

PLAGUES: PERSONAL, SOCIETAL AND FAMILIAL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

We once again read about types of plagues and dermatological illnesses that create a climate of impunity and negativity. We are no longer privy to the identity and physical appearance of these plagues that are recorded for us in this week's Torah reading. These plagues are or were unknown to us and they are certainly not the modern form of leprosy, which was the usual understanding of them for number of past centuries. In the absence of true understanding of these plagues and of the existence of the Temple, currently this subject matter is an esoteric one rather than theoretical.

Nevertheless, as the Torah is always multi-layered and to be understood on many different levels and planes, there are certainly lessons that we can derive from this week's Torah reading that are relevant to our lives and society. All of us encounter plagues during our lifetime. They may be physical, mental, spiritual, financial, family associated or work related.

The Torah reading divides its litany of plagues into different categories. There are plagues that affect the physical body of the person, while there are others that manifest themselves in the clothing and/or in the structure of the home and residence where the person lives. Many of the commentators to the Torah have seen this division of the plagues that can afflict human beings as being categorized as personal, societal and familial.

These three areas of life - one's own being and body, one's society and community and one's family are the areas of life and existence that are most vulnerable to plagues - or troubles. They are also those areas of life that can bring one the most satisfaction and sense of achievement. In the world of the Torah, what is most fragile and potentially impure is also what can be the greatest source of strength and holiness.

These three areas of life require constant vigilance and effort to remain healthy, productive and noble. The Torah bids us to care for ourselves. Our bodies and our health are not to be abused or taken for granted. We oftentimes sacrifice our physical well-being for transitory gain and imagined security. This type of attitude creates a plague within us that sooner or later will affect and injure us.

Part of the idea of the quarantine that the Torah describes for us in this week's Torah reading is to give the individual an opportunity to analyze and think about one's self and how to properly take care of one's own physical well-being.

Next, no person should live in isolation. and Belonging to and contributing to a community - synagogues, charitable organizations, study groups, etc. - becomes our clothing, so to speak - the

external persona that we project. The great Choni Hamageil of Second Temple times said it well: "if there is no community, then there is only death."

And finally, family obligations should trump all other imagined obligations. There is a responsibility of great magnitude in bringing children into this world. That responsibility for raising, guiding, caring and training one's own family cannot be shunted off to schools, institutions, peer groups or others. To attempt to do so invites the appearance of plagues in one's own home. So, we should always be on the lookout to avoid these types of plagues. that do exist and abound in our world.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com