

Public Health, Plagues, Coronavirus, and COVID-19

by Rabbi Aaron Melman

ויקרא י"ג:מ"ב-מ"ו

(מב) וכִי־יִהְיֶה בְקִרְחַת אֹרֶב בְּגִבְחַת נֹגַע לְבָן אֲדַמְדָּם צֶרַעַת פִּרְחַת הוּא בְקִרְחָתוֹ אֹרֶב בְּגִבְחָתוֹ: (מג) וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ הַכֹּהֵן וְהִגִּיהַ שְׂאֵת־הַנֹּגַע לְבָנָה אֲדַמְדָּמַת בְּקִרְחָתוֹ אֹרֶב בְּגִבְחָתוֹ כְּמֵרָאָה צֶרַעַת עוֹר בְּשָׂר׃ (מד) אִישׁ־צָרוּעַ הוּא טָמֵא הוּא טָמֵא יִטְמָאֵנוּ הַכֹּהֵן בְּרֹאשׁוֹ נֹגְעוֹ: (מה) וְהִצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ הַנֹּגַע בְּגִדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פָרוּעַ וְעַל־שִׁפְמֵי יַעֲטֶה וְטָמֵא | טָמֵא יִקְרָא: (מו) כָּל־יָמֵי אֲשֶׁר הַנֹּגַע בּוֹ יִטְמָא טָמֵא הוּא בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבוֹ: (ס)

Leviticus 13:42-46

(42) But if a white affection streaked with red appears on the bald part in the front or at the back of the head, it is a scaly eruption that is spreading over the bald part in the front or at the back of the head. (43) The priest shall examine him: if the swollen affection on the bald part in the front or at the back of his head is white streaked with red, like the leprosy of body skin in appearance, (44) the man is leprous; he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; he has the affection on his head. (45) As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" (46) He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

במדבר ה':א'-ד'

(א) וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: (ב) צוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה כָּל־צָרוּעַ וְכָל־זָב וְכָל טָמֵא לְנַפְשׁוֹ: (ג) מִזְכֹּר עַד־נִקְבָּה תִשְׁלְחוּ אֶל־מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה תִשְׁלְחוּם וְלֹא יִטְמָאוּ אֶת־מַחֲנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שֹׁכֵן בְּתוֹכָם: (ד) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אוֹתָם אֶל־מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כִּן עָשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (פ)

Numbers 5:1-4

(1) The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: (2) Instruct the Israelites to remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse. (3) Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell. (4) The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp; as the LORD had spoken to Moses, so the Israelites did.

במדבר י"ב:י-ט"ו

(י) וְהֶעֱנוּ סֹר מֵעַל הָאֵהָל וְהִנֵּה מְרִימִים מִצִּרְעַת כְּשֹׁלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אֶהָרֹן אֶל־מְרִימִים וְהִנֵּה מִצִּרְעַת: (יא) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶהָרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנָי אֵל־נָא תָשֶׁת עָלֵינוּ חַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר נִוְאָלְנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חָטָאנוּ: (יב) אֵל־נָא תְהִי כַפָּת אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֹּאכֵל חֲצִי בְשָׂרוֹ: (יג) וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ: (יד) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאָבִיָּה יִרַק יִרַק בְּפִנְיָהּ הֲלֹא תִכְלֵם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּסָּגֵר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחַר תֵּאָסֵף: (טו) וְתִסָּגֵר מְרִימִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְהָעַם לֹא נָסַע עַד־הָאָסֵף מְרִימִים:

Numbers 12:10-15

(10) As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales. (11) And Aaron said to Moses, "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. (12) Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away." (13) So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "O God, pray heal her!" (14) But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted." (15) So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted.

