illness; the question of their legal status¹⁸ and in the legal consequences of their actions.¹⁹ Similarly, mental vulnerability is a broad field whose boundaries are not sharp.²⁰ The Talmud mentions various mental illnesses and takes a general position in relation to the halakhic status of the mentally handicapped. A mentally ill person who suffers from a serious injury in reality testing, or is in suicidal danger, then the simple and clear instruction regarding this case

¹⁴ A person whose mind has gone wrong due to mental illness.

¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud Babba Kama (Vilnius) 86b.

¹⁶ The sages in the Middle Ages and after them dealt very little with the various mental illnesses, see:

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik "Al haTeshuva" pp. 109.

¹⁷ The Tosefta brings some characteristics to the behavior of the mentally ill: Tosefta, Trumoth 1,1.; see also the Babylonian Talmud Chagiga (Steinsaltz) 3b.

¹⁸ Regarding the mentally ill who are defined as the people who are exempt from the fulfilling mitzvot (Jewish commandments), see Mishnah Chagiga 1,1. , Shulchan Arucha Choshen Mishpat 28 and Orach Chaim 589.

¹⁹ See Mishnah Babba Kama 8,4.

²⁰ Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilkhos Edut 9, 10.

is *Pikuach Nefesh*²¹, from which the commandments of the Torah are rejected.²²

It seems that the definition of a mentally ill person according to Jewish law should be based on three factors: the factor of opinion, namely the level of the patient's ability to perform various legal actions that require a foundation of opinion and will, the factor of the injury, i.e. the level of the mental injury, the extent to which the injury affects the regular continuation of life, and the danger factor, i.e. whether the person is dangerous to himself (suicide) or to others. The danger is that he will hurt himself or not be able to keep himself from dangers. Other dangers are that the patient will harm his environment or that the disease will damage his body systems.

The Talmud emphasizes the duty to maintain one's mental balance and sanity and warns of the danger of a person entering stressful situations. To this end, sages are willing to make the halakhic requirements flexible for a person's mind to keep someone from going crazy. For the very mental trauma of fear and its expression puts the person in danger of life.²³

Many of the mentally handicapped suffer from mental disorders that make their lives very difficult, but at the same time they are not in real life danger and their ability to communicate with the environment shows that they understand the reality around them like most others who do not suffer from mental disorder. However they suffer and sometimes suffer greatly. Some take medication, some maintain special behaviors that help them alleviate their suffering and even put them on a path that will lead them to health. The period of the coronavirus we are dealing with has increased the number of those patients.

A religious person can not ignore the question of whether faith and religion are a contributing or inhibiting factor in the struggle of the mentally ill with their situation: Are they part of the problem or part of the solution? What is the role of religion in this context?

The answer to this question is quite complex, on the one hand there are parts of religion that really help the mentally ill, like the regular ritual of keeping the mitzvas, prevents various struggles on a daily basis and this is especially important in times of disaster. Prayer also helps a lot, comforting, strengthening and empowering. Belief in God and His providence over His creatures also gives a certain sense of security.

On the other hand, religious society is a homogeneous society in which it is very difficult to be exceptional. For example, everyone is supposed to get married, while for a person suffering from a mental injury it is very difficult to build a shared house; the more conservative a religious society is, the more rigid its patterns of behavior are and the harder it is for it to accept anyone different. In such a society it is very difficult for a hurt soul to maintain anonymity, which is sometimes very necessary and blessed to the mentally ill.

The role of rabbis in this complex reality is also complex. First, there is a need to develop the private and community awareness that the mentally ill are within us and we must identify and treat them with respect. Cultivate the community's tolerance towards the mentally ill, raise the awareness to this issue. An embracing and supportive atmosphere must be created by the community; removing the stigma and feeling of the mentally ill that they are abnormal, for without a doubt the best place for the mentally handicapped is within their community and not outside it.

