

To Our Dear Talmidim,

Our heads are spinning with thoughts in these troubling times. I wanted to share with you, with whom I feel close, some thoughts regarding the present reality, and our response to the situation.

These are disturbing times. Difficult emotions are raging, even threatening; not the usual anxiety that possesses us in a "normal" crisis, like the fear and trepidation of war, security threat, or illness. This distress is different, a vague but consistent unease in the depths of the soul.

Certainly, fear and trepidation from the danger of disease, and the concern about the potential disaster in a pandemic, are very real. Dread of the catastrophe we have seen in other countries is palpable, and enhanced by fear of the unknown. The unknown threatens us with the mystery of what the future holds for us – this is one of the most significant components of the fear of death with which we are all so familiar – and in this case, our inability to predict the magnitude of danger and enormity of threat reinforces our fear. Each of us feels threatened because we do not know what tomorrow will bring, and we all endangered by the pandemic.

However, there is another element at play in the current situation. Contrary to medieval or ancient society, modern man derives support and comfort from familiar routine in times of crisis. When we feel threatened, we hold on to routine as an emotional respite. Modern society encourages those who are ill to continue their routine even in times of sickness, and understands the importance of routine during wartime or security threats. I am reminded of the cleaning staffs that would arrive at the scene of mass terror attacks immediately after the removal of the wounded, washing the streets with powerful hoses, to enable a return to routine within hours of the event. Routine is not only important, it's also comforting. Modern man views the natural order as a positive and beneficial force, and normative life sponsored by the natural world as safe. He has learned how to use nature to support his needs, and views nature as a source of provision and security. With scientific knowledge, he understands nature to a great extent, and utilizes the technology he created to recruit nature to serve him best. The powers of nature are accessible and obedient. The laws of nature and course of regular life are not perceived as threatening or dangerous, but rather as a framework for personal and economic security. Deviation from nature, whether through natural disaster, war, or economic crisis, is the primary threat to modern humanity; we are therefore comforted by that which is familiar and routine.

This state of mind, which has become second nature to us, has been undermined in the current crisis. Suddenly, instead of offering comfort, nature is a threat, and routine – the cause of possible disaster. The crutch has become a beating stick, and the source of comfort has become a threat. In this new reality, only dramatic steps involving a complete break with routine and war against nature can save us. Nature and modern lifestyle have turned against us, like a harnessed bull turning on its master. It is a world turned upside

down, and this state shakes our equilibrium and undermines our existence. Man has lost his anchor, and knows not how to navigate his own world; his work plan was knocked down, and the manual is no longer relevant.

This change carries significant spiritual ramifications. The panic and loss of control are threatening. Our trusted map or Waze have gone astray, and we feel helpless without them. Like a small child lost in a mall, suddenly, without warning, the fun, familiar, bustling place of entertainment becomes threatening and frightening, inducing hysteria. He searches for a familiar face, store or sign, to return to a familiar framework, but can't find one. He cries out for his father and mother in his fear and distress, begging to be heard and rescued, and turns to an unseen redeemer. Suddenly an adult reaches out and offers him a hand – and he clings to him. If, God forbid, he follows the wrong adult, tragedy might ensue.¹ However, in the best case, the child might look up and see that it is his mother or father who have come for him, reaching out a loving, protective hand. If he had not been lost, he would not cling to them; he would have preferred his freedom. On the familiar road to kindergarten or school he might not even hold their hand at all. However, in this strange and foreign reality, he clings to his parent, his savior.

We are this child. In our present reality, we are threatened by the dangers of the pandemic, and frightened by an unfamiliar world. Fear of danger, dread of an unfamiliar world, and the loss of routine are all reflected in our souls. We cry to our father to reach out and save us from this frightening reality. If normally we would delight in man's independence and God-given autonomy to cultivate and keep the world, today we feel not only our weakened position, but also nature's hostility. This is not the kind world that is "desirable for gaining wisdom," but rather a "vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions... something your ancestors had never known." The snake and scorpion are one danger; the unfamiliarity is another, "something your ancestors had never known." One of the great challenges of Israel's journey through the wilderness was coping with the unknown and unfamiliar, waking each morning to a foreign world. The difficulty of living in a world "your ancestors have never known" is the key to understanding the nation's strange yearning to return to Egypt. Despite the fact that Egypt is a land of oppression and enslavement, it is a world 'your ancestors *have* known.'

