

Living in Precedented Times: A Closer View into Past Pandemics in the Bible and Talmud

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Contagious epidemic diseases have been a major problem to public health for centuries. In 430 BCE a plague in Athens killed around 100,000 people, in the 14th century the Black Plague killed an estimated 25 million people and during the 1918 Spanish Influenza 50 million people died [1]. Nevertheless, preventative measures were taken in all these plagues. It is only recently, with the awareness of microbiology, that the preventative measures have a firm scientific basis. Within the Bible and Talmud there are multiple instructions and regulations given during epidemic times to prevent and control the spread of disease.

There are several choice words that appear when discussing contagious diseases. Dever appears in the Tanakh 49 times and is translated to a lethal epidemic disease. It is a general term and could be a plague that affects humans or animals. The word magephah is used 23 times and the word negef appears seven times and both are synonyms for dever. The interchange of these words is seen in Samuel II chapter 24; the disease is called dever and then shortly afterwards called a magephah. Dever, magephah and negef refer to a highly deadly pestilence brought about naturally or by God [2].

There are specific plagues mentioned in the Bible and Talmud. In Samuel I 5:6 there is a disease called the ophalim; looking at the specifics of the disease, researchers assume it to be the bubonic plague [3]. Askera is another epidemic mentioned in the Bible and Talmud. Scientists have determined askera to be diphtheria [4]. In Psalms 63:12, askera is mentioned to have silenced the king from rejoicing God, which is fitting as diphtheria causes the throat to swell and gradually covers the throat in a thick grey membrane. The victim either dies from suffocating to death or by the toxins released by the bacteria [5]. The Talmud's Sages argue that getting askera is one of the worst ways to die [6]. In Masechet Shabbat 33a, b, the Sages debate why someone would become sick with askera and they delineated what would be the worst sin to

transgress. In a different masechet, Rav Nachman states that Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students who died in a plague died from askera [7]. The Talmud's Sages also believe that the spies who spoke badly of the Land of Israel died from askera [8].

The Torah places high regard for the well-being of one's life. There are numerous commandments that deal with protecting one's life and taking care of one's body. One is even permitted to transgress a commandment, excluding one of the cardinal three, if a life is in danger [9]. It is one's religious duty to ensure that they are safe and out of harm's way [10]. As a result, the Mishna grapples with defining an epidemic and dealing with it. The Mishna considers dever to be present in an area in which 500 people live and there are three cases of death in three days [11]. Both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud specify that the deaths must be on three consecutive days or else it could be possible that the deaths are the result of food poisoning or some other non-contagious disease [12]. This was a very modern way of looking at the spread of disease as a dever is not defined by the number of dead, but by the rate it spreads. The Babylonian Talmud elaborates that in a town in which 1,500 people reside there must be nine cases of death in three days—the Sages were cognizant that bigger towns are more likely to have more deaths from non-epidemic causes and adjusted the numbers accordingly. This is unlike most recounts of ancient plagues where the writer or historian shared the number dead, but did not compare it to the population size [13].

The word dever has different significance depending on the word it is associated with. Dever most often appears with the word herev, sword. There's a theory that this association is because these two concepts usually come together. Wars lead to famines and increased aggregation of people—which then leads to lack of nourishment, hygiene, sanitation and pandemics. Typhus and typhoid are both examples of lethal epidemics that have ravished a population after a war. Dever also

appears with the word *dam*, blood. Throughout Eze-kiel, it is written that *dever* and *dam* will pass through an area together [14].

There is also a biblical idea that a *dever* is a collective punishment. After King David took a census of the people without God's permission, God made him choose between seven years of famine, three months of war or three months of plague. King David chose three months of plague so God sent the angel of destruction to kill 70,000 people [15]. Through the way the text reads, it appears that *dever* is a punishment for all the people, not just King David.

It's important to note that while the Talmud's sages were concerned with why a *dever* was taking place, they also intricately understood how it spread. A *maka mehalehet* is a plague that spreads through exposure to people and no natural borders can prevent its spread [16]. In *Masechet Taanit 21b*, Samuel immediately orders his town to fast when he discovers a nearby town was overtaken by *dever*. People questioned him as to why there was a need to fast because there was considerable distance and even a river between the two towns. Samuel answers that this *dever* will not be prevented from reaching their town due to the natural boundaries. More practically, Samuel was aware that the commercial or tourist ties between the two towns would aid in the propagation of the epidemic—caravans frequently traveled between these towns.

Following this story, is the account of Rabbi Judah hearing of a deadly epidemic only affecting pigs and immediately ordering a public fast. The reason as to why he insisted on a public fast is debated in the Talmud and the Sages decide that Rabbi Judah realized that pigs and humans have similar gastrointestinal systems and, as a result, both species are susceptible to a disease affecting one of them [17]. Even within the Bible, there is recognition that humans and animals are vulnerable to the same plague. One of the 10 Plagues given to the Egyptians was *Shehin*, now known to be anthrax, and it is written that it affected both man and beast [18]. It appears that knowing a plague could affect both humans and animals was common knowledge. Thucydides, an Ancient Greek Historian, wrote that the 430BCE Athenian Plague affected Greeks and animals alike. He explained that animals would become affected after touching or eating a corpse [19]. Virgil, a Roman poet in the first century BCE, also

described an epidemic that affected both humans and animals [20].

In order to prevent the spread of diseases, the Sages had a set of public health measures. This meant that the public was aware of the danger early on. Precautionary rules were shared with the public and there was rapid implementation of treatment and control. It is a rabbinic obligation to report a contagious disease to the authorities [21]. There is evidence that the reporting of contagious diseases was implemented in the two Talmudic stories shared earlier. Both Samuel and Rabbi Judah heard of the *dever* while it was still not affecting their people. The second measure was to warn the public; someone in the town would blow the *shofar* to alert the people of the danger. The next step was to share information about the disease and how to curtail its spread. As mentioned earlier, *dever* was viewed as a collective plague so that meant people would look within themselves to perform *teshuvah*, penitence. Public fasts were issued, *shofars* were blown and people limited their movement in a zone affected by the pandemic [22]. In *Bava Kama 60b*, the Sages advised people to remain at home during a plague. It was also mentioned that the 4th century Sage Rava kept his windows shut during an epidemic. It is even advised during an epidemic for a traveler to walk on the sides of the road instead of the middle. There were two reasons for this piece of advice: practically, the sides of the road are generally emptier than the middle so there would be less exposure to others and spiritually, during a pandemic the angel of destruction walked in the middle of the road so it was best to avoid the middle. There were even people who would flee a town that was ridden with a lethal disease. Rabbi Moshe Isserles, a prominent 16th century rabbi, writes that his commentary of *Megillat Esther*, *Mechir Yayin*, was written while fleeing an epidemic that struck his hometown.

There is much evidence that people in the Bible and Talmud were aware of epidemics and created public health measures to curtail the pandemics to spread. The ultimate aim was to save as many lives as possible through individual and communal measures. Public fasts were issued, *shofars* were blown and people remained within their family unit to warn others of the danger and work towards curtailing the disease.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents as their encouragement and support enables me to pursue my passions. I would also like to thank Dr. Babich for his support and guidance throughout my three years in Yeshiva University. I am incredibly thankful for everything he does. I would finally like to thank Ms. Claudette Mikhli and Ms. Carolina Cohen for sharing their passion for science and graphic design with me. It continues to propel me forward and open my eyes to a world of possibilities.

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