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Temasektion

GOD IS TELLING US SOMETHING

Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's Peshar and Socio-Political Pantheism of Coronavirus

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic, Modern Judaism, Ultra-Orthodoxy, Peshar, Midrash, Socio-Political Pantheism, Eschatology, Baalei Teshuva.

Abstract The conflicting and different reactions to Covid-19 pandemic, ranging from a willingness to cooperate with health authorities to a violent rejection of all decisions and measures suggested or taken by local and international authorities are but expressions of framing meanings of and finding answers to why Covid-19 broke out on a such global scale beyond biological boundaries. This is to show why epidemics such as Covid-19 deserve to be investigated within their broader cultural, political, scientific, and geographic contexts. Religion or the religious rationale once again has made itself a site of interest in the public space; both as one of the many competing explanatory frameworks and as a scapegoat for contributing to the breakdown of the social order and for promoting unscientific, irrational and superstitious understandings and interpretations of Covid-19. As a matter of fact, certain religious communities across all the Abrahamic religions do present theological and eschatological interpretations of the pandemic. As we shall see, Messianic Jewish groups actually present a hermeneutical framework that consists of a theological-eschatological framework of the Covid-19 pandemic and a socio-political pantheism plan of action the aim of which is to maintain the believer immune to the attacks of secularism and its ills. On the latter point, I find Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's explanatory framework of the Covid-19 pandemic very informative as both to how the religious rationale is still at work in post-secular societies, and why Jewish ultra-orthodoxy's theological-eschatological explanation and social pantheist response are worth investigating. In this article, Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's "perception, interpretation and response" to the Covid-19 pandemic and its global impact on both the biological and the social aspects shall be the primary subject of our analysis.

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In this article, I set out to investigate Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's response to this new virus – Coronavirus (Covid-19) through the lens of his political theology and biblical exegesis, particularly the latter's main components: **Pesher** – Eschatological exegesis – and **midrash** – socio-political pantheistic exegesis. Through a presentation of Rabbi Yitzhak's explanation of the cause(s), timing and meaning of this transnational deadly pandemic, this article will examine the religious rationale, its theological underpinnings and its political and social impact on the Jewish "ultra-orthodox" communities, chief among them the community of *Ba'alaei Teshuva* in Israel. The main reason behind this investigation is to show why epidemics – such as the one we are in the middle of – namely Covid-19 pandemic – needs to be framed beyond the biological boundaries. As we have seen, religious authorities, whether rabbis, clerics, or imams have responded to both Covid-19 pandemics and the measures taken by political and health authorities. We know also that their responses have a huge impact on the public. The response of Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak to the Covid-19 pandemic, its wide diffusion in primetime TV-programming, and its impact on a huge segment of the ultra-orthodox population cut to the heart of the history of religions, history of medicine and political theology. While attending to the spirituality of the flock, Rabbi Amnon caters to their social agency and political orientation by offering them an explanatory framework and requiring obedience to the divine office as a rabbi. As to the Covid-19 pandemic, which he considers an eschatological sign with a double meaning: a) a warning to the ungodly that the end is near, calling upon them to repent, and b) a fortification for the godly, that they are at the threshold of redemption. Epidemics and plagues, the Bible tells us, are double edged violent enunciations of God's wrath and blessings. Wrath against God's foes and blessings for his friends. To uncover Amnon Yitzhak's explanatory framework of the Covid-19 pandemic as an expression of the pastoral power that stands behind the religious rationale, I shall discuss two areas:

1. Socio-political pantheism (Midrash) as an ideology of non-compliance and change.
2. Eschatological exegesis (Pesher) of the Covid-19 pandemic

I shall also argue that Rabbi Yitzhak's interaction, understanding and interpretation of the Covid-19 pandemic, to which many Jews and non-Jews subscribe, is not a blunt rejection of science or rationality, but rather a rejection of secularism and modernism's tenet that "modern science is a practice which can only be fully understood on the basis of itself and performatively establishes the criterion of all that is true or false." (Habermas 2008:210) What goes for modernism's perception of truth and position towards religious epistemology, goes for secularisation theory's perception that religion's political theology and/or pastoral power are a thing of premodern societies. (Biale 1986; Büttgen 2007; Sabih 2016, 2019).

