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Psychological and spiritual implications of the COVID-19 crisis



The slowdown imposed by the current crisis provides us with an opportunity to become mindful of what we value most in life, to re-examine our values and priorities, and give higher priority to that which is most precious.

(April 1, 2020 / JNS) Israelis have been accustomed to national emergencies and tend to accommodate well to stressful changes in their daily routines. However, in contrast to past crises, the current predicament is exceptional. People across the world are experiencing an identical threat and creating a sense of shared global destiny. This sustained worldwide threat generates unprecedented situations that are of interest to psychologists.

The prolonged involuntary home confinement offers opportunities to many, stress and risks to some, and a relief to others. For example, the government decree to stay home does not bode well for the vulnerable among us. After all, self-confinement is not an option for the homeless and does not provide social distancing for the poor, who need to share small spaces with large families. The imposed intimacy of the lockdown can increase interpersonal friction and tension. Relationships that were characterized by conflict prior to the pandemic outbreak may deteriorate further because of increased tensions.

Indeed, as corona lockdowns grow, so does the surge of phone calls made to domestic-violence hotlines. Self-isolation traps many women and children in abusive and coercive situations. Cooped up with their perpetrators, they now have less opportunity to access vital welfare services.

Curfews prevent social workers from reaching out to victims of family violence and discourage referral to overcrowded emergency shelters, abandoning the vulnerable to their fate. While self-isolation is an important step to protect children from contagion, it renders young victims of physical and sexual child abuse easy prey, leaving them at the

mercy of their predators.

For the more fortunate among us, the mental pollution created by our daily rat race is lifting. Without distracting tasks, many of us can now experience our most intimate relationships more lucidly. An opportunity has emerged that allows us to appreciate and savor an unmitigated encounter with our loved ones and to do so without guilt. It is also an occasion to reflect on our relationships with our elders. Their forced isolation and dependence on us uncover their role in our lives and their value to us. It gives us all—old and young—a magnanimous chance to sweep out past grudges, bridge old rifts and mend broken ties.

The coronavirus pandemic has also provided *halachic* and spiritual challenges. The instruction to avoid gatherings posed a dramatic dilemma for observant Jews and *yeshivah* students who gather daily for prayer and study. Long after the Israeli Ministry of Health prohibited gatherings, many synagogue and *yeshivah* activities continued as normal, believing that Torah learning saves from death. Some anti-Zionist *haredi* rabbis were initially furious at the decrees, believing they were part of premeditated secular conspiracies to eradicate Torah learning and prayer. It seems that the ultra-Orthodox community has now accepted the gravity of the COVID-19 threat. The importance of human life (*pikuach nefesh*) is now cited as an important obligation that justifies the temporary disbanding of synagogue and *yeshivah* activities.

Sadly, for some *haredi* communities in New York and Israel, this was a late reaction and a rude awakening to a frightening reality. One of every three tested citizens of Bnei Brak and other religious communities in Israel is now positive for COVID-19, and *haredi* patients comprise 50 percent to 60 percent of the ICU beds in Israel's major hospitals. Tragically, many discovered that pious life and Torah learning were not sufficient in protection from contagion. The magnitude of the calamity developed for some into a crisis of faith as well.

This unprecedented pandemic also provides us all with several wake-up calls and opportunities. Albert Einstein once said, "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity." Case in point: We are learning that many of us can work effectively from home, thus slashing our carbon footprint. This largest-scale climate "experiment" ever shows that through significant global human behavior change, we can lower drastically air-pollution levels and global nitrogen-dioxide emissions. The slowdown imposed by the current crisis provides us with an opportunity to become mindful of what we value most in life, to re-examine our values and priorities, and give higher priority to that which is most precious.

What is the opportunity presented to us as a people? In the shadow of a mortal pandemic,

a life-saving dialogue takes place between the institutions of the secular State of Israel and the ultra-Orthodox community. In this crisis also lies the chance for better integration of the two communities. My hope is that the mutual fear and suspicion between the *haredim* and modern Israelis will be substituted by a recognition that we

are mutually dependent on each other. The life-saving encounter with science and science-based medicine might chip away at the ghetto walls *haredi* leaders have erected to protect against what they see as the dangers of secularism.

Finally, I see another wonderful opportunity in this crisis. Years of bloody conflict with the Palestinian people has turned Jewish public opinion in Israel against political and cultural coexistence with Israeli Arabs. Nonetheless, our country's public health-care system is a model of genuine commonality between Arabs and Jews. While Arabs constitute some 20 percent of the population of Israel, 42 percent of nursing students and 38 percent of pharmacists in Israel are Arab; at the Super-Pharm drugstore chain, 62 percent of the pharmacists are Arabs. At the **Technion-Israel Institute of Technology** and the **Ben-Gurion University of the Negev** medical schools, Arabs comprise more than a third of the student body.

These days, as always, Arab medical staff are fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with their Jewish Israeli colleagues against a formidable common enemy: COVID-19. My prediction is that this biblical-scale calamity will foster a significant new bond between the two Israeli communities.

As with most radical changes, we must take the good with the bad. The novel coronavirus provides many reasons for frustration, but from a psychological standpoint, it behooves us to focus on what we currently have and what we can do to optimize this situation for our own peace of mind and for a better post-pandemic world.

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