

Despite the fact that Debbie and I lived in Chicago for ten years beginning in the late 1990s, it was not until this week that I had heard of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave. As Dr. Eric Klinenberg describes in *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, on the first day of the heat wave, Thursday, July 13, 1995, the temperature hit 106 degrees, which in combination with the humidity, felt like 120 degrees to Chicagoans. That week roads buckled, train rails warped, and children riding in school buses became so dehydrated they had to be hosed down by the Fire Department. Energy usage went sky-high, leading to a failure of power grids, and so many fire hydrants were opened that some neighborhoods lost not only electricity but also water. The emergency crews that came in to seal hydrants were greeted by overheated citizens throwing bricks and rocks to keep them away.

Paramedics couldn't keep up with emergency calls, and city hospitals were overwhelmed. Some ambulance crews drove around the city for miles looking for an open bed. By Saturday, just two days later, capacity at the morgue was exceeded by hundreds; a fleet of refrigerated trucks had to be brought in to store the bodies. The "excess death" rate, Klinenberg recounts – meaning the difference between the number of fatalities that week as compared to a typical week – was 739. That is, 739 Chicago residents suffered heat-related deaths.

Government response was both insufficient and tone-deaf, with Mayor Richard M. Daley advising, "Let's not blow it out of proportion. . . . Every day people die of natural causes. You cannot claim that everybody who has died in the last eight or nine days dies [sic] of heat." If you, like I, have never heard of the heat wave, part of the reason may be the legacy of Mayor Daley's callous skepticism. By the end of the summer even Chicagoans debated whether the heat deaths were "really real."

Klinenberg's credentials, however, are not in meteorology or public health. He is a sociologist and his study of the heat wave revealed that it was not just a natural disaster but a social disaster as well. The mortality rates did not impact men and women equally, did not impact rich and poor equally, did not impact white, black, and Latino equally. Most interestingly, Klinenberg explains, the disparate mortality rates can be tracked not just by ethnic or economic divides, but by the degree of social cohesion within communities. The tight-knit communities, where people checked in on each other, enjoyed strong family ties, shared public space and social services – those communities weathered the heat wave more successfully, and fewer people died. But in neighborhoods where residents were out of contact with family and friends and unassisted by public agencies or community groups, it was in those communities where residents – seniors and otherwise – died alone, often behind closed doors and sealed windows. Drawing on the language of Emile Durkheim, one of the founding figures of sociology, Klinenberg points to the importance of "organic solidarity," the idea that we are all interdependent. It is the key variable to survival – not just in the Chicago heat wave, but in Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Sandy, and other natural disasters. Yes, these calamities reflected nature's fury, not to mention systemic failures of government, but the extent to which they were disastrous correlated with the presence or absence of social trust and cohesion. These calamities were plagues that were not distributed evenly, their effects were experienced differently

by different communities – differences that made all the difference in the world when it came to the most important difference: life or death.

Last week, in preparing for all my Zoom seders, or “Zeders” as my children call them, for obvious reasons, I found myself like many of us absorbed by the Ten Plagues. Why did God send the plagues? Why ten? Why these ones in particular? Why in this particular order? Why did God harden Pharaoh’s heart with each successive plague? Who was the intended audience of the plagues? The Egyptians? Moses? The Israelites? What do we make of a God who redeems a people by inflicting misery upon another? There are more questions about the plagues than there are plagues.

As I reread the plague cycle in the book of Exodus, I stumbled upon an aspect of them that I had never noticed before. There is a critical difference between the first three plagues – blood, frogs, and lice – and the other seven. The first three plagues afflicted all the inhabitants of the land equally – Egyptian, Israelite, rich, poor, near the Nile, in Goshen – everyone, everywhere. It wasn’t just Pharaoh who awoke with frogs on his nose and frogs on his toes; it was everybody. And through these first three plagues, Pharaoh’s resolve only stiffened; he would not let the Israelites go – not for three days, and certainly not for good.

It was only with the fourth plague – *arov*, usually translated as swarming insects – that God, through Moses, changed tactics. Listen to the language: “On that day, I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there. . . and I will make a distinction between My people and your people. . . .” (Exodus 8:18–19). In other words, Moses announces, the Egyptians would be infested by the insects, but the Israelites would not. Which is exactly what happened. It was a display not only of God’s mighty destructive power, but of one population being afflicted and another spared. The results were immediate. For the first time, for a short time, Pharaoh wavered: “Go and sacrifice to your God.” (18:21). The Exodus itself was still a long time off. It would take more plagues – hail, darkness, the death of the firstborn. One group targeted, the other one spared. The point is made explicit in the plague of darkness: “People could not see one another, for three days no [Egyptian] could get up from where he was; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.” (10:23). It is an intriguing thought, one I had never fully considered until this year. Had the plagues befallen everyone equally, we could not say *dayenu*. That alone would *not* have been enough. Only by differentiating between communities, by targeting one community and not another would God deliver the full terror of the plagues. That was, if you will, the eleventh plague, the *coup de grâce*, the one that made all the difference. Not hail, not darkness, not even the death of the firstborn, but the horrible realization that the destruction was not distributed equally among the inhabitants of the land. That is what broke Pharaoh’s will.