Attention should be paid to different behaviors in individuals that can be misleading and obscuring. Behaviors that appear to stem from a high religious level but can be the result of mental injury, obsessive-compulsive disorder. On the other hand, very loose behavior can be the result of mania. Excessive modesty can hide anorexia and hatred of the body. Unfortunately, a mistake in identification accompanied by the best of intentions can lead to tragedies.

This awareness should combine knowledge and professional tools for diagnosis and therefore a professional should be consulted. The rabbi is not a doctor, a psychologist or a psychiatrist and does not have to have professional knowledge in these areas.²⁴

Rabbis deal with the halakhic consequences of a person's various mental states and not with a psychiatric diagnosis. Even in providing "first aid" in the field of the mind, the rabbi and everyone else should be very careful not to cause harm according to the basic rule: *primum non nocere*. Therefore, the rabbi should, on the one hand, listen to distress and, on the other hand, resolutely support the patient's approach to counseling and psychiatric treatment.

However, we will emphasize that the aspiration of the psychiatrist is to provide as quick a diagnosis as possible to try to cure the patient in early treatment. Whereas the purpose of Jewish law, on the other hand, is to reduce the content of the definition of "mental illness" in order to prevent the exclusion of the person from the community following it. For the assumption is that once a person is declared "mentally ill" according to

²¹ Pikuach nefesh (Hebrew: פיקוח נפש 'watching over a soul') is the principle in Jewish law that the preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious rule. When the life of a specific person is in danger, almost any negative commandment of the Torah becomes inapplicable. ; See more about it in K.D., Židovstvo, pp. 271-272.

²² See Mishnah, Shabbat 2,5.

²³ Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilkhot Shabbat 2:17 and Shulchan Aruch 328,15.; see also Babylonian Talmud Yoma (Steinsaltz) 84b.

²⁴ Even the sages in the Talmud, despite their Torah knowledge, were not physicians - see Rabbi Sharira Gaon's answer regarding the use of medicines mentioned in the Talmud in: see: B. M. Levin, Otzar HaGaonim, Vol. 10: on Tractate Gittin 68b., Teshuvah 376 p. 152.

Judaism they become irresponsible of halakhic and legal obligations. For a religious person, this can hasten their mental breakdown. This is especially true in older people.

Indeed, today, more than in the past, the public is exposed to the existence of the mentally handicapped and to the depth of their suffering. The language of psychology and its concepts are embedded in society and culture.

Getting to know the world of the mentally handicapped is challenging and requires the community but also its spiritual leaders to approach with human sensitivity and compassion and identify and address the difficulty. Jewish law is required to recognize the ailments of the mentally handicapped and to treat them in a way that will alleviate their pain and express the halakhic sensitivity to pity and suffering in order to bring more healing and more good to the world.

Two examples of concrete spiritual challenges faced by the Jewish spiritual leadership during the coronavirus

Judaism's opinion on vaccination

Many voices were heard and still can be heard for and against coronavirus vaccines. The debate was among religious people as well. Therefore it is only a matter of time when the ruling of key Rabbinical authorities will be required. And indeed the question was put in front of many rabbinical courts and the following is a short summary of the Rabbinical rulings on this question.

When we come to examine the attitude of the Jewish law to the subject, the discussion must be divided into two parts.

The first part is related to the private and personal interest of the person. The person must do everything in his power to maintain his body and health, and in this matter there is broad rabbinical consent from wall to wall. The Torah commands in a large number of places and in various contexts to preserve and protect the body, which is the tool given to us by God so that we can act in the world. The main commandment in the Torah in this regard is:

"For your own sake, therefore, be most careful - since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire" (Deutoronomy 4: 15).

In another place it is written:

"But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously" (4: 9).

In Maimonides' opinion, it obliges us to take an active role in preserving life. Therefore any action that is putting one's soul in danger is a severe transgression of this commandment.²⁵

²⁵ Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilkhoh Rotzeach uShmirat Nefesh 11,4.

