

Passover During a Plague

by Phyllis Chesler



What is there to say that has not already been said?

First, that it is surprising, and rather strange, that we are so totally and thoroughly unprepared, at least psychologically, for something that has always been so familiar to most of humanity.

The known world has been [laid low by plagues](#) many times before, at least from the 6th century and on every continent. Bubonic plague, smallpox, influenza, cholera—all carried along, time and again, by armies, explorers, and traders. Cholera struck at least seven times and was brought to earthquake-afflicted Haiti in 2010 by UN peacekeeper troops.

Perhaps most of us have never studied History or, perhaps, we thought that we no longer lived in an age susceptible to pandemics. We do now and we must never forget it.

This plague is like 9/11 every day, day after day.

However, this psychological unpreparedness is strange for Jews. Our DNA is coded for expecting the worst, it is fine-tuned for seeing “oppressors” everywhere (and they are often right there, always easy to find); we are used to understanding that, if we are lucky, we will be allowed to flee, leaving all our earthly possessions behind.

But we are entering Passover, a time in which our freedom was presaged by plagues. Have we thought they never really happened, or could never happen again, to both Jews and non-Jews?

The Passover story celebrates God’s taking us out of slavery, rescuing us from a real plague, not a metaphoric one. Will physicians, scientists, and government leaders now rescue the world? If not, who will?

This year, alone together, we may all have [more authentic Sedarim](#) than ever before. Why? Because the Jewish slaves were quarantined inside their homes as the Angel of Death “passed” over each household with blood on the lintel post as it carried out its mission to slay every firstborn, both human and animal. No one could enter or leave that household. The eating of the pascal lamb was done only by those who had already “signed up”—so to speak—to do so.

This next thought has already been shared by many on the internet: That this may be the first Passover Seder that was actually cancelled by a plague. But that’s not really true. We are all going forward with Sedarim, some alone, some only with their immediate households, and many via Zoom, FaceTime, or Skype.

This Passover, let us praise our ancestors, those “wandering Arameans,” and let us certainly praise God.

But let us also praise the extraordinary doctors, nurses,

health aides, pharmacists, paramedics, fire and police officers, and ambulance drivers who are serving the cause of life even as they risk their own; who are saving us all just as the Egyptian midwives Shifra and Pu'ah, Moses's sister Miriam, and Pharoah's daughter Bat-ya did when she rescued and adopted the Jewish baby crying in the *reeds*, just as God rescued us with the parting of the *Reed Sea*.

Every human act of life-saving kindness is heroic and may lead us all to a more ultimate Redemption.

Let us pray that all of us, both Jews and non-Jews, be "passed over," and not singled out for death.

Chag Pesach Sameach.

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