God is telling us something

Back in the month of April 2020 at the time when the death toll began to rise among the Haredi communities (tagged as ultra-orthodox Jews), the interior minister and leader of the Sephardi Haredi Shas party, Rabbi Aryeh Deri, said: "We need to do very deep soul-searching...*God is telling us something*." Overtly, Deri is catering to his Haredi constituency by addressing the Covid-19's pandemic impact upon them, but overtly proposing an explanatory framework that tallies with the rabbinic traditional understanding of, *inter alia*, plagues, epidemics etc. His question – as a propositional enunciation – could look like a **peshet** and/or **midrash question**. Overtly, Rabbi Deri's propositional enunciation "we need to do very deep soul-searching...*God is telling us something*" confirms that the infectious nature of Covid-19 pandemic is real, and the Haredi community and Israeli society are affected and impacted by it. At the same time, he, in his capacity of being an interior minister, Rabbi and leader of the Mizrahi Haredi political party Shas, proposes a practical course of action as how to deal with this deadly airborne virus. Addressing the Haredi community while catering to their spiritual and material needs, he frames his response within a theological and exegetical framework. Covid-19, in Haredi discourse – as we shall see – is packed in as a *mysterious* (heb. *raz*) and *violent* (heb. *hamas*) virus, but at the same time this pandemic is a fulfilment of a biblical prophecy (heb. *nevu'ah*) which at the time when it was given to the prophet in question was considered a mystery. Thirdly, a mystery that fulfils a prophecy is, according to religious

rationale, is a *confirmation* of the truthfulness of the sign/proph-
 ecy and a *revelation* of God's power. Covid-19 pandemic is God's
 message to humans and needs to be de-coded and its lessons to
 be heeded. In the Hebrew Bible, epidemics and plagues are God's
 violent language addressed to humans. To understand that God
 is telling us something – and if it is the case that Covid-19 pan-
 demic is a message from God – one needs not only to explain its
 immediate causes, content, implications – whether ethical, so-
 cial or political – but also propose an adequate course of action
 to be taken. For decoding this mystery – the Covid-19 pandem-
 ic-Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak proposes reading this as an eschatolog-
 ical sign (peshet exegesis) that requires drawing the right social
 and political management of this virus (midrash exegesis).
 Through the latter, Rabbi Yitzhak makes connections between
 new realities and the unchanging biblical text.

Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's pastoral power: "returnee to religion"

Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak (b. 1953) – a well-known preacher and
 politician – is one of the most outspoken neo-traditionalists,
 who is often associated with the Sephardi or Mizrahi Haredi ul-
 tra-orthodox movement in Israel (Lintl 2020). In addition, and
 this is what, in my view, is the most important point that illus-
 trate this Rabbi's pastoral power, he is considered one of the
 founders of the *Ba`alei Teshuva* movement in Israel¹. *Ba`alei Te-*

1 He himself is believed to be a
 returnee to religion (*ba`al teshuva*)
 at the age of twenty-four. In 1986,
 Rabbi Yitzhak founded the Shofar
 Society. He is believed to be a leading
 figure among ultra-traditional rabbis
 to use the new technology of the
 Internet. Before that, he was one of
 those preachers that we know from
 the Middle East to disseminate his
 sermons on cassettes, then on DVDs,
 and now via YouTube. Rabbi Amnon
 Yitzhak has proven to be an excellent
 communicator, who has a grasp of
 how to use technology, scientific
 topics such as the Evolution Theory

to promote a radical religious
 rationale: The Bible is always right.
 As a preacher of the end of time, or
 the end of the secular world political
 system, including Zionism he
 conjugates preaching with social and
 political activism. In one of his
 public lectures in 1988, he told a
 story from his own life about his
 conversion from being a Zionist and
 secularist Jew to becoming a
 practicing Jew. He said that state
 sponsored education schools taught
 unbelief and atheism. Here, he told
 the story of how a biology teacher
 told him that the young Amnon