במדבר כ"א:ו'-ט'

(י) וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה בָּעָם אֶת הַנִּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרְפִים וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיִּמַּת עִם־רַב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל: (יא) וַיָּבֹא הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חָטָאנוּ כִּי־דַבַּרְנוּ בִּיהוָה וּבָךְ הַתְּפַלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּסֶּר מֵעָלֵינוּ

אֶת־הַנֶּחָשׁ וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מִשָּׁה בְּעַד הָעָם: (ח) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ
עַל־גֹּס וְהָיָה כָּל־הַנִּשְׁוֹף וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָי: (ט) וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נְחָשׁ נִחְשָׁת וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ עַל־הַגָּס
וְהָיָה אִם־נִשְׁוֹף הַנֶּחָשׁ אֶת־אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל־נְחָשׁ הַנִּחְשָׁת וְחָי:

Numbers 21:6-9

(6) The LORD sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died. (7) The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people. (8) Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover." (9) Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover.

דברים כ"ח:ט"ז

(טו) וְהָיָה אִם־לֹא תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתַי וְחַקֹּתַי אֲשֶׁר
אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם וּבָאוּ עָלֶיךָ כָּל־הַקְּלָלוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְהִשְׁיִגוּךָ:

Deuteronomy 28:15

(15) But if you do not obey the LORD your God to observe faithfully all His commandments and laws which I enjoin upon you this day, all these curses shall come upon you and take effect:

דברים כ"ח:כ"ב

(כא) יִדְבֶק יְהוָה בְּךָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר עַד כָּל־תּוֹ אֲתָךְ מֵעַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה בָּא־שָׁמָּה
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: (כב) יִכְכֶּה יְהוָה בְּשַׁחֲפֹת וּבִקְדָחַת וּבִדְלָקַת וּבַחֲרָחַל וּבַחֲרָב וּבִשְׂדֵפוֹן וּבִירְקוֹן
וּרְדָפוֹךָ עַד אֲבֹדָךָ:

Deuteronomy 28:21-22

(21) The LORD will make pestilence cling to you, until He has put an end to you in the land that you are entering to possess. (22) The LORD will strike you with consumption,

fever, and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew; they shall hound you until you perish.

משנה תענית ג'ד'

(ד) וכן עיר שיש בה דבר או מפלת, אותה העיר מתענה ומתרעת, וכל סביבותיה מתענות ולא מתריעות. רבי עקיבא אומר, מתריעות ולא מתענות. איזהו דבר, עיר המוציאה חמש מאות רגלי, ויצאו ממנה שלשה מתים בשלשה ימים זה אחר זה, הרי זה דבר. פחות מכאן, אין זה דבר:

Mishnah Taanit 3:4

(4) And so too a city which has a plague or [its buildings] collapse that city fasts and they sound a blast, but those [in the places] around it fast but do not sound the alarm. Rabbi Akiva says: they sound the alarm but do not fast. What constitutes a plague? If in a city that can supply five hundred foot-soldiers and three deaths occurred on three consecutive days, behold this constitutes a plague, less than this is not a plague.

ברכות ס' א:כ"ט

אמר אביי: לא לימא אינש הכי, דתני דבי רבי ישמעאל "ורפא ירפא" — מכאן שניתנה רשות לרופא לרפאות.

Berakhot 60a:29

Abaye responded and **said: One should not say this, as it was taught in the school of Rabbi Yishmael** that from the verse, **"And shall cause him to be thoroughly healed"** (Exodus 21:19), **from here we derive that permission is granted to a doctor to heal.** The practice of medicine is in accordance with the will of God.

בבא קמא ס' ב:ב'

ת"ר דבר בעיר כנס רגליך שנאמר ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח ביתו עד בקר ואומר (ישעיהו כו, כ) לך עמי בא בחדריך וסגור דלתך בעדך ואומר (דברים לב, כה) מחוץ

תשכל חרב ומחדרים אימה

Bava Kamma 60b:2

§ **The Sages taught:** If there is **plague in the city, gather your feet**, i.e., limit the time you spend out of the house, **as it is stated** in the verse: **“And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning.”** And it says in another verse: **“Come, my people, enter into your chambers, and shut your doors behind you;** hide yourself for a little moment, until the anger has passed by” (Isaiah 26:20). **And it says: “Outside the sword will bereave, and in the chambers terror”** (Deuteronomy 32:25).

