

This week is a double Torah portion. *Parshat Vayakhel* and *parshat Pekudei* are joined together. The word *pekudei* has the root: פ.ק.פ We see this root at play in another context in *parshat Va-yera* in the Book of Genesis. There, the Torah states:

וַיִּקְנֶה פְקֹד אֶת-שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְקֹנֶה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר:

“The LORD took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken” (21:1).

The root word - פ.ק.פ – appears in this context as a description of an interaction between God and Sarah. פְקֹד is translated as “took note.” Some translations use the verb, “to visit.” The text would then read, “And God visited Sarah.”

Returning to the second of the two *parshiot* we read this Shabbat – *peudei* – we might also consider a potential meaning of that word as “to visit.”

During the last week as I’ve been cooped up in our house, I’ve wondered where God is in this COVID-19 crisis. Given that our Bible records numerous instances of the people of Israel being visited by a plague because of ill behavior, I could not help thinking that the spread of this virus was connected to God.

I know that that very thought is not uncommon, but I recognized pretty soon how problematic thinking that way is. First, that would mean that God somehow had sanctioned the deaths of those who have been struck by COVID-19. We refer to the God of Israel as a living God not only because He is actively engaged with his Creation and His Creatures but because He desires life. That is one of the key tenets of our religion. How could a God that desires life, bring a virus that has deprived thousands of their lives? All this is evidence of the dangers of thinking about natural events theologically.

Alternatively, we should consider the statement of the rabbis: “The world goes along according to its course” (BT Avodah Zarah 54B). Centuries before science confirmed our view of the universe as a physical realm that adheres to strict laws of necessity, the rabbis recognized that nature is governed by fixed rules. That means, for example, that disease – including COVID-19 – is not a direct creation of God, but a facet of natural system that comes into existence without purpose or reason.

While this answer may be more true than the first, it is also unsatisfying. When matters of life and death are at stake, we feel that God is involved in some way in the way events turn. We can’t help but think, Perhaps God has allowed this virus to come into existence and spread for a reason. This experience is so undeniably unique that we are inclined to think that it has special meaning. Again, we can never know, and even thinking along these lines carries great risks. Nonetheless, I’d rather acknowledge that many of us think this way rather than pretend that we don’t.

We think of divine reasons for why this virus has come upon us. A range of answers could be given, but we have to offer one that both resonates with our immediate experience and also does not affirm a notion of God that we ultimately cannot stand by.

The one facet of this experience that jumps out at me is how it is a shared experience. All of us – nearly the globe over – share a set of concerns. We all experience the worry and vulnerability of sickness, and we all hope for a cure, vaccine, or solution, too. That sense of sharedness strikes me as the one divine reason that we can absolutely affirm.

In short, what I’m doing is trying to extract good from bad. The advent of COVID-19 is a bad event. Not only do we feel this because of the extraordinary and uncomfortable measures we have to live by but because we do not know when the curve will flatten. Projections suggest large numbers of deaths.

Something within us craves a good that can come out of a bad. Our optimism encourages us to find some good in this bleak picture. The sharedness is just that. If we can take this sense of sharedness and continue to live by it after this virus has passed – and this virus will pass – then we can address other

shared concerns for humanity, wildlife, and our planet that a lack of will has so far prevented us from accomplishing.

What has been most odd about this sharedness is how it has occurred in the midst of isolation and loneliness. As social animals, we crave interaction with people who live outside of our homes. Yet that is denied us. When the curve of infection for COVID-19 flattens and eventually descends, we will have experienced a kind of isolation that many of us never have before in our lives. We have an opportunity to look forward to that and plan inwardly for it. We can look ahead and anticipate that sweet moment when we can leave our houses as we once did. We will recognize that even that is a joy and a privilege. Taking routine for granted will be harder once we've endured these necessary measures taken to protect one another from disease.

The great 20th century modern Orthodox rabbi and thinker Joseph Soloveitchik makes a distinction between fate and destiny. Keenly aware that Jews live outside of Orthodoxy, he describes the relationship between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews as fateful. What he implies is that Orthodox Jews share not only a fate but a destiny, too. All of Israel has the potential to share in this destiny.

The distinction between fate and destiny is useful during this time in our world as well. Today we are united by fate. The threat of disease and infection permits us a shared experience. Nonetheless, this shared experience has no positive dimension. It is about a shared threat. Destiny is about a shared purpose. We will eventually have to shift from a sense of fate to a sense of destiny. If COVID-19 has played any role in this transition, then we can affirm that even curses may become blessings.