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Rosh HaYeshiva of Ramat Bet Shemesh

Unauthorized translation by Eliyahu Y. Weisman

With God's help, this 23<sup>rd</sup> day in Adar 5780:

1. To guide us towards mending our numerous imperfections, this Coronavirus pandemic has been cast and spread upon our world. Many have become ill and some have died, may God's mercy be upon us. Practices of social distancing have been implemented around the world to curb the spread of the virus and we too shall be vigilant to avoid risks that endanger life. The Magid Mishna (Shabbos 2,13 and quoted by Magen Avraham 330,3) has already stated that even if one in a thousand die from a malady, the illness is to be treated as Pikuach Nefesh, or life threatening. This illness has clearly passed that threshold and each individual is duty-bound to heed the warnings of medical experts to reduce transmission, particularly in light of the incubation period where infected victims have no symptoms, and furthermore, any delay in implementation may undermine the effectiveness of precautionary measures. It is therefore critical that we immediately implement measures to reduce transmission in accordance with the directives of medical experts.

2. And contemplate the fact that this world is guided in a manner that is entirely hidden. The Holy One, Blessed be He, cloaks His Will and aspirations for us by means of how He guides His world. It is therefore with certitude that we can derive genuine communication through all that transpires, and we should definitely interpret current events as cautionary guidance from God to His nation. It is therefore incumbent upon each individual to reflect on what his purpose is at this time, and what message God is calling out to him personally at this time.

At times of great suffering for the Jews of Russia, the Chofetz Chaim gathered many rabbis to decree a fast day in response to the challenge, and they broadly signed at his urging. He sent a request to Rav Chaim Soloveichik from Brisk, z"tl that he add his signature, however, Rav Chaim of Brisk z"tl would not sign, and when the Chofetz Chaim sent an inquiry to understand why he would not sign, HaGaon, Rav Chaim z"tl explained that the primary purpose of fasting is to open the heart to returning to God. It is not sackcloth and fasting that effect redemption, but rather returning to God and taking worthy actions (Ta'anis 16a), and such is explicit in the words of the prophet Isaiah (58:6), "No, this is the fast that I have chosen: Open the fetters of wickedness, untie the bonds of injustice, send the crushed ones to freedom, and every victim – cut him free! [Targum, every precedent of injustice - abandon!]. Beyond this, the Rambam elucidates that in decreeing a fast day, the court must convene and examine the community's actions, exhort and remove stumbling blocks from the people of their generation, and through these measures will a fast have value. The Gaon, Rav Chaim z"tl said that the Rabbonim needed to

first convene and examine what needs rectification in accordance with the realities of the generation, and only then enact a fast day.

This is instructive for our times as well. When the Holy One, Blessed be He, calls out to us through pandemic, an upheaval of the world in its wake, it is not adequate to rouse ourselves to generic return to God. Rather, we are required to examine and introspect in the context of our generation: what must be done to improve? It is incumbent upon each individual to evaluate his deeds, evaluate his relationships with God, and with people. Each community Rabbi, with knowledge of his community's state of affairs, should arouse his community, from where they are, and we shall merit a sweetening of the judgments, and nullify the plague.

3. Each one should increase prayer and supplication before God, to elicit His pity and mercy on His nation, that we suffer no loss of health, or livelihood. In these times when we undertake so many precautions to prevent contagion, we must not forget the most basic and primary intervention, to employ prayer for mercy with petitions to God, and we should invest in our prayers more than we invest in all other forms of intervention. Know, the source of our salvation is through our prayer, whereas other actions are required of us, they are nonessential to bringing about redemption.

Under the aegis of the Bada"tz, we encourage the daily inclusion of Avinu Malkeinu, to be said with heart, in the morning prayers after the Amida. One who is unable to do so with a minyan is encouraged to do so privately, and this is a great means of making an impact, as it includes all the formulations of supplication that are effective in negation of the decree. Similarly, under the aegis of the Bada"tz, we encourage people to add three chapters of Tehillim after each Amida prayer. This also has the ability to impact ourselves, bringing us clarity to recognize that all are in God's hands exclusively.

Similarly, we should increase our acts of charity and kindness; Tzeddaka is great for it overturns wrath and ushers in mercy (Tanchuma Ki Sisa 14). This was the guidance of Rabbi Akiva Eiger, as well as giants throughout the ages, to increase the giving of charity in response to plague, as Tzeddaka has the potency to nullify the decree.

It is appropriate for each individual to give a fitting amount as a personal redemption, based on one's finances, from rich to poor. The rich should not give less than 1,000 NIS and a standard householder should not give less than 50 NIS, and the poor who take charity should give what is possible. When giving, declare, "This is as redemption for my soul." Each one should know that it is a vital rectification.

4. In those places where Yeshivos and Talmud Torah instruction for children have been forced to close, in the interim: gather together in small groups in homes, following immaculate hygiene protocols, including distancing between each

individual. Throughout each and every generation, even in circumstances entailing clear and present risks of death literally, they never halted the learning of Torah. We pray and hope that the circumstance in our Holy Land will not deteriorate to the point requiring the disbanding of communal prayers; let us examine our ways and return right up to God.

5. We firmly believe that the spread of this illness, with all its upheavals, are entirely in accord with the Will of God, and personal Divine providence. No person is struck unless decreed from above. Under no circumstance may we permit ourselves to be deluded to consider the illness “natural” but rather we know that each individual is guided by Divine providence personally. Our heart must resolve to place our reliance and trust in God that whomever is not subject to a Divine decree will not be adversely impacted.

During the years of the World War, my master the Gaon and Tzaddik, HaRav Moshe Schneider of blessed memory, would regularly remind us [in England]: “Each bomb has an address!” One should never be in terror of what transpires in the natural world, but rather allow events to penetrate our hearts to return in Teshuva, in addition to taking appropriate precautions as determined by medical experts, in fulfillment of our required *Hishtadlus*.

The primary need right now is to return in Teshuva, increase our prayer, and our charity, and our kindness — and to increase the time we dedicate to learning Torah every single day. We also need to strengthen ourselves to utter 100 blessings with hearts brimming, which has the power to nullify plagues, particularly on the holy Shabbos, when this should be fulfilled through eating a variety of fruits and delicacies (as is clear from Menachos 43b).

It is important to raise awareness and be especially vigilant and meticulous to accord the appropriate respect to Torah scholars. Our sages have cautioned concerning one who denigrates Torah scholars: there is no healing for his affliction (Shabbos 119b). One who does so risks contracting an illness such as this, which the world knows no means of healing. God’s benevolence is more powerful, and one who is scrupulous in this regard, will merit drawing upon himself protection from this illness so that it may not infect him, or his children.

In the merit of engaging in Torah study and Teshuva and Tzeddaka and Kindness, we will behold wonders. And from Heaven we shall be dealt with mercifully to remove all affliction and illness, and the Holy One Blessed be He shall extend to us our redemption with the coming of Moshiach, our righteous leader, speedily and imminently.

In anticipation of abundant heavenly mercies,  
Moshe Sternbuch