

HAARETZ

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How Coronavirus Sparked an Open Season of Hate for Haredi Jews

The coronavirus crisis has set off a blood libel against Orthodox Jews, from Brooklyn to Bnei Brak. And liberal Jews have kindled it

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When higher rates of coronavirus infection and morbidity in Haredi towns and neighborhoods were first reported, many of us Haredim knew what was coming.

When the bubonic plague ravaged Europe in the 1300s, identifiable Jews were seen as less likely to contract the infection – and may well have been, due to their frequent, religiously mandated hand washing. The larger populace, though, concluded that the [Jews were poisoning](#) Christian drinking wells. Then came a wave of brutal torture, forced confessions and massacres that decimated entire Jewish communities.

Ironically, today, [Haredim](#) have been particularly hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, and are being blamed once again. Not, this time, for causing the contemporary plague (though there's been that too, on [social media](#) and in [public confrontations](#); Jew-hatred knows no logic).

Now the charges against religious Jews are about different alleged crimes: not acting quickly enough to close schools and shuls, disdaining medical knowledge and advice; and blindly following leaders who cannot be trusted to make proper choices.

And so dawned, as we expected, a new open season on Haredim.

Yes, some Haredi communities did not recognize the virus's virality as quickly as they now wish they had. But shuls and yeshivot occupy a singular place in such communities, and their shuttering was traumatic.

And hindsight, famously, is flawless. Many other parts of society – including partygoers, sunbathers on the beach and political leaders – at first discounted the degree of threat the virus posed, some well beyond the point when Bnei Brak and Brooklyn had embraced all the necessary precautions.

There were indeed Haredim who flouted proper health authority rules. But for every Bnei Brak or Brooklyn funeral that drew a crowd of distraught mourners there were

scores of final farewells in the same and other Haredi communities, including that of the [Novominsker Rebbe](#), that took place with only a handful of family members present, and well distanced from one another.

Judging an entire population on the basis of recalcitrant outliers is the essence of bigotry.

As to disdain for medical knowledge or guidance, there are few groups more respectful of medicine or more dedicated to preserving life than Haredim.

In Israel, many Haredim harbor, justifiably or not, a distrust of the government. But once it was properly and [sensitively communicated](#) to Haredi enclaves that social distancing and other measures were needed to avoid contracting or spreading the virus, Israeli Haredim, like their counterparts in the U.S., complied with alacrity.

Enlightening, too, is the Haredi response to medical authorities' calls for plasma donations from people who have survived the infection. Within hours of posting notes about the need for blood donations to conduct antibody research, facilities in New York were flooded with thousands of would-be blood donors.

The scene repeated itself in places like Baltimore, Maryland and Lakewood, New Jersey, which host major Haredi communities. More than half of the plasma donors at New York's famed Mount Sinai Hospital were identifiably Orthodox Jews.

So much for disdaining science and medicine.

But the most common -- and most egregious -- libel lobbed at the Haredi world over recent weeks has been focused on its spiritual leaders.

Typical of the exaggerations about how Haredim regard their religious leaders was the claim by Anshel Pfeffer, a perennial critic of Haredim, that we regard our rabbis as "[infallible](#)."

Writing similarly in the Los Angeles-based Jewish Journal, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg decries "the Haredi Gedolim," whom he sees as "guided by...[insular theological thinking](#)."

Does Mr. Pfeffer consider the most respected doctor in a particular field to be infallible? Surely not. Does that fact somehow preclude seeking the doctor's advice?

And does Rabbi Greenberg not recognize that the very essence and power of Judaism is Torah-based guidance, i.e. "insular theological thinking"?

An example of such thinking was the reluctance of Haredi leaders to close the community's schools when Israeli public schools shut their doors. Those leaders were ridiculed for taking seriously the Talmud's teaching that the "breath of the children" exhaled in their Torah study verily upholds the world.

But here's the thing – and it's a most important thing: We Haredim *really believe* that.

It's odd that liberal-minded Jews tend to allow others their particularistic beliefs if those others follow any one of a myriad of belief systems. But not if they are their fellow Jews (believing, in fact, in what has been called Judaism for millennia).

Every decision about closing things down during the advent of the coronavirus crisis has been about weighing the needs and the costs. Even at this point, essential services like keeping the electrical grids operative and the tap water flowing have not been shut down.

To a Haredi leader, shutting down schools is closer to those examples than to the closing of businesses and places of entertainment. Disagree, critics, if you wish. But please don't disparage or hate Haredim for their sincere beliefs.

So much rancor in Klal Yisrael is due to the refusal of Jews to imagine things from the perspective of other Jews. Yes, we Haredim actually believe that children's learning Torah maintains the world. Yes, we sincerely believe that Torah study protects Jews no less than army service. Yes, we fully believe that Shabbos is a gift, not a burden.

And, yes, I urge my fellow Haredim, no less, to try to inhabit the minds of those who oppose them, to try to better understand the reasons others have to resent them.

In my happiest dreams, both camps do just that, and the Jewish world would be a far more pleasant, and healthy, place.

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