Despite what Madonna may have tweeted out to the world, it seems to me that the coronavirus is not “the great equalizer.” As with the plagues of the Passover story, our horror is amplified knowing that whatever the ravages of the coronavirus may be, its ramifications – medically, socially, economically

– are not felt equally by everyone. Of course, our community has been hit hard; I can no longer keep track of the number of synagogue members and family members who have either tested positive or are presumed positive. As evidenced by the long list of bereavements, our synagogue is not immune. The number of deaths, I believe, reflects a healthcare system stretched beyond capacity, hospitals forced to prioritize urgent care, and the elderly and ill lacking support systems that would enable the frail to withstand the virus despite their infirmities.

But I also know that terrible as the hour may be, my family and I are among the fortunate. Access to healthcare, access to food – these are privileges that many do not enjoy. To be able to socially distance, to work from home, to be able to work at all. I was telling someone about the all-consuming efforts made these past weeks to transform our synagogue into a virtual community, not to mention the pastoral demands this crisis imposes on clergy. This person reflected back that at the very least I was blessed to be in a position that is, for better or for worse, in demand. After all, to be busy and purposefully deployed is a blessing that many people sheltered in place do not enjoy.

The other day, I shared with a friend the good news and the bad news that I was ordering dinner in that evening. The good news was that I was ordering in – putting a restaurant and deliveryman to work. The bad news was that I was ordering in – putting a restaurant and deliveryman to work. I have the luxury of debating the relative merits of this choice and others, and if you are watching services this morning from your home, odds are that you do, too. But there is a world out there of people who do not. This virus is not hitting everyone equally. It is laying bare racial, ethnic, and economic inequities. It is bringing into stark relief so many societal fault lines that we would rather avoid – poverty, access to healthcare, food instability, and others. As I have shared many times from the pulpit, my family and I have the tradition of sitting at the Shabbat table every week and sharing our “roses and thorns,” the best and worst parts of our week gone by. When it was my turn, my rose was that we were together, healthy, and under one roof. My thorn was that I knew that my blessings were not shared by so many members of humanity.

And this brings us back to the plagues. If the most frightful aspect of the plagues is the realization that they affected different communities differently, then perhaps the redemptive charge of this Passover is to work to close the gap between communities. Isn't that the whole point of this festival anyway? To remember that we were once strangers in a strange land and then leverage that realization towards addressing the condition of those standing at the periphery waiting to be redeemed. It is why decades ago we remembered and mobilized on behalf of Soviet and Syrian and Ethiopian Jewry. It is why as Jews we are uniquely sensitive – not just on Passover but year round – to the plight of immigrants, refugees, and anyone seeking liberation from oppression, be it ethnic, economic, gender, sexual, or any other kind. We recall the Exodus as if we ourselves left Egypt in order to raise in ourselves an abiding empathy for others: to feel empathy and to act on that empathy. This year, those of us like myself, perhaps like you, who are among the “haves,” not the “have-nots,” need to respond with deeds in keeping with our people's spiritual DNA. Give charitably;

give blood, time, political resources; give of what you have. Give of yourself in a manner that addresses the acute needs of the hour and lays the foundation for a society that seeks to narrow, not widen, the systemic gaps between the diverse pockets of humanity created in God's image.

Finally, there is something that we all can do and must do, no matter who we are. As Klinenberg himself has written of late, it is unfortunate that in our efforts to flatten the spread of this deadly affliction, we have adopted the language of "social distancing." What we need, Klinenberg writes, is not "social distancing" but "physical distancing." If there is one thing the Chicago Heat Wave and all such crises have taught us, it is that the difference between life and death is not "social distancing," but "social solidarity." We may or may not have the means to contribute meaningfully to a charity, we may or may not feel comfortable putting ourselves in harm's way. But I do believe that all of us have the ability to pick up the phone and check in on each other and on the infirm and the elderly, to let people know that we are thinking of them, that we look forward to seeing them soon, please God, that they are not forgotten, and that if need be, we will help them identify how to get assistance.

That is my challenge to you: Don't just sit there. Yesterday we began to count the Omer –today is the second day – 49 days total between now and Shavuot, a stretch of time, the Talmud explains, that another terrible plague afflicted our people. Start this evening. Tack a piece of paper on your wall, write the names down: no less than one person per day. A phone call, an email – your choice – especially to people you may otherwise not reach out to. Why? because odds are it is those folks that are not being checked in on by anyone else either. Social solidarity has nothing to do with liking people or being friends with them. Social solidarity is about creating a caring community and caring society; something that I hope we can all work towards. It may just make all the difference in the wilderness ahead.