Yitzhak's ancestors were monkeys
 (Darwin's Evolution Theory). his
 partial visual autobiography, his
 story about his becoming *ba'al*
teshuva see: <https://youtu.be/qFbY3hQdjyE>
 For instance, in 2011 In the year 2011,
 he and his followers smashed 1,000
 television sets in front of the
 National TV Broadcasting Service
 building in Jerusalem.
<https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/israel-news/1762075/rav-amnon-Yitzhak-claims-he-is-receiving-death-threats.html>

shuva (literally meaning *owners of return* [from a mundane lifestyle back to religious lifestyle governed by rabbinic halakha]) is a socio-religious phenomenon that began in the USA and later re-emerged on Israeli soil. In Israel *Ba`alei Teshuva* while tapping into the foundational myth of Zionism² and its political theology³ and, not all streams of this movement subscribe to its theological redemption ideology and socio-political pantheism project⁴. One thing is sure, *Ba`alei Teshuva* movement – Sephardi or Mizrahi streams in particular – represents a rising reservoir of “human material” for right and extreme right political parties⁵. In certain cases, conversion to orthodox Judaism means also a conversion to revisionist Zionism and/or religious nationalism and their settler colonialism. The power balance has been shifting to the right and extreme right since 1977 when Me-

2 On Zionism’s foundational myth, Piterberg analytically and critically deconstructs three enunciations or what I call the three “returns”: 1. The ‘negation of exile’ (heb. *shlilat ha-galut*), 2. The ‘return to the land of Israel’ (heb. *ha-shiva le-eretz yisrael*), and 3. ‘The return to history’ (heb. *ha-shiva la-historia*). (Piterberg 2008:94) Compare Zeev’s book *The Founding Myths of Israel* (Sternhell 1998) the religious Movement of *Ba`alei teshuva* as we see here bears marks of common political, theological and mythical referential site with Zionism. As Benslama has rightly observed with regard to radical Islamists – whom he calls supermuslims (fr. surmusulmans) – that they do not become (fr. deviennent) Muslims, but they return (fr. reviennent) Muslims. (Benslama 2016:92–93) In my opinion, radical Jews – ultra-orthodox, Haredi Jews of *Ba`alei Teshuva* are a kind of super-Jews who return to a radical interpretation of Rabbinic Judaism.

3 On Zionism’s political theology which conflates with Zionism’s foundational myth, is a national-colonial theology says Raz-Krakotzkin. (Raz-Krakotzkin 2007). Here, I should refer to David Ohana’s discussion of Messianism and

sovereignty in Hebrew: *Meshikhut ve-Memlakhut*. (Ohana 2003) With regard to the concept, *political theology*, my use of Schmitt’s term is both explicative and interpretative: In his sociology of juridical concepts, Carl Schmitt proposes the concept of political theology. Schmitt’s sociology of legal concepts, frames this sociology of sovereignty within what he calls “a radical conceptualisation, a consistent thinking that is into metaphysics and theology. The metaphysical image of a given epoch forges the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form by its political organization. The determination of such an identity is the sociology of the concept of sovereignty.” (Schmitt 2005:46) With regard the use of *political theologies* rather than *political theology*, see the introduction of Hent De Vries in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. (De Vries and Sullivan 2006)

4 These streams range from radical religious Zionism on the right to radical anti-Zionism of Haredi movement Naturei Karta. Between these two extremes one finds a constellation of other Haredi and Hasidic communities.

5 Concerning the dichotomy secular-religious in Israel, Raz-Krakotzkin, believes that there is a transposition of a euro-centric paradigm on Middle Eastern soil, according to which the Palestinians and oriental Jews have been excluded from it. The secular / religious opposition masks the theological and colonial aspects of the Israeli definition of secularism. (Raz-Krakotzkin 2007) From a sociological point of view, the Haredization of world Jewry is combined with a move to the right. (Lintl 2020; Waxman 2004, 2017) As far as Arab Judaism, Sephardi and Mizrahi, this Haredization or return to tradition/traditionalism/traditionism is characterised with its Ashkenazisation, which in the case of Moroccan Judaism, it began in beginning of the 20th century, and intensively after WWII due to many Haredi communities in Eastern Europe perished in the Nazi Holocaust. (Loupo 2006) I find Asad’s discussion of the secular-religious very interesting, in particular his criticism of the view that some apparently secular institutions were really religious.” The secular and the religious in his view, “are not essentially fixed categories.” (Asad 2003:25)

nahem Begin and his Likud party took power for the first time in Israeli history.