Furthermore, anything that is forbidden due to danger is more severe than other prohibitions.²⁶

One of the main principles in the Torah is the principle of *pikuach Nefesh* that derives from the verse:

"You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the LORD.. (Lev. 18,5)

The sages explained: "by the pursuit of which man shall live, and not die because of them".²⁷ Maimonides write:

*"It is forbidden to hesitate before transgressing the Sabbath [laws] on behalf of a person who is dangerously ill,¹⁴ as [reflected in the interpretation in the phrase of Leviticus 18:5,] "which a person shall perform to live through them," as "[to live through them'] and not to die through them." This teaches that the judgments of the Torah do not [bring] vengeance to the world, but rather bring mercy, kindness, and peace to the world.".*²⁸

This principle rejects almost all the commandments of the Torah.²⁹ It is therefore imperative to use the tools provided by modern medicine to protect ourselves from epidemics and diseases. The definition of *Pikuach Nefesh* is accepted by all in the world, and since the fear of the coronavirus epidemic, and especially in the new variants of the virus, is considered by most of the medical community as a dangerous disease, vaccination against corona disease is obliging everyone. While there may be side effects, as with any medical procedure, this vaccine may also have side effects. However, the accumulated experience after millions of vaccines proves that these effects are quite rare. On the other hand, there is clear evidence from experience and research that the vaccine is very effective in preventing infection and in preventing life-threatening conditions for vaccinated patients.

The second part is related to each person's responsibility towards their immediate and extended environment. Even if a person decides, contrary to the above, to prefer to take the near risk of the coronavirus disease instead of the distant risk of side effects of the vaccine, he has a duty to consider the implications of his decision on others who come in contact with him and society as a whole.

There is a well-known rule in halakhah that a person has a greater duty of care when it comes to the possibility of causing harm to others than the possibility that

²⁶ Babylonian Talmud Chulin (Vilnius) 10a.

²⁷ Babylonian Talmud Yoma (Steinsaltz)85b, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin (Vilnius)74a.

²⁸ Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilkhoh Shabbat 2,3.

²⁹ See: Babylonian Talmud Yoma (Steinsaltz) 82a, 83a, 85a,85b.; All the commandments in the Torah except of idolotery, incest, and bloodshed see: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot (Vilnius) 19a, Sanhedrin 74a and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 329.

only they themselves will be harmed.³⁰ And when a person who refrains from getting vaccinated by choice endangers all who come in contact with him. Therefore the general duty of rescuing others³¹ obliges the person to protect those around them from the coronavirus disease, and according to the information we have, the most effective way to do so is by getting the vaccine.

It should also be noted that in addition to the direct damages of the spread of the disease, society as a whole suffers from indirect damages of morbidity: traffic restrictions, tremendous economic damages, severe damage to education and more. Public peace in general is at stake, and when it comes to harm to the public as a whole, then the demands from the individual increase accordingly.³² Therefore each and every one of us should consider not only our personal and family well-being, but also our contribution to the public effort. Just as during a war a person may be required to sacrifice their life for the common good, all the more so as they are required by such an epidemic problem to perform the protective act both on themselves and on the common good - to get vaccinated.

Passover and Seder night in the shade of the coronavirus

One of the direct implication of the closures with the outbreak of the coronavirus in March 2020 was related to the celebration of Passover. This was in my opinion a leading example to the challenges spiritual leadership faced.

Seder eve is celebrated by the vast majority of Jews in Israel and abroad in the forum of the extended family, three generations around one table. Grandparents, children and grandchildren. A situation arose, due to restrictions, in which many families could not gather on the eve of Passover and many of them, especially the elderly, were even in complete isolation. Based on this background, and about two weeks before the holiday, a group of rabbis were asked the following question by a social activist:

The loneliness of the elderly who will not be able to celebrate Passover with their family, who among them are many sick people and Holocaust survivors, will make them feel deep sadness and a great fear. Hence the question of whether it is exceptionally possible to allow those sick and isolated people to have a virtual Seder night with their families through live video broadcasting on platforms like "Zoom," provided it is activated before the holiday enters.