בבא קמא ס' ב:ה'

רבא בעידן רתחא הוי סכר כוי דכתי' (ירמיהו ט, כ) כי עלה מות בחלונינו

Bava Kamma 60b:5

At a time when there was a **plague, Rava would close the windows** of his house, **as it is written: “For death is come up into our windows”** (Jeremiah 9:20).

בבא קמא ס' ב:ט'

ת"ר דבר בעיר אל יכנס אדם יחיד לבית הכנסת שמלאך המות מפקיד שם כליו וה"מ היכא דלא קרו ביה דרדקי ולא מצלו ביה עשרה

Bava Kamma 60b:9

The Sages taught: If there is a **plague in the city, a person should not enter the synagogue alone, as the Angel of Death leaves his utensils there**, and for this reason it is a dangerous place. **And this matter**, the danger in the synagogue, applies only **when there are no children learning in the synagogue, and there are not ten men praying in it**. But if there are children learning or ten men praying there, it is not a dangerous place.

בבא מציעא ס"ב א:ב'

ורבי יוחנן האי וחי אחיך עמך מאי עביד ליה מבעי ליה לכדתניא שנים שהיו מהלכין בדרך וביד אחד מהן קיתון של מים אם שותין שניהם מתים ואם שותה אחד מהן מגיע לשוב דרש בן פטורא מוטב שישתו שניהם וימותו ואל יראה אחד מהם במיתתו של חברו עד שבא ר' עקיבא ולימד וחי אחיך עמך חייך קודמים לחיי חבריך

Bava Metzia 62a:2

The Gemara asks: **And Rabbi Yoḥanan, what does he do with this** verse: “**And your brother shall live with you**”? The Gemara answers: **He requires** the verse **for that which is taught** in a *baraita*: If **two people were walking on** a desolate **path and** there was a **jug [kiton] of water in the possession of one of them**, and the situation was such that **if both drink** from the jug, both will **die**, as there is not enough water, **but if only one of them drinks, he will reach a settled area**, there is a dispute as to the *halakha*. **Ben Petora taught: It is preferable that both of them drink and die, and let neither one of them see the death of the other.** This was the accepted opinion **until Rabbi Akiva came and taught** that the verse states: “**And your brother shall live with you,**” indicating that **your life takes precedence over the life of the other.**

Encyclopedia Judaica – Medicine

In The Bible: With the one exception of the incurable serpent bite (Num. 21:9), biblical remedies and treatments are all of a rational character and do not involve incantations or magic rites, nor do they include the so-called “filth pharmacy.” Biblical therapeutics consisted of washing; the use of oils, balsams, and bandages for wounds and bone fractures; bathing in therapeutic waters (II Kings 5:10), especially in the case of skin diseases; sun rays, medicated drinks, etc. The modern method of mouth-to-mouth artificial respiration was also known, as testified by the accounts of Elijah and Elisha (I Kings 17:22; II Kings 4:34-35).

The Talmudic Era: The main contribution of talmudic medicine lies not so much in the treatment of illness but rather, as in the Bible, in the prevention of disease and the care of community health. The hygienic measures advocated were of a practical as well as of a

religious, ethical nature. A principle which recurs a number of times is that "bodily cleanliness leads to spiritual cleanliness" (Av. Zar. 20b; TJ, Shab. 1:3, 3b).

Hygienic regulations applied among other things to town planning, climatic conditions, social community life, family life, and care of the body. Mention is made of a disinfectant composed of seven ingredients used for cleansing infected clothing (Zev. 95a). A town was required to have a physician and a bathhouse. Clothing had to be changed before eating. Mar Samuel declared that diseases may be carried by caravans from land to land (Ta'an. 21b). Members of a family with a sick person among them were to be avoided. The digging of wells in the neighborhood of cemeteries or refuse dumps was forbidden (Tosef., BB 1:10). It was forbidden to drink uncovered water for fear of snake venom (Av. Zar. 30a). Food had to be fresh and served in clean dishes. Kissing on the mouth was discouraged, and kissing only on the back of the hand was recommended in order to prevent contagion.

