

Corona Diary #4

Four Unique Questions for Corona Pesach

Moshe Taragin

Judaism has always encouraged questions. Our oral tradition is founded upon the Socratic method of questions and answers between study partners or chavrutot. On the night of Pesach questions are particularly pivotal; multiple irregularities are introduced into the Seder to prompt questions. In fact, the Torah itself encoded four different “approaches” to questions about the Exodus- which are enshrined in the Hagaddah as the “Four sons”.

During a typical Pesach the questions are practical instruments to jump-start conversation about our Exodus from Egypt. This year, unfortunately, in addition to the standard questions about our Exodus, we are all facing additional daunting questions. We dare not leave these questions unattended - to ourselves, and certainly not to our children and grandchildren.

Here are four novel questions for our “Corona Pesach” as well as some basic ideas to consider:

Question 1: How could there be such evil and suffering in our world?

Obviously, this isn't a novel question as perennially Man has been baffled by this riddle. The current suffering we are experiencing amplifies an ancient question for which there are many, many classical answers; elaborating upon the philosophical answers lies well beyond the scope of this article. Here are a few baseline truths to frame the conversation

- G-d is merciful and cares about human life
- We often are perplexed by His management of our world
- Watching a world suffer helps us appreciate the supervision and kindness which G-d typically bestows upon us

- Proportion: As difficult as this situation seems, our condition is far superior to that of previous generations. Pandemics of the past raged uncontrollably. As Jews, we have experienced worse horrors such as the Holocaust or the backbreaking nightmare of 200 years of Egyptian slavery

Question #2: If G-d chose us as His people why are we suffering like all other nations; Should we pray for Jews or for all humans?

Yes G-d chose us, liberated us from Egypt and delivered His Torah to us. As His chosen nation we are meant to serve as the world's conscience and are intended to showcase a life of moral principles and obedience to G-d's will. Throughout history we have often suffered anti-Semitism precisely because we are different and because we challenge the world to higher ground.

The Corona crisis has a different feel. Jew and non-Jew alike are threatened by this epidemic. Our suffering isn't "directly" related to our being chosen as G-d's children. However, our "response" to the crisis definitely IS a product of being chosen. If we are responsible for humanity, we must make every effort to strictly follow health guidelines – both to preserve public health and, hopefully, to set a correct example for others. Sadly, some in the Jewish community didn't fully comprehend this message quickly enough; strict adherence is both medically vital and part of being a G-d fearing Jew.

As a nation which cares about the welfare of every human being, we must also pray fervently for the full recovery of all ill people as well as praying for the restoration of a fully functioning society.

Question #3 Is the world coming to an end?

Judaism definitely views history as cyclical and pre-determined. It isn't open ended but is inevitably advancing toward a pre-established conclusion- the arrival of Moshiach and the introduction of an era of universal welfare. Indeed, the transition to that Messianic period may be rocky. Perhaps, if our religious behavior warrants, we may have an easier 'landing'. It is certainly possible that apocalyptic events may precede the arrival of Moshiach.

However, two truths remain inalienable. Firstly, the world will not end or be destroyed. After the flood, G-d already promised humanity that the world would never again be totally wrecked. There may be dramatic and even traumatic events, but the world will continue and continue to progress. Our reality may change and there may be great tragedy, but the world isn't "ending".

Secondly, it is very perilous and inadvisable to try to predict Moshiach. We eagerly await his arrival on a daily basis, but we avoid predictions and calculations. Messianic prediction can raise unrealistic hopes which, if unfulfilled, can lead to widespread national despair. We wait patiently without reading too much into historical events- even seismic ones such as this pandemic. The Rambam asserts that the details of Moshiach are so shrouded in mystery that it is almost impossible to predict or otherwise discern his arrival. We will know that Moshiach has arrived only once he arrives, and the transformation of our world becomes obvious and undeniable to everyone.

Question #4 Is it appropriate to celebrate Pesach when we are surrounded by so much suffering?

At the root level commemoration of Pesach is even more essential while struggling with a worldwide epidemic. Brave medical personnel are valiantly attending to the sick while scientists are working around the clock to develop treatments and vaccines. However, we will come up very short and full healing and restoration for our broken world can only be delivered from G-d. When the final era of human history arrives, the entire world will be healed physically, spiritually and morally. That march toward this Messianic healing began on Pesach when we became His nation and launched the march of history. Pesach night is referred to as 'leil shimurim' because the date is reserved for a future "full redemption" which will complement the first stage of redemption we celebrate on Pesach. Fundamentally, the events of Pesach are completely consistent with the struggle to heal our world.

At a practical level we must decide how to express our commemoration of Pesach. Certainly, all the mitzvot and rituals should be deeply engaged in since they touch upon the timeless aspects of Pesach – as stated above. Obviously,

there may be several halachik leniencies necessary to help preserve public health – which at this stage is nothing less than piku'ach nefesh. Beyond halachik observance, how celebratory should our overall experience be? This is a sensitive question which should differ from person to person and obviously from location to location. I assume there may be a different answer for a Jew living in Queens amidst high casualty rates as opposed to a Jew living in a relatively more stable situation.

Emotionally should we be happy or sad? The obvious answer is both. As humans we are often challenged to process multiple and conflicting emotions. This Pesach we must be sad but happy. G-d crafted our hearts with multiple chambers because he often expects us to simultaneously process multiple and antithetical emotions.

Pesach Samei'ach and Refuah Shleimah to us all !