

We Have been Here Before: Spiritual Wisdom for Enduring Covid-19

I feel this sense of *deja vu* as we began to cancel plans and hunker down. Yes, the coronavirus-compelled communal self-quarantine descending upon our county, state and country felt vaguely familiar. Here's how we get through then and will now.

We are a community in transition

Travel plans canceled.

Classes suspended.

In person social interactions avoided.

Worship participation reverting to *klei kodesh* (clergy-led version), without communal singing.

Our *Mishkan Tefilah* (Tent of Worship and Meeting) shuttered for all but the smallest gatherings.

The understandable fear of infection and the scientifically certified need to “flatten the curve” forces us to quarantine ourselves, hunker down, and wait. For what benchmarks and for how long we don't really know.

But it all feels so familiar

Yes, we are *bamidbar* (back in the wilderness), reliving the Torah's [Numbers chapter 12](#), when Miriam becomes infected with a scaly-white, highly contagious skin condition and quarantines herself outside the camp. Miriam

the prophet, the soulful singer of new songs to God, whose wisdom discovers the wells of water in the wilderness, must cease her wonder-working to protect herself and her community. And while the chattering classes whisper about which offense might have gotten her punished, we who turn to science for insights into the world's workings, know that the "God punishes you" theology (even though articulated in the Torah) is sheer nonsense that we must ignore.

So what did the Israelite community, millions strong by then, do when a plague of unknown proportions entered their midst? They stopped traveling, hunkered down, and observed a period of quarantine.

What happened then?

The Torah says little about what they did during that painful period. We hear nothing about Miriam's suffering, though we can imagine it was significant. And the Torah is silent about the worry of the women and men who had come into contact with her before and just as the infection became visibly apparent. We know nothing about how the adults and children passed the time, whether they interacted with others or hunkered down at home in their tents. We only know that they made camp, stopped moving, and waited.

Moses prayed for his sister

And that Moses, brother of Miriam, a leader of our people, cried out to the Healer of All. Moses' prayer – brief but heartfelt and heart wrenching – says it all:

El na r'fa na la.

Please God please heal her (Numbers 12:13).

Asking for healing, Moses twice beseeches the Holy One, doubling the word “*na*” (please) to emphasize the intensity of his desire. We imagine Moses falling down on his knees, worried, fearful, bent low by the twin burdens of keeping his community safe and seeking healing for his beloved sister and partner in leadership.

And like him, we pray now:

El na r'fa na lanu.

Please God please heal us.

But our response to the plague shouldn't end there.

From outside our usual communal camps, hidden in our homes, we must imagine actions of our ancestors: how they held strong and of great courage as they endured the unimaginable:

Listen to the voice of Miriam, from outside the camp, sing loudly from the distance, singing songs of hope and healing.

Hear the women, taking up their timbrels yet again, joining her in song, spreading out, like a comforting chorus, creating across the camp the world's first livestreamed liturgy of love.

See children tossing stones at targets drawn on the ground and outside their tents, laughing and playing games together though separated from each other by a distance, as if distance meant nothing, but companionship was possible nonetheless, in this virtual reality game that the kids created together.

There were latrines still to be dug and food to be prepared (but in separate areas and always accompanied by vigorous washing of hands). They arranged the sharing of resources and attended to the comforting of the confused and the anxious. Life went on, though separated by social distancing. Or better yet, life went on alongside [physical distancing as they continued socially connecting](#).

And they told stories

In the most heartwarming *kodesh* (holy) moments of all, we might glimpse through the tent flaps, parents and children, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, telling stories to one another, reading into the moment a reimagining of our ancient heroes:

About Noah and Naamah whose strategic planning together – building an ark, gathering the animals, collecting seeds to seed a future – saved the animals and saved themselves, reminding us that in working together, in spite of the trauma of what was to come, we can find a way forward and hopefully a way through, and

About Isaac, the assaulted, who struggled to find meaning in a life torn apart by the painful experience he endured as a youth, yet who opened his heart nonetheless to the love of Rebekah and thus found a way forward, reminding himself and others that with love and partnership we can overcome debilitating anxiety and fear, and

About Sarai, the soulful one, who dug deep amidst her despair to find strength to feed the stranger-wanderers and, learning that there would be hope for her future – a child to be born – she laughed, reminding us that amidst great pain we can still find great joy.

[Let's laugh, love, support each other and sing](#)

We will never know what really went on in the Israelite camp when a plague of unknown proportions threatened the very survival of the people. But imagining as we Jewish midrashicists are wont to do, we can see it all clearly:

People planned and played, shared and showered each other with love. They told stories and sang songs, creating social connection amidst the physical distance.

And healing came to Miriam, finally. Although we never know if others were infected and/or died of the disease, but sadly we imagine too many did. And then community buried their dead with honor and love. And then, breathing a sigh of relief, and licking their wounds (but not their fingers or each other's faces), they packed up and moved on.

And eventually we will too.