During epidemics, the population was advised to avoid crowding in narrow alleyways because of the danger of contagion in the air. For body care, the Talmud recommends physical exercises, massage, sunlight, employment, and above all cleanliness. Mar Samuel states: "The washing of hands and feet in the morning is more effective than any remedy in the world" (Shab. 108b). Excesses of any kind were regarded as harmful. The Talmud also concerned itself with the health of future generations and forbade marriage to epileptics or the mentally retarded (Yev. 64b; 112b).

H.H. Ben Sasson, A History of the Jewish People, p. 486

Animosity and persecution reached their peak during the Black Death, in the massacres of 1348-1349. This plague descended upon Europe... In many places more than half of the population perished within a brief period. Rational explanations of the catastrophe were unknown... In those days scapegoats were sought... The Jews were accused of poisoning the wells in order to destroy the whole of Christendom. In Switzerland, Jews were tortured until they produced the demanded confession. News of the guilt of the Jews was broadcast so rapidly that in some places Jews were exterminated even before the plague arrived.

יורה דעה קט"ז:ה'

(ה) צריך לזהר מלידת מעות בפיו שמא יש עליהן רוק יבש של מוכי שחין ולא יתן פס ידו תחת שחיו שמא נגע ידו במצורע או בסם רע ולא יתן ככר לחם תחת השחי מפני הזיעה ולא יתן תבשיל ולא משקים תחת המטה מפני שרוח רעה שורה עליהם ולא ינעוץ סכין בתוך אתרוג או בתוך צנן שמא יפול אדם על חודה וימות: הגה וכן יזהר מכל דברים המביאים לידי סכנה כי סכנתא חמירא מאיסורא ויש לחוש יותר לספק סכנה מלספק איסור (ב"י בשם הש"ס) ולכן אסרו לילך בכל מקום סכנה כמו תחת קיר נטוי או יחידי בלילה (שם) וכן אסרו לשתות מים מן הנהרות בלילה או להניח פיו על קלוח המים לשתות כי דברים אלו יש בהן חשש סכנה (רמב"ם) ומנהג פשוט שלא לשתות מים בשעת התקופה וכן כתבו הקדמונים ואין לשנות (אבודרהם ומרדכי ס"פ כל שעה רוקח סימן ער"ה ומהרי"ל ומנהגים) עוד כתבו שיש לברוח מן העיר כשדבר בעיר ויש לצאת מן העיר בתחילת הדבר ולא בסופו (תשובת מהרי"ל סי' ל"ה) וכל אלו הדברים הם משום סכנה ושומר נפשו ירחק מהם ואסור לסמוך אנס או לסכן נפשו בכל כיוצא בזה ועיין בחושן משפט סימן תכ"ז:

Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 116:5

(5) One must refrain from putting coins in one's mouth, lest it's covered with dried saliva of those afflicted with boils. He should not put the palm of his hand in his arm pit, lest his hand touched a metzora or a harmful poison. He should not put a loaf of bread under his armpit, because of the sweat. He should not put a cooked item or drinks under the bed, since an evil spirit rests on them. He should not stick a knife in an esrog or a radish, lest one fall on its edge and die. Hagah: Similarly, he should be careful of all things that cause danger, because danger is stricter than transgressions, and one should be more careful with an uncertain danger than with an uncertain issur. They also prohibited to go in a dangerous place, such as under a leaning wall, or alone at night. They also prohibited to drink water from rivers at night or to put one's mouth on a stream of water and drink, because these matters have a concern of danger. It is the widespread custom not to drink water during the equinox, and the early ones wrote this and it is not to be changed. They also wrote to flee from the city when a plague is in the city, and one should leave at the beginning of the plague and not at the end. And all of these things are because of the

danger, and a person who guards his soul will distance himself from them and it is prohibited to rely on a miracle in all of these matters.

