

We are now six weeks into the COVID-19 crisis. Our routines have been upended; but new ones have formed. Our schedules are different, but somehow we figure out ways to fill them anyhow. Our interactions are limited, but we then savor them all the more.

Public officials are discussing when quarantine restrictions should be lifted. In some states, they already have been. Like many of the conversations in our society, this one has also bifurcated into two distinct positions. Some argue that we need to maintain the quarantine since that's the only way we can be sure that the number of victims of COVID will decrease. Others say that we have to take into account the damage that is done to the economy because of the quarantine.

This public discussion sparked an interesting exchange with a congregant. Initially, I tried to straddle the issue, making a case for both maintaining the quarantine and protecting the economy from further decline. My correspondent was surprised. "You're a rabbi," he wrote me. "You're supposed to stand for the protection of life above all." I reflected on what he wrote and realized that he was right. Let the economists and those in the financial sector make the case for why the economy should assert priority as we navigate the transition away from quarantine. My role is to represent the truths in our Torah.

Since COVID hit, it has been no secret that the ones most in danger of getting sick through COVID are those over sixty. As I studied our double parsh – acharei mot-kedoshim – this week, I noted a verse that strengthened the position my correspondent was directing me toward. Kedoshim presents the reader with a litany of laws of various kinds – ethical, ritual, agricultural. One of those laws is the following: "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old" (19:32). The verse speaks for itself and does not require a whole lot of explanation; it does, however, require emphasis and reflection. Toward the old, we should show deference.

I can imagine a person my age who has endured the quarantine up to this point expressing frustration. After all, he could probably be in public spaces without endangering himself; and even if he got sick, the likelihood that he would recover is high. Meanwhile, he's in the prime of his working life, and the loss of income is a real, concrete problem for him. This hypothetical person's point of view is reinforced by a society that elevates youth above the aged. When we watch tv, most of the people we see are young. This is typical of modern societies. Traditional societies place the elderly above all in importance. By inverting that arrangement, modern societies unleash near boundless potential for productivity and innovation. The highlighting of the young over the old, however, also has its drawbacks. Much in life can't be learned save through experience.

Of late, I've found myself reflecting on how I've lived my life for the past twenty years. Often, I find that I might have acted differently. That is the wisdom that can only be gained through experience. For a thirty nine year old, that wisdom has been hard-earned; it also opens up for me how much more wisdom can be gained through living. If I can benefit from a morsel of wisdom at my age, then someone thirty years older than I will have an even larger dosage of wisdom to benefit her as she navigates the world. It is that wisdom that we will sacrifice if we affirm the needs of the economy over those of public health. We can't just accept

that the elderly are more likely to die if the quarantine ends. If we lose them to COVID, we also lose the storehouses of wisdom that they've accumulated.

If we return to the verse under consideration, the point is strengthened. The verse actually reads, "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God." The Torah links deference to the old to the fear of the Lord, one of the two basic dispositions one should adopt toward God, the other being love. To learn what the fear of God is, we have to look for another verse in which the fear of God is used as a justification for a behavior. That other verse occurs earlier in chapter 19. It reads, "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God" (v. 14).

With that verse in mind, a clear picture emerges of what the fear of God is. Fear of God is demanded when we have an opportunity to take advantage of someone more vulnerable than we. The elderly, the deaf, and the blind are each vulnerable in our society. Fear of God is what inhibits us from taking advantage of them. The Zohar, in its commentary on Achrei Mot, asks which is primary, the love of God or the fear of God. It answers that the fear of God is more primary than the love of God. We cannot love God until we fear Him. How do we know that we fear Him? We fear him when we behave in ways that demonstrate that we don't take advantage of the vulnerable.

No matter what our age, we should consider the Torah's teaching as we enter into discussions about whether the quarantine should end sooner or later. Although we are restless, eager to escape our homes and return to the routines we had before COVID, we must pause and consider who will be most harmed by a peremptory lifting of COVID. Since we know that that population is the elderly, we realize that lifting the quarantine too quickly is not in accord with the teaching of the Torah.

If we have to choose between economic ruin and protecting the lives of as many elderly as possible, I believe that we need to choose – as hard as this may be – economic ruin. Economic viability can be restored, but the loss of hard-fought wisdom that all those with some years under their belt is too precious to be discarded.