The idea of coping with an unfamiliar reality resonates in our prayers. Each day we begin *Amidah* with turning to הגדול, הגיבור והנורא – the great, mighty, and awesome God. A special blessing is dedicated to each of these epithets. The first two – הגדול והגיבור – are two different attributes of divine providence. גדול is the distribution of divine

¹ This was indeed Israel's sin with the Golden Calf – they clung to the first element they believed would protect them in unfamiliar surroundings. In their panic and fear they failed to understand that what they looked to as a solution, was, in fact, the problem.

abundance in the natural world. As Maimonides diligently emphasized, there is great religious value to maintaining natural law and to divine governance within the framework of scientific constancy. This is the normative route of God's governance and providence, and the foundation of natural order. In this context, God "Who bestows good kindness ... and recalls the kindness of the patriarchs, and brings the redeemer to their children's children." These benefits, mentioned in the first bracha of *Amidah*, are provided within the normative and familiar world. God provides for us routinely in a world governed by natural law. This is normative divine providence, under normal circumstances.

The assumption at the foundation of the second bracha, *אתה גיבור*, is reversed – here, God's governance conflicts with nature, and subdues it. The might described here is the might of defeating nature, which commits God to conquer his desire to maintain natural law and defeat the rules of his own design. Therefore, the bracha begins and ends with resurrection – "You are mighty forever, Hashem, You revive the dead, and greatly capable of liberating... and you are reliable to revive the dead." There is no greater contrast to natural law than resurrection. Here God benefits his creation by acting against natural law. This concept of defeating nature is inherently problematic, since it contrasts God's role as man's benefactor with his role as the creator, who commands the maintenance of the natural laws he designed. Despite this conflict, the rabbis instructed us to turn to this attribute of *גיבורה*. They informed us that it is not impertinent to turn to God's might, and ask him to suspend natural law; in fact they positioned it in the introduction to *Amidah*. We turn to God as a father and merciful king, and ask him to hear our cry and defeat the laws of his own world for our benefit. The epithet *גיבור* denotes the ability of God's might to defeat a conflicting divine attribute. In other words, turning to a mighty God is turning to a merciful ruler who has the ability and desire to bend the rules of his own design, due to his compassion, and the acknowledgement that he has the ability to do so, when natural law cannot be relied upon.

The dichotomy of greatness and might when standing before God in prayer is expressed halakhically in the division between tractates *Brakhot* and *Taanit*; while both relate to prayer, one discusses routine, everyday prayer, while the other delves into prayer practices in a time of crisis. However, the two are differentiated not only in the sense of distress and the presence of danger, but also in the divine attributes that are employed. *Brakhot*, with its normative prayer, turns to God who governs the world with the natural law he created, and benefits us through natural law, while *Taanit* pleads with the attribute of might – particularly relating to controlling rain,² which negates the natural order. When facing drought, plague, epidemic, and cessation of rain, man turns to God and asks him to overpower nature. Redemption cannot be found within the framework of nature, since it is

² The discussion of the rain as a feature of might which overcomes nature, instead of a natural force, is beyond the scope of this letter.

nature that poses the threat; instead, in his distress, man asks God to suppress the natural order. He is compelled to go out of his comfort zone, and turn to God while deserting the familiar framework of beneficial nature and comforting routine. He leaves his protective home and prays on the street, as an expression of stepping out of the comfort of his routine – a last resort against the hostility of nature.