אורח חיים ד'י"ח

(יח) אלו דברים צריך נטילה במים. הקם מהמטה והיוצא מבית הכסא. ומבית המרחץ. והנוטל צפורניו. והחולץ מנעליו. והנוגע ברגליו. והחופף ראשו וי"א אף ההולך בין המתים. ומי שנגע במת. ומי שמפליא כליו. והמשמש מטתו. והנוגע בכנה. והנוגע בגופו בידו. ומי שעשה אחת מכל אלו ולא נטל אם ת"ח הוא תלמודו משתכח. ואם אינו ת"ח יוצא מדעתו:

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 4:18

(18) The following things require washing the hands in water [after them]: One who rises from bed, goes out of the bathroom, or of the bath house, one who cuts his nails, takes off his shoes, touches his feet, or washes his head, some say: also one who goes among the dead, or touched the dead, one who cleanses his clothes of lice, has sexual intercourse, touches a louse, or touches his body with his hand. Anyone doing any of these and not washing his hands, if he is a scholar, his studies are forgotten, and if he is not a scholar, he goes out of his mind.

יומא פ"ה א'י"ד

נענה ר' ישמעאל ואמר (שמות כב, א) אם במחתרת ימצא הגנב ומה זה שספק על ממון בא ספק על נפשות בא ושפיכות דמים מטמא את הארץ וגורם לשכינה שתסתלק מישראל ניתן להצילו בנפשו ק"ץ לפקוח נפש שדוחה את השבת

Yoma 85a:14

Rabbi Yishmael answered and said that it is stated: **"If a thief be found breaking in and be struck so that he dies, there shall be no blood-guiltiness for him"** (Exodus 22:1). **Now, if this** is true for the thief, **where there is uncertainty whether he comes to take money or to take lives**, and it is known that **bloodshed renders the land impure**, since it is stated about a murderer: **"And you shall not defile the land"** (Numbers 35:34), **and it causes the**

Divine Presence to depart from the Jewish people, as the verse continues: “In the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the children of Israel” (Numbers 35:34), and even so the home owner **is permitted to save himself at the cost of the thief’s life**, then *a fortiori* **saving a life overrides Shabbat**.

יומא פ"ה ב:ג'

ר' שמעון בן מנסיא אומר (שמות לא, טז) ושמרו בני ישראל את השבת אמרה תורה חלל עליו שבת אחת כדי שישמור שבתות הרבה א"ר יהודה אמר שמואל אי הואי התם הוה אמינא דידי עדיפא מדידהו (ויקרא יח, ה) וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם

Yoma 85b:3

Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya said: It is stated: “**And the children of Israel shall keep Shabbat, to observe Shabbat**” (Exodus 31:16). **The Torah said: Desecrate one Shabbat on his behalf so he will observe many Shabbatot.** **Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: I would have been there** among those Sages who debated this question, **I would have said that my proof is preferable to theirs**, as it states: “You shall keep My statutes and My ordinances, which a person shall do **and live by them**” (Leviticus 18:5), **and not that he should die by them.** In all circumstances, one must take care not to die as a result of fulfilling the mitzvot.

אורח חיים שכ"ט:א'

(א) על מי מחללין שבת. ובו ט סעיפים:

כל פיקוח נפש דוחה שבת והזריז הרי זה משובח אפילו נפלה דליקה בחצר אחרת וירא שתעבור לחצר זו ויבא לידי סכנה מכבין כדי שלא תעבור:

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 329:1

(1) 1. All cases of saving a life supersede Shabbat, and he who hurries in these matters is praised. Even if there is a fire in a different yard and there is concern that it will move to this yard and cause danger, we put it out to ensure that it does not spread.

משנה יומא ח:ה'

(ה) עברה שהריחה, מאכילין אותה עד שתשיב נפשה. חולה מאכילין אותו על פי בקיאים. ואם אין שם בקיאים, מאכילין אותו על פי עצמו, עד שיאמר די:

Mishnah Yoma 8:5

(5) If a pregnant woman smelled [food on Yom Kippur], they feed her until she feels restored. A sick person is fed at the word of experts. And if no experts are there, they feed him upon his own request until he says: enough.

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