Actually, the term *teshuva*, a feminine noun derived from the root *sh-w-b*, means, in biblical Hebrew, *return or answer*. As a technical term it came to mean *repentance* as in returning from a sinful state and a turning back to a holy state. Literally, the expression *ba`al teshuva* (*ba`alei teshuva* in the plural) means *master or owner of return; a returnee or a repentant*⁶. The expression that illustrates best this meaning is *khozrim b'teshuvah* (literally: going back or turning back in return). The most plausible meaning would be returning to religion in repentance. To use Sagi's expression *Teshuva* would mean returning to traditionalism and to Haredi and accepting or obeying the pastoral power of the Rabbis and rejecting the political idolatry of Zionism.⁷

In the case of *Ba`alei Teshuva*, return to religion (Hebrew: *dat*), the returnees are called religious (heb. *datiyyim*) in Israel. Almost everything in Israel is divided into these two opposing categories: secular (heb. *hiloni*) or religious heb. *dati*): politics, education, public space...etc. So, returning to religion in this sense means more than repentance. As a socio-political pantheism concept it is paradoxical due to various reasons, the first of which, is the inherent anachronistic meaning of the concept *religion*. (Boyarin 2018; Schwartz 2011). As a second reason the concept of returning is a crossing from one worldview to another, from one a liberal secular kind of Jew to a totally different kind: a legalistically and theologically bound Jew. Return to religion in *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s perspective means return to tradition as orthodoxy. On the latter concept, I still maintain that the definition of the German theologian Arnold Gottfried is the most plausible:

Orthodoxy cannot be defined as dogma, but simply results from the privileged position obtained by clerics in exchange for unconditional support for political powers.

6 The Hebrew *teshuva* in the sense of repentance/repenting from the root *sh-w-b* is an equivalent to the Arabic term *tawba* from the root *t-w-b*. (See note 5) Both terms describe both a state and action, whence repentance/repenting. As such they stand for a socio-religious

phenomenon that unlike conversion from one religion to another it characterises the state and action of a person who to change from non-religious or non-practicing to religious or practicing ways of thinking and living within the same faith. In Judaism, this phenomenon,

Ba`al Teshuva would stand for person return to orthodox or ultra-orthodox rabbinic Judaism. In Evangelical Christianity, this phenomenon is called being *born again*.

Since then, we cannot speak of dogmatic objectification of a religious message, of a kerygma, but only of the organization of a political and clerical system. (Meslin 1973:31)

Since Jewish Haredi movement with all its colourings is called ultra-orthodox and/or fundamentalist, Sharot proposes a different concept to fundamentalism, namely neo-traditionalism⁸. *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s neo-traditionalism would then mean:

a self-conscious attempt to represent or reassert what they regard as their authentic tradition against what they perceive as threats in modern developments. A past society is believed to have embodied the authentic tradition, and this provides a model to be reconstituted or emulated. (Sharot 1992:25)

The paradox of returning to orthodoxy or to tradition emerges due to the will to render either orthodoxy as non-relational, i.e., the intimate relation between legitimacy – religious or political – and authority, (Sabih 2016) or tradition as normative. I do concur with both Sagi and Asad that the concept of tradition is paradoxical and discursive respectively. Sagi argues for a substitution of tradition with traditionalism.⁹

The paradox, Sagi explains, of the return to tradition emerges because traditionalism replaces the concept of tradition. The paradox, then, emerges due to the equation of two different and even contradictory concepts. (Sagi 2008:8)

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1UL-YD_TTE

8 As we shall see, the religious responses and the religious communities handling epidemics are often ridiculed by so-called mainstream media and branded as irrational and medieval. On a cautious note, I am aware of Hamnett labels “sociology of error” to describe social sciences fixation with marginal and sensational aspects of religion. We often see this emphasis in medias anti-clerical caricaturing of scandals and the nonsense of the clerics. (Hamnett 1973; Sabih 2016)

