

GOD, FRAGILITY, & CORONA & VIRUS

Senior Tanach class seeks religious meaning of quarantine

Rabbi Ari Schwarzberg's senior Tanach class held a Schoology discussion forum last Thursday on the religious significance of quarantine from the coronavirus.

"Given the craziness and uncertainty of our current reality," Rabbi Schwarzberg wrote in the discussion description, "I'd like you all to take a few steps back at the beginning of class to think about what's going on reflectively."

He then instructed students to respond to this prompt:

"Let's say someone came to you with an inquiry about the religious, spiritual, or moral significance of Corona and quarantine. They wanted to process their current reality seeking some meaning or symbolism out of it.

"Obviously, you do not and cannot know, but what 'pastoral' advice would you give to a person looking for deeper meaning?"

Here are four of the students' responses, used with permission and edited only for spelling and minor syntactical errors. Entry headings have been added by the Boiling Point.

-- Sam Rubanowitz, March 16

Evan Rubel: We are vulnerable, and quarantine gives us time to consider what this means.

Our world is undeniably a different place than it was just several months ago. Chaos and uncertainty plague humanity, which are proving to be, perhaps, even more lethal than the virus itself. In light of the interconnectedness of our society, COVID-19 has demonstrated just how vulnerable we all are – that, at a moment's notice, our world can be brought to its knees by something infinitesimal and that there are greater, unknown dangers to our existence. Each and every one of us should consider our role within our communities, our countries, and our world; we should consider and think deeply about how we affect others and what effects our actions have. One protective measure – quarantine – actually empowers us to contemplate what is important and how we can contribute to the common good.

Danya Helperin: See quarantine as a spiritual cleansing — as the Torah does — and not as a punishment.

I would first and foremost say that it is not a punishment. It could be perceived as such because human nature tends to interpret solitude as a negative, but that is more a product of the process than it is the goal of the process. Rather, quarantine could be considered almost a form of cleansing or meditation. To the best of my understanding, in a biblical context, quarantine was usually for cleansing the impure or following a misdeed. In the case of impurity, quarantine served as a separational cleansing, whether physical or spiritual. In the case of

a misdeed, it appears consequential on the surface, but I believe it was a time for the person who committed the deed to meditate on their actions and understand their wrongdoings. In the case of both impurity and misdeed, both cleaning and meditation is implied. So, to me, the nature of the situation we're experiencing seems almost...spiritual? Of course, the coronavirus is a terrible occurrence and one should treat it as such, but the method of recovery — quarantine — could be looked at in a more meaningful light.

Anna Weiss: This crisis is not about religion.

I could say something dumb like, "Oh, everything happens for a reason! Hashem has a plan." Or maybe I would say, "Well, this is Hashem's way of telling us that we need to be better people and learn to come together as a community to help one another." Like I said, this is dumb. This does not make me feel better, and I doubt it would make anyone else feel better. The virus seems to continue to penetrate and hurt our community, leaving nothing positive.

I guess one can take this time to do some self-reflecting, learn to live in the moment, and build on their connection with G-d/Judaism, but I think it would be better to focus on the health and needs of your family. I don't think religion should be anybody's #1 concern

right now. If we focus too much on religion and ignore the reality of the current state of the world, we might not have anyone left to pass on the religion.

I don't really have any pastoral advice to give. Everything about the Coronavirus is damaging and unfortunate. Our entire world has been put on hold, the economy is plummeting, people are losing their jobs, family members are dying, and the world's education system has been moved to laptops. I think that right now, it's difficult to see any good or anything positive coming out of the Coronavirus and the necessary quarantines. Maybe in the future that will change, but for now it just really sucks.

Read more student responses at shalhevetboilingpoint.com/coronavirus

Neima Fax: Quarantine opens us to prayer and to purpose.

I had a realization recently because of this virus about why Jewish faith has remained so solid for thousands of years. I was sitting in my bed feeling helpless, worried, stressed, and anxious about all the consequences of Coronavirus and all I felt that all I could do was pray. It was the only power I had. And I realized that the Jewish people have spent the majority of their existence feeling helpless, worried, stressed, and anxious about anti-semitism, whatever form it may take. And in those moments of crisis, the only power they had was prayer. And then I started thinking about people who have it way worse than we do. People who are homeless, living paycheck to paycheck, can't afford healthcare, or don't have the resources to survive quarantine. Even on a regular basis, these groups of people feel helpless, worried, stressed, and anxious because their future is unsure. If we are stuck in quarantine I would put my time towards coming up with plans to help the underprivileged, because whatever problems we have, they have it way worse, and as Jewish people and just people in general, we have the obligation to help them.

▲ **MINCHA:** Men davened on Alta Vista Boulevard in Hancock Park March 18. When synagogues closed, people in search of a minyan created distanced prayer groups outside.