



A woman wearing a mask to prevent the coronavirus is reflected in mirrors, in Seoul, South Korea, earlier this week. (Illustrative photo: Heo Ran/Reuters)

Sickness and spiritual health

A lesson from the coronavirus on the fragility – and strength – of humanity

By YUVAL CHERLOW

The outbreak of the coronavirus is a deeply troubling and potentially dangerous development, but within it we can find lessons that are important for our spirituality and our role in this world.

Throughout Tanach [the Bible], we can find two very different but complementary descriptions of humans and human nature. On the one hand, we are defined as created in the image of God, “only slightly less than divine.” This characterization would lead one to think that humans are created to be “near-perfect.”

Yet on the other hand, we know that the Torah makes it very clear that we are subject to failures and weaknesses.

These dueling identities are revealed in very practical terms when we are forced to confront something so vast and challenging like this outbreak of disease.

On the one hand, the coronavirus is a tiny living organism that can spread a terrible disease throughout humanity – while at the same time, we know that we have the potential to harness the power to develop the vaccine to stop it.

This disease has already destroyed many lives. And in addition to physically killing people, we know that it is wreaking havoc in many other ways.

It is impacting economies, tourism, trade and travel all over the globe. All this from something so miniscule – yet it has the power to spread so quickly and so dangerously. Typically we fear giant threats – earthquakes and storms that can destroy in seconds. In this case, the fear is no less present, but in a very different form. It stems from the sense of not knowing from where it is coming and where it might head. Is the person next to us a carrier? Is that sneeze something far more dangerous and sinister?

Yet, the appearance of this disease also reminds us of the incredible inherent strength of humanity. It reminds us of the passionate humanitarianism of the medical community that must risk their own lives to

save others. And of the power of medical science, driven by the minds of men and women who are now desperately searching for a vaccine that will fight the disease.

In everything in life we can find meaning and certainly this is no exception. In the coronavirus we are able to better understand how fragile human life can be, whereby a tiny organism originating in the Far East can so quickly grow and spread to impact communities so far away. And at the same time, we must find strength in the recognition that we have tools to confront this disease that, with God’s help, will see its end very soon.

This is the remarkable world in which we live – where we are both humbled by the small things yet always emboldened by the understanding that we have been given the strength to confront and overcome even the greatest of challenges. ■

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