9 I consider Talal Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition” very pertinent to the discussion about tradition in Jewish Studies. Asad proposes to study Islam as a ‘discursive tradition’ that ‘consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history.’ (Asad 1986:14) Yidgar proposes a neologism, traditionism, which he defines as “a dialogical (yet surely not equal) stance in relation to tradition; it is a concept that denotes an individual’s or a community’s

loyal yet reflective—favorable and even sanctifying “in principle” yet interpretive, critical and selective in practice—attitude toward what they view as the tradition that constitutes their identity, that is: constitutes them as subjects. As such, traditionism, or a traditionist stance, embodies a certain understanding of the concept of tradition, as well as an interpretive and phenomenological argument regarding the viable and desirable nature of the relationship between tradition and its bearers.” (Yadgar 2015:2)

Furthermore, *Ba`alei Teshuva*, does not mean return to religion as spirituality or a return to Judaism, but also a return to the *land of Israel* as the only place where one can truly be Jewish (heb. *yahudi*) and practice true Judaism. (Hebrew: *yahadut amitit*). The paradox of return to religion is due to the inherent anachronistic meaning of these concepts: religion, Judaism, tradition, and the land of Israel. *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s calls for a return to religion corresponds to an ideological conflation of tradition and traditionalism on the hand, and a political theology that conflates pesher-midrash exegesis with socio-political pantheism in messianic nationalistic trappings. The dichotomy *dati/hiloni* (religious/secular) in *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s discourse, stands for two opposing states: while the first leads to salvation the second leads to perdition. The returnee or return to religion should not be confused with the postmodern concept of return of religion since it has never left us.

Amnon Yitzhak's explanatory framework of the Covid-19 pandemic

When Covid-19 hit Israel, political and health authorities began taking measures to contain and control the deadly virus: social distancing, lockdowns, travel and gathering bans were some of those measures that had a devastating impact on social order, and the economy. Non-compliance with these measures began to show from an early stage. These non-compliance reaction of some segment of society are always expected as part of Rosenberg's second act: managing randomness. The pandemic's sudden outbreak had a deadly and far-reaching impact upon the Orthodox communities in Israel as well. The Haredi Community of *Bnei Brak* neighbourhood was branded in the Israeli media as the capital of the Covid-19 pandemic. Other Haredi neighbourhoods suffered the same fate. Anshel Pfeffer wrote in august 2020 an article in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, the title of which is very telling: *The anarchic ultra-orthodox Jews prepared to die for their pilgrimage*. (Pfeffer 2020) Responses to Covid-19 pandemic among Haredi and Hasidic communities were different and often contradictory. Some complied with health authorities' directives and others did not, despite the fact that both health and interior ministries were in the hands of United Torah Judaism and Shas parties. Dissident Rabbinic voices among the ultra-orthodox Jews in *Ba`alei Teshuva* movement – and Se-

10 For his quarrels with the Shas party, please see: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4319429,00.html>. For further information on his split with the political leadership of Shas party, and his allegiance to the religious rabbinic authority of the late chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, see <https://youtu.be/nrdbidloGLw>. In 2012, He established his own political party – *koakh* lehashpe'a, which did not make in 2013 elections: <https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/jewish-news/amnon-yitzhak-i-wont-stop-ill-save-the-jews>

phardi Haredi movement in particular¹⁰ – remain significant as the reasons for the non-compliance policy. Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's virulent response to both Covid-19 and the government's health and social management of the virus strikes goes beyond the question of the biological mechanism of the virus. The widespread scepticism and noncompliance among the public towards the secular worldly governments' catastrophic management of the Covid-19 pandemic has increasingly fed the feeling of mistrust, gave ammunition to conspiracy theories, and weaponized pastoral power with anti-secular and anti-science arguments. In response to and competition with world governments, including Netanyahu's "Jewish" coalition government, in the handling of Covid-19, Yitzhak's explanatory framework of this pandemic sustains and his pastoral power as an enunciation of God's sacred power. Any act of contesting the rabbis' explanatory framework would mean a contesting of God's sacred power articulated through the Rabbis' pastoral power. Now what does Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak say about the Covid-19 pandemic? How does his explanation inform the religious rationale on the one hand and sustain the pastoral power of the Rabbis on the other?

