Jewish Responses to Epidemics, Contagion and Disease
What is “Disease”?  


- The relationship of Impurity, the Body, Airborne Contagion and Rituals of Purification in the Bible. (Tza’raat, Corpse Impurity, Zav, Niddah, etc)

- **Theology:** What stops God’s anger that manifests through plague? Does contagion exist in the realm of the Demonic apart from the Divine? Since the realm of the demonic is also God’s creation, how is the demonic an expression of the “outbreak” of God’s anger? How does sin manifest as “Impurity” and what are the consequences for the Sancta?

- Abuse of Nature and its consequences – Ecological karma ...and the wrath of the Earth .....
The Divine and the Demonic, or the Demonic Divine?

- **Ancient Rationality of Magical Medicine** Malady, Contagion, Plague, Epidemic; Ancient Near Eastern Methods for Dealing with Plague/ “Magical” Rituals of the ANE.

- **Theology of Divine Anger**: What stops God’s anger that manifests through plague?

- **Contagion as Deity**: Does contagion emerge exist in the realm of the Demonic apart from the Divine?

- **Disequilibrium**: Abuse of Nature and its consequences – Ecological karma …and the wrath of the Earth …..
Illness and Disease


- Mirko D. Grmek points to the fundamental yet subtle differences in English between ‘being sick’ and ‘having a sickness’ and in French between ‘être malade’ and ‘être un malade’.
- There are also differences between the pathological and physiological aspects of a disease, its classification (by a etiology, pathogenesis, or symptoms), and its social or cultural manifestations.
Magic and Medicine Distinguished

• In the Ancient Near East – from the standpoint of Causes of Disease
• **Magic** – deals with the ultimate causes of disease, such as irritated or petulant gods who may be angry at guilty humans or harmful demons who bring on disease as part of their raison d'etre
• Disease may be the result of curse or witchcraft.
• Rituals and incantations alleviate or prevent this misfortune
• **Medicine** – less concerned with the supernatural than with the natural and the focus is alleviating symptoms. Causes of disease are more prosaic...eating hexed food or an insect or bad water...etc.
Babylonian Cuneiform Medical Text
Pollution and Impurity

• **Anthropological** – Durkheim suggests (followed by Mary Douglas) “The dangerous powers imputed to the gods are, in actual fact, powers vested in the social structure for defending itself, as a structure against the deviant behavior of its members. Pollution rules in essence prohibit physical contact.....but pollution rules vary from place to place and different types of pollution/impurity are considered more serious in some societies than others....”

• See Mary Douglas “Pollution” in *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge 1975)
Akkadian Ritual from the Middle Babylonian Period (ca. 1200 BCE)


- Magical/Medical ritual aims to cure a person who has been “seized” by a contagion, deemed a ghost.

- First part of the Ritual describes making a doll from reed wood and different kinds of fabrics, while the second part contains elaborate instructions for transferring the ghost induced illness from the man to this doll by marrying her (the doll) off to the ghost (Disease) and then expelling the “newlyweds” from the patient’s house.
Akkadian Ritual from the Middle Babylonian Period (ca. 1200 BCE)

- “Three days she keeps lying in bed with him, while his (actual) wife stays away ... for three days he treats her (the doll) like a wife. When he eats bread, he offers her the bread he is eating, saying to her ‘eat this ! you are in my place’. The food he is chewing he offers to her, saying ‘I give it to you!’ When he drinks beer, he offers her the beer he has in his mouth, saying “Drink!” on the third day he lifts up Sun water (?) He gives her the bed frame and the chair...”

- The ritual exorcist takes over ... he provides the figurine with travel provisions and other equipment and then says to her “you have now been given provisions and a dowry...you are...The evil demon ghost who is with _____ is now your husband, you are given to him. You have been caused to take a wife! Suhuzuta. From the body of _____ you shall take “him” and go away.. the doll is moved and the bedroom is sealed with clay and magic drawings are commissioned.

- The demon ghost is addressed : “Evil...you must not walk behind me! Evil...you must not be on my heels.”
Akkadian Ritual from the Middle Babylonian Period (ca. 1200 BCE) on "marrying the disease" and expelling it

• (Chair and bed and fabrics of patient are then taken out and burned...the dowry consists of items that needed to be destroyed (two for one)....the figurine was probably burned along with the "dowry" from the wedding...or possibly a torch is in the ritual as part of fumigation...as in many ritual cleansings in ancient Babylonian magic.

• Key Akkadian words: **mushtahhizu** ("the one that continuously causes to seize" -- a person who is contagious and seizes those around him/her with the disease).

• The ghost demon is called **Ahhazu** "the seizer, the marrier"
Egypt

- Sekmet and her Hordes are seen as the bringer of the Plague and contagion in general, and there is a plethora of Egyptian magical texts direction and balancing the energies of disease brought by this Goddess.
Exodus 30:12

"When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled."

• (Rashi: Do not take a census strictly by numbers, but collect a half-shekel; numbers and people that have been “numbered” are subject to the Evil Eye and will attract a plague...)

• There is something reductionistic and crude in numbering people – it brings the wrath of God/Evil Eye/Plague.
Some key Bible passages

Numbers 16:31-17:15

- When Moses and Aaron reached the Tent of Meeting the Lord spoke to Moses saying. “Remove yourselves from this community, that I may annihilate them in an instant. They fell on their faces. Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take the fire pan, and put on it fire from the altar. Add incense and take it quickly to the community and make expiation for them. For wrath has gone forth from the Lord: the Plague has begun! Aaron took it, as Moses had ordered, and ran to the midst of the congregation, where the plague had begun among the people. He put on the incense and made expiation for the people. He stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked. Those who died of the plague came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred.....
Some key Bible passages

Numbers 21:

• והנה הוה הוה בני יעם את הנחשים השחרים ונתן להם את ח違反 בני יעם העם

The LORD sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died.

