

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Passover

by Michael Curtis



Who would have thought my shriveled heart could have recovered greenness?

It is a coincidence yet symbolic that the upsurge in the coronavirus epidemic Covid-19 has coincided with the Jewish festival of Passover that commemorates the liberation of Jews more than 3,000 years ago from an enemy determined to liquidate them. Individuals are now conscious that the world today is fighting an invisible enemy determine to exterminate them, and which so far has claimed 58,000 lives and more than one million infected.

The parallel between today and the Jewish historical experience is enticing to compare in at least five ways. One is the very visible fight for liberation and the end of their slavery in Egypt against an oppressive foe, and then the formation of the liberated people into a nation. The U.S. and

the world is fighting for physical liberation against the global pandemic, Covid-19. A second, related theme, is that Jews have survived, overcoming foes, like Antiochus and Haman and Hitler through the ages, with heroes like the Maccabees, and are determined to prevail. The world today will survive as a result of the increasingly stringent measures in all countries to fight the inexorable invisible foe, to run where the brave dare to go, to try to reach the unreachable star.

A third similarity are the historic rituals or present devices by which undesirable elements are eliminated. In Passover, all chametz, food with leavening agents in contact with moisture for longer than fifteen minutes, are thrown out as garbage and Jewish eating habits change. We now realize that, as a result of the impact of the virus, economic, financial and political factors thought by authorities in the U.S. to be undesirable are being bypassed, and that personal life and social relations are also changing.

A fourth factor is that the fight against the foe, whether in Masada, 73 AD or in Bar Kochba revolt 132-134, exemplified determination and heroism, but caused pain, and sacrifices had to be made to overcome the enemy. Today, health care professionals, scientists and business are united in the fight against an enemy which has brought casualties, exposing inequities in the economic status, class, and gender sectors. Irrespective of who, individuals or countries, can be blamed for delay or stumbling in taking actions or providing necessary medical equipment, ventilators, masks, or hospital beds, or the necessity of testing. all are aware of urgency to remedy the deficiencies. Contemporary societies now understand that recovery in human and economic terms may not be easy, that they may face recessions for some time, and that more of our lives at work or in education will be spent in online activity.

A fifth lesson in this parallel of past and present is that central to the struggle and irrespective of ideological

beliefs, are two needs: one is that the whole community must collaborate as Jews did 3000 years ago with Moses, a gifted leader; the other is that government leaders, using the power of the state, must rise to the challenge as Moses did. It also means that a significant contemporary problem is dispute over the extent and limits of that state power.

It is all too clear there is a great deal of uncertainty and lack of clarity about the very nature of Covid-19 which has affected all forms of response and behavior, and about the means by which it can be overcome. It is painfully obvious, especially in the U.S. which is now seen as the global epicenter, that the coronavirus epidemic has been punishing in human terms and in economic activities including the stock market. As a public health emergency, it has affected all aspects of life, travel, restaurants, sports and entertainment gatherings, as well as business. The virus has been particularly painful in both developed countries, for less well-off persons, and in developing countries which lack investment.

One gratifying development is that the world's scientists have been concentrating on research on the virus, through collaboration in laboratories and hospitals, and sharing their findings. The virus has fostered more cooperative work and a more integrated world scientific community. One wonders whether after the virus has been conquered, this spirit displayed by the scientific community will lead to less nationalistic policies and to a more integrated political community. Another related question is whether states will return to a diminution in the power of governments that have used more authority during the virus crisis, including over both the economy and more surveillance of the population.

All governments are struggling with the virus that has spread quickly and globally. Guidelines for personal hygiene, and careful and constant washing of hands and food have been adopted. All societies have recommended to varying degrees the

concept of social distancing, keeping people apart, and imposing shutdowns in business, schools, stores, sports, parks. The Wimbledon tennis tournament for 2020 has been cancelled, as has the Summer Tokyo Olympic Games also scheduled for 2020. It is arguable whether the U.S. presidential election should be postponed.

Most governments, with the prominent exception of Brazil, whose president has been defying the scientific consensus on the issue, have issued orders for lockdowns or for residents to stay home to slow the spread of the disease. All are frantically involved in devices for and implementing mass testing, though to do this there are different methods, local variations, and technical obstacles. All countries and cities search for more hospital space and for producing more masks.

Prince Charles is one of those celebrities, like Prince Albert of Monaco, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, actor Tom Hanks and TV anchor Chris Cuomo, who tested positive for infection of Covid-19, while musicians Ellis Marsalis and Bucky Pizzarelli are two of those who died from the virus. In an appropriate tribute made after his rapid recovery, Prince Charles, expressed appreciation of the medical help he received, complimented doctors, nurses, medical personnel for their selfless devotion to duty, and expressed concern for those who lost loved ones in these unprecedented and anxious times.

The ongoing war is a story of heroes, like citizens who donated blood plasma to help neutralize the virus in infected individuals. Medical specialists, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, regarded as the world's expert and the U.S. leader on the pandemic and Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the government response against the virus can be seen as noble heroic individuals. It is saddening that the 79 year old Dr. Fauci has received death threats for his central role. His courage is shown in his defiance of the death threats: "This is the life I have known and I'm doing it."

If there are heroes in this war against the pandemic, there are also foolish villains and clowns who appear on the information stage or act in despicable fashion in spite of the medical realities. In Britain a number of men have been jailed for biting and spitting at UK police officers, and then saying they were infected with the virus. In Ramsgate, England, one individual showed his bravery by drilling holes on the tires of eight ambulances, putting them out of action.

As in the past, conspiracies abound, though they are contradictory. One can choose among them. The U.S. Army brought the virus to Wuhan during the Military World Games held there in 2019. Or the U.S. found and used the virus to destroy China's economy, or is it the other way round? Iran may be using it in its conflict with the U.S. and Israel. may be using it in its conflct. It did this through cooperation of the two sides resulting from the many flights of its privately owned airline Mahan Air running between Teheran and China. However, the conspiracies have not yet explained the best way to wash and dry one's hands, or whether to wipe groceries after we get them from the grocery store, or whether it's safe to travel.

Perhaps the worst and most unpleasant of conspiracy theories about the pandemic are the accusations against Jews, the main targets of hate speech grounded in the issue of the virus. Antisemites for long have asserted the Jews have taken over the world economy and the media, and control the political process. Now, by another Jewish plot by a cabal, presumably located in a kosher deli in New York City, they are responsible for the pandemic and have encouraged infected individuals to spread the virus to non-Jewish areas. Jews have benefited from the pandemic as part of their plan to expand their global influence. Jewish companies have manipulated the stock market, patented a vaccine, and intend to make millions from the biological weapons developed by Israel.

The U.S. community is now aware it is suffering from the bread

of affliction that Jews ate in the land of Egypt. This year we are slaves to the virus, making our lives bitter; next year we will be free of it. The U.S. will conquer with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.