My take on Rabbi Yitzhak's framing of Coronavirus as both biological and social enunciations of sacred power in terms of terrestrial or mundane violence, which I call sacred violence, is as a kind of socio-political pantheism according to which the eschatologist sees in plagues (heb. *makkah* and *maggefah*) – biological and or social – God's hands and semiotic language. I would also argue that Yitzhak's explanatory framing follows a theological script that cast terrestrial powers in terms of powers divines or vice versa, in particular the power to create and maintain order and power over life and death. Representations of this sacred power in terms of the Covid 19 pandemic – as a non-verbal or semiotic, though ubiquitous enunciation of divine violence – is construed, in the political theology of messianic movements of the Abrahamic religions and their eschatological discourse, as site of the power of God and powerlessness of man. In Judaism, Israel's salvation's history God's sacred power is enunciated in the dialectical relations of redemption and exile. While awaiting the redemptive moment through the agency of the Messiah, Israel accepting being in exile is both accepting Israel being powerless with God and Israel being the agency of

God's redemptive hand. Israel as a nation of kings and priests is a sacred territorial community that marks God's immanence, a theophanic sign among the nations, and an instrument of God's redemption. In midrashic exegesis, socio-political pantheism means that sacred power, which is encoded in nature and biology and embedded in the holy writ, is revealed through an incessant conflict between the episodic quality of crisis, and the promethean attempt to restore order without God. The Jewish Bible maps this site of opposition and counter-opposition in two political theological principles:

1. Man's inherent inability to be master of his own destiny: "I know, O Yahweh, that man's road is not his [to choose], That man, as he walks, cannot direct his own steps." (Jer 10:23)
2. Sacred absolute power can be as both verbal and non-verbal violent enunciations of God's response to man's non submission to God's sovereignty and non-compliance with God's Law. Humanity is divided into God's friends and God's foes. In the redemption narrative of Exodus, the God of Israel had to demonstrate his power as a supreme God for all to see through the powers of nature: sacred violence. Foes were coerced to submit by recognising God's unparalleled power, and friends were led to submit to God's power through accepting sovereignty through his laws:
 - a. Foes: "For this time, I will send all my **plagues** (heb. *maggéfotay*) upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is **none like Me** in all the world. I could have **stretched forth My hand** and **stricken** you and your people with pestilence (heb. *daver*), and you would have been effaced (heb. *tikkakhed*) from the earth. (Ex. 9:14)
 - b. Friends: "As a well flow with water, so she keeps her wickedness. (heb. *rā`ātāh*) cool. Violence (heb. *hamās*) and destruction (heb. *sud*) are heard in her; Before Me constantly are sickness (heb. *huli*) and plague (heb. *makkā*). Be warned, O Jerusalem, Lest I come to loathe you, Lest I make you a desolation (heb. *shemāmā*, An uninhabited land (heb. *eretz lo noshava*)." (Jer 6:7-8)

In Jeremiah, friends – the nation of Israel – are not immune from being punished and being the target of God’s sacred violence. Jeremiah posits a theological law of causality: Because of Israel’s wickedness – rejecting Yahweh’s sovereignty (the political) and his prophet/king’s authority (politics)¹¹ – a series of punishing events are enacted. Natural, biological, social and political events befell his people. In the vocabulary of the religious rationale, epidemics such as Aids, Ebola, and Coronavirus are framed in biblical terms that we read in Ex. 9:14 and Jer. 6:7-8: **plagues** (heb. *maggefot, makkot*), pestilence (heb. *daver*), sickness (heb. *huli*).¹² The deadly infectious effect of human lives and the devastating impact on the social and political order are the logical consequences of God’s wrath and punishment. This reminds me of Rabbi Yitzhak’s constant warning to the Jews urging them to repent and become God’s real friends: Anyone who does not keep the biblical commandments would consequently be punished in hell.