This sense of a hostile nature that requires overpowering and might is foreign to modern man. In the consistent tension between fixed natural laws and divine providence, modern man is accustomed to turning to God, who will kindly tend to his needs, livelihood, and health, within the natural framework. The modern God-fearing man prays and pleads to God with passion and intensity, but his prayers emerge from an understanding that out of the natural possibilities pertaining to his personal reality, God will choose a positive outcome. He is reluctant to pray for the submission of nature; he prays for God to guide and hone nature toward the desired outcome.

Over the last few weeks, reality has changed, and this demands a parallel change in our emotional world, in prayer, and in religious experience. Man is no longer Adam I; nor is he Adam II, who trusts nature to provide his needs, even when this security creates the existential loneliness described in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. The state and perception of *The Lonely Man of Faith*, an essay based on modern philosophies that trust in nature, is a far cry from the current condition of the current *isolated man*. R. Soloveichik describes man's conquest of nature in a world where technology provides man with control over the universe; but now what we need is prayer that turns to the attribute of גבורה to battle nature. We need to acknowledge the new existential state, and pray to God, who heals the sick, while recognizing the new reality.

Our prayers today need to be founded on the mode of prayer described in Taanit, which expresses this perception. The primary relevant prayer from Taanit in this situation, which is embedded in our siddur, is אבינו מלכינו (followed by מי שענה). This certainly seems an appropriate prayer to include daily at this time.³

In this context we should note, that these prayers in Taanit are based on an acute sense of danger, based in a threat from nature. A threat from nature is usually severe. While the threat is sometimes gradual, and only becomes concrete over time (such as cessation of rain), it is no less severe. In the present reality, in which the threat emerged gradually, not everyone feels there is an individual threat, since the extent of the danger is amorphous. Contrary to an acute sense of trepidation, if it exists, the vague unease makes it difficult to

³ Another prayer from Taanit that is embedded in our siddur, to a lesser extent, is מי שענה. To me this seems an appropriate addition alongside ענונו ה' ענונו and עשה למען אמתך, in times that demand crying out to God (for example, in the fast day declared this week on Erev Rosh Hodesh), since all these additions have a deep connection with the Taanit mode of prayer.

utter these prayers. This requires one to internalize the dangers posed by nature, not to shirk our responsibility to respond with appropriate prayer.

In light of this analysis, the ramifications on the policy of *psak* must be determined as well. One of the primary approaches to current halakhic questions attempts to maintain a familiar routine to whatever extent possible, and is willing to be lenient to achieve this end. Of course, each situation requires individual attention, but the fundamental question of whether it is even correct to maintain routine in these trying times should be addressed. Should the individual and the community not be instructed that these are not usual times, and that we are faced with a new world and existential state; and for now, there is no spiritual or existential logic in maintaining a routine that befitted a different reality? Familiar routine is a comfort; but when the world order has turned upside down, the objective should not be to seek calm or comfort, but rather to face reality, and understand that our relationship with the world around us has shifted. We must recognize the crisis and make the necessary spiritual adjustments. Instead of holding on to the past, we must come to terms with a different present. The aspiration to execute a halakhic policy which strives to maintain routine is not a question relating to a specific halakhic detail, nor is it a general question of leniency or stringency in policy, but rather a fundamental question of whether the crisis should be acknowledged, and the aspiration to return to that which is familiar and routine abandoned. The world is changed, and this must be acknowledged.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that I don't believe fear of epidemic and disease are necessary to enhance the sense of man's dependence on God. Our dependence on the divine is crucial to our religious existence, no less in normal times, in our dealings with comforting routines and friendly nature. However, this dependence is no longer filtered through that which is familiar and routine, but rather through battling routine; we therefore need to turn to God as the only power that can conquer nature on our behalf. This is another form of divine providence; in order to merit this, man must recognize the specific need, and pray to God, while shedding the sense of security usually derived from the world that surrounds us.

May the great, mighty and awesome God hear our prayers, and remove illness from our midst and from the entire world.

With sincere and loving hope for physical and spiritual health,

Mosheh Lichtenstein

*** English Translation by Atara Snowbell of original letter in Hebrew*