The rabbis responded in a ruling that elderly people staying in preventive isolation, for fear of infecting with the virus, may participate in a virtual Seder to remove

great sadness from the elderly, motivate them to continue fighting for their lives and prevent them from getting into depression and mental laxity, which can cause them to despair of life. Emphasizing that this ruling is only for the emergency created and only for the Seder eve of that year and for those who need it.

The rabbis faced several problems in Jewish law: one is the halakhic fear that the use of prohibited technological means during the holiday, even if activated in advance, may cause a distraction due to which the person will come to turn off or turn on the device. The rabbis ruled that since the use of electricity on the holiday (unlike Shabbat) was permitted in any case by some of the Sephardic rulings, this could be facilitated in the special circumstances that arose.

The second problem is related to a principle rule, according to the adoption of habits from weekdays on Shabbat and holidays should be avoided, so as not to harm their special character, but the rabbis clarified that in a situation where fulfilling a mitzvah is necessary (celebrating Seder eve) it should be facilitated. The third problem was the fear that such a ruling, which relates to a very specific reality, would cause parts of the public to err and behave in the same way in a routine situation. The rabbis stated that it was clear to everyone that the entire permission was for an emergency only, furthermore they also added that thanks to the virtual connection of the elders, many young people would join in the celebration of the holiday out of respect for the grandparents.

The above ruling is based on the recognition that intergenerational disconnection on Seder night can lead to negative results, both in terms of the continuity of tradition among the young and in terms of the mental health of the older generation.

Although many rabbis opposed this permission, in the context of our article we see a courageous rabbinical attempt to recognize and take into consideration the complex reality of isolated old people and people with a depressive tendency, which allows those who feel a real danger to their mental health to celebrate the holiday.

The duty to save a life includes the duty to save both the person's soul and not just the person's body, for all that that implies. A person's mental anguish is sometimes even greater than physical anguish. When we encounter the soul of our friend who is swept away in the currents of life, in the vortices of his soul, and has no power to save his own soul, we have a duty to save him. People who hold key positions, in the leadership of the public and the community, are even more commanded to save a lost soul.

The Corona crisis has exposed halakhic authorities to very difficult halakhic dilemmas, forcing them to adopt creative and sometimes groundbreaking halakhic solutions. Since the crisis began, there have been many independent rulings by rabbis who have tried to address various problems that have arisen due to the pandemic situation and have not received satisfactory treatment from the chief rabbinate of Israel or of key halakhic authorities.

³⁰ See: Tosafot on Babylonian Talmud Babba Kama (Vilnius) 23a.

³¹ See: Dadon K: The attitude toward lifesaving in Jewish law, The Good Samaritan ideal, or a duty? A moral or legal obligation? *Nova prisutnost* 2017; 15:393-423.

³² See: Babylonian Talmud Babba Batra (Vilnius) 2b, Babylonian Talmud Shabbat (Steinsaltz) 42a.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we tried to analyze the changes and the challenges the Jewish Community faced with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Challenges that were deeply connected to the tensions on the scale between individuality and community life.

On one hand, challenges that threaten the Jewish Community as an institution and as people of Jewish origin. On the other hand we saw that serious spiritual challenges were at stake. Mental illness and mental handicaptivity increased dramatically. This put sincere challenges on the doorstep of the rabbinical leadership. For the purpose of better understanding of the subject, we explored the perspective of Judaism on mental illness and on the mentally ill and brought two examples showing how the rabbinical leadership treated spiritual challenges. In our opinion, in these examples the Jewish spiritual leadership acted very good showing great understanding. However, this is not to say, as we showed, that all Rabbis and spiritual leader acted in the best possible way in every challenge that came to their doorstep during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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