Rabbi Yitzhak’s Peshar – Eschatological exegesis

Literally, Peshar means explanation or interpretation. In the history of Jewish hermeneutics, Peshar is one of five methods or techniques of interpretation: Literal, Allegorical, Typological,

11 See Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak’s commentary on *parashat shoftim* (Deuteronomy 17:15-20): 15. “You shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the LORD your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman. 16. Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the LORD has warned you, “You must not go back that way again.” 17. And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess. 18. When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. 19. Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere the

LORD his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws. 20. Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel.” https://youtu.be/58_hVdk6bxo Rabbi Yitzhak’s interpretation of what is known in the Jewish tradition as *mishpat hamelukhah* (the law of kingdom) is basically ideological. In this connection, he discusses the issues of authority and power within the *edah* (community), which he identifies with *‘am yisrael* (nation of Israel): this authority is traditionally divided into three areas or domains: 1. *keter malkhut* (domain of kingship), 2. *keter torah* (the domain of God’s instructions and commandments), and 3. *keter kehunah* (the domain

through which the people reach out to God).” (Elazar 1998:4)

12 One of diseases that the Bible speaks about in detail is leprosy (Heb. *Tzara’at*). In the Book of Leviticus, chapters 13 and 14, the Bible gives a detailed description of the laws that regulate *how* to deal with leprosy – Hansen’s disease – and the people that are affected by it. Religiously, the leprosy is unclean and socially is shunned from the community (a form for social distancing). In the religious rationale, the answer to *why humans become sick* presupposes that human being is both body and spirit: (man cannot live on bread alone) two sets of causality and understanding: mechanical (apparent, obvious) and existential (mysterious, metaphysical, theological)!

Midrash, and Peshet. In short, Peshet exegesis consists of understanding present events in light of biblical prophecies. The latter point means that God reveals his purpose to his prophet, but He refrains from telling him when the prophecy will be fulfilled, but it has a reference to the time of the end or the last days, as it were. Since salvation history is about a theology of restoration and redemption (Gr. *eschaton*), history follows a semiotic script in which God's will is revealed through the agency of his Messiah-king. The World is still in waiting. Rabbi Yitzhak's Peshet or eschatological exegesis of Coronavirus – a current event – as a sign of the last days and a fulfilment of a biblical prophecy can be seen in one of his recent lectures, in which Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak presented what he considered to be a realistic scenario by which the Messiah-king would arrive.¹³ In this lecture, he offered a *peshet* interpretation of Micah 5:2:

Surely, he will leave them [helpless] until she who is to bear has given birth; Then the rest of his countrymen will return to the children of Israel. (Micah 5: 2)

Rabbi Yitzhak explains the Messiah will not come until the evil empire that rules over the whole world have been brought down. “It looks like the nation of Israel will be under the rule of an evil empire”, he said: “It is Edom.”¹⁴ At this point, Rabbi Yitzhak asks: how is it possible for an evil globalist empire to rule over Israel and over the entire world? He then makes reference to the social, management of a world empire and the various restriction measures that were imposed on people during the current coronavirus crisis. He refers to the decision or decree of the evil and ungodly powers to suspend its own laws of individual freedom, saying that “The decree that people should be isolated, controlled and ask them not to move and do what we say – it is called control.”¹⁵

13 Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak Paskins about Vaccines: <https://www.organicbakerymiami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-Yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rLjk7OjFII>

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 In Sandhedrin 98b, it is Rav who has said: “The son of David will not

come until the evil Roman kingdom will disperse throughout Eretz Yisrael for nine months, as it is stated: “Therefore will He give them up, until the time when she who is in labour has given birth; then the remnant of his brethren shall return with the children of Israel” (Micah 5:2). Once a period equivalent to a term of pregnancy passes, the redemption will come.” The Term

Romi stand for ‘Rome’, ‘romans’, Christians, and more specifically – the Vatican. In Rabbinic literature, the biblical terms, Esau and Edom stand for Christians, not as a religious term only, but as world empire as well. Similarly, the term Ishmael came to stand, in later Rabbinic literature for Muslims, Arabs. (Bakhos 2006).