• יבאו בני יעם אל משה ואמרו חטאנו כי דיברנו בוהה ונבר ח تعال אל יהוה וינא רעינו את חมากๆ

The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!” And Moses interceded for the people.
Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover.”

Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover.
Impurity – so powerful it's airborne

• “The impurity bearers (and their biblical sources) are listed in the order of their severity. Severity is determined by the duration and complexity of the purification procedure. Thus the scale – diseased person metzora whose period of impurity is indeterminate and who must undergo a seven-day purificatory rite involving two ablutions, followed by an eighth day sanctuary rite comprising four sacrifices and two daubings, qualifies her for first place in this scheme."

• Jacob Milgrom on Leviticus (Anchor Bible)
Jacob Milgrom commenting on the Priestly system of purification in the Bible:

• The impurity bearers, twelve in number, fall into two divisions, determined by the way the impurity is terminated. The first six end by sacrifice, the second group of six, by evening. Focusing first on the sacrificial group the most prominent fact to be noted is that each purification rite features primarily the Hattat, the purification offering. The implications of this fact are clear. We are dealing with the phenomenon of the indirect, airborne pollution of the sanctuary. That is, whenever such impurity occurs in the Israeliite camp it is powerful enough to convey itself to the Mishkan and it can only be eliminated by the purgative action of the blood of the purification offering....

• ...also the Rabbis concept of overhang (extra impurity) illustrates their awareness that impurity is a gaseous substance that needs to be dissipated in the open air but, if confined in an enclosed space, will contaminate everything within it.

• Note their graphic description of impurity’s dynamic airborne power: it “penetrates upward and downward” ...(eg. Mishnah Ohalot 7:1-2) “its nature is to expand, not to contract” (Mishnah Ohalot 4:1)
Additional Biblical references

• 2 Chronicles ch. 6:28-30 (On plague and repentance after the Building of the Temple)
• 2 Samuel 24:1-25 (David chooses plague as punishment, repents and then builds an altar)
Sound healing and Healing Energy

{Why would they sound a Teruah and why do they fast?}

Mishnah Ta'anit 11a

• And so too a city which has a plague or [its buildings] collapse that city fasts and they sound a blast, but those [in the places] around it fast but do not sound the alarm.

• Rabbi Akiva says: they sound the alarm but do not fast. What constitutes a plague? If in a city that can supply five hundred foot-soldiers and three deaths occurred on three consecutive days, behold this constitutes a plague, less than this is not a plague.
Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit - blow the Shofar!

Key question: does the blowing of the Shofar with Teruah signify a public health alert or an attack on demons since demons flee upon hearing a cacophony (as do humans)?

Sounding the alarm places people on alert for the next message and announcement about the plague in the public square as they await directions and information.
The Talmud relates that Resh Lakish, the great amora of the third century, and his secretary Yehuda bar Nachmeni went to comfort Rav Chiyyah bar Abba, who was mourning the death of his child. Yehudah bar Nachmeni offered some intended words of comfort, but they were nothing of the sort; they were words of rebuke. “In a generation in which fathers abhor the Holy One, Blessed be He, He gets angry at their sons and their daughters, and they die when they are young.” Resh Lakish, hearing Yehuda’s insensitivity told him to change track. Here is the last of the four blessings with which Yehuda replied.

Master of the worlds, redeem and save, deliver and help your nation Israel from pestilence, and from the sword, and from plundering, from the plagues of wind blast and mildew [that destroy the crops], and from all types of misfortunes that may break out and come into the world. Before we call, you answer. Blessed are You, who ends the plague.
Talmud on Divine Wrath, Prayer and Ending the Plague

- **Blessed are You who ends the plague.** All that could be done when little children died was to pray for God to intervene and end the plague. It’s an understandable response to the tragedy caused by infectious disease, when all you can do is watch the children die.

- In the 11th-14th century a visual notion of contagion was popular – whereby disease was spread by rays that infected the person gazing upon the disease or the infected person.

- This is also found in the Commentary of Moshe ben Nahman..
Nachamides

• Nachmanides on plague and contagion in his commentary on Gen 19:17 (fleeing from Sodom and Gomorrah) (concerning Lot and his family) And it came to pass, when they had brought them outside, that he said “Escape for your life; look not behind you, nor stay in the plain; escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed”

• Looking (or gazing) into the atmosphere of the plague and all contagious diseases is very harmful and the because of that the Disease may cling to a person. Even thinking about it!
OTTOMAN EMPIRE – MUSLIMS AND JEWS

• PLAGUE PRAYER (from the Ottoman Sufi Taskopruzade..12th century – who was versed in Kabbalah called for the writing of God names on the forehead and this would draw down the “shefa” according to auspicious astrological signs ..and later traditions in the Ottoman Empire included permutations of letters written on amulets, along with chants.

• God names were written on body parts to counter plague on the opposite side of the body (Taskopruzade – Ottoman 15th century)
EARLY OTTOMAN EMPIRE – MUSLIMS AND JEWS

• “We ask You to protect us from deep Sorrow...O you who have complete power and total control, O you have hidden kindness, save us from what we are afraid of. The name of God is the best name...He is the God of Heaven and Earth...With the Name of God nothing with hurt us, neither on earth nor heaven. He listens to us and knows everything...in the Names of God the All Compassionate and All Merciful, I am asking you. O God, O Believer, O Protector O Dear O All Compelling please rid us of Plague......by your Names, your hidden kindness.....please give us a Remedy “ -- Turkish Prayer

• Early Ottoman 14-15th century discourse counters plague with plague amulets, recitation of the Quran, chanting God names and Zikhr