He characterises the highly anticipated ‘second wave’ of coronavirus, which many world leaders, including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have said would be inevitable, as a pre-conceived plan: “Now they are planning a new wave. If it lasts for nine months, redemption is likely to come after this period.”¹⁶ Rabbi Yitzhak then quotes Rabbi Yehuda as a source who said that the Messiah will not come until the kingdom of ‘Romi’ falls¹⁷. This evil empire, states Rabbi Yitzhak, will rule the entire world for nine months. He unveils the nature of this evil empire when he brings in an ancient tradition that states that the seed of Esau will rule the world for nine months until Jacob will rule over him.¹⁸ “Today we see that they – Western Christian powers – control us,” says Rabbi Yitzhak, and he continues: “We get orders from Edom and the whole world executes them: Everyone wears masks. Everyone is isolated.”¹⁹ In support of his line of reasoning, he quotes proverbs 22:8-9:

He who sows injustice shall reap misfortune; His rod of wrath shall fail. The generous man is blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor.

According to Rabbi Yitzhak, the one who sows injustice in this passage is Esau – the father of Edom, who will also reap misfortune. After these seven months, the “generous man will be blessed.” The generous man is Jacob, the rabbi explains. He adds that all of Jacob’s blessings will be fulfilled at the end of days. He also invokes Isaiah 9: 2 in support of his interpretation of this prophecy²⁰:

You have magnified that nation, have given it great joy; They have rejoiced before You As they rejoice at reaping time, As they exult When dividing spoil. (Isaiah 9: 2)

18 In 2 Esdras 6:9 a similar tradition that explains why Jacob (Israel) is blessed despite the fact that his older brother Esau looks more powerful: “For Esau is the end of the world, and Jacob is the beginning of it that followed.” Applying this prophecy to our modern times is not to be mistaken.

19 Ibid. <https://www.organicbakerymiami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-Yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII>

20 It is well known that Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak has made many prophetic claims which proved to be false: In 2010, Rabbi Yitzhak foresaw a bloody war in the Land, but nothing happened. In 2014, he foresaw the imminent arrival of the War of Gog and Magog and warned that only a few Jews would survive this global conflict. In October 2018, he foresaw that in the end times, that is to say in this generation, 95 percent of all rabbis would be of “mixed race” (בר ברע), using a

biblical term from the Exodus to classify most of today’s rabbis as non-Jewish imposters. <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/the-rabbi-and-the-new-world-order/> On the latter point, one sees his anti-clerical religious discourse. For further discussion of Jewish anti-clericalism and Yitzhak’s see (Sabih 2017)

21 <https://www.organicbakerymiami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-Yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII>

In his *peshar* exegesis, there is a twist, an implied ellipsis: the Hebrew text does not say: “*lo lo*”, which means “not for them.” Rabbi Yitzhak explains that this means that although the nation of Esau, Edom, is great and powerful when they rule the world, in the end it will not be they who celebrate, but rather the nation of Israel.”²¹

In a virulent and combatant tone, the interpretation of this prophecy takes a new turn: namely a universal plot or the conspiracy of a secret society to rule the world: The freemasons, who built the Tower of Babel, are excited because they believe that their grand plans to depopulate the world will finally come true,” he concludes. “But in the end, the celebration will not be theirs, but rather the Jewish people.”²²

With regard to the debate surrounding the vaccine and the scepticism about it, Rabbi Yitzhak has joined those who accused Netanyahu of preparing “microchips and sensors to control the population and enslave them”.²³ He issued a *psak* (a legal ruling) recently that vaccines are *avodah zara* (idol worship).²⁴ Vaccines would not help just as nothing could help the Egyptians when the 10 plagues struck them²⁵. The religious rationale as it’s framed by Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak in his *peshar exegesis* of the issue Coronavirus pandemic and health and social management policies proposed and implemented by coercion are both a ful-

22 <https://www.organicbakerymi-ami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII>

23 <https://uwidata.com/10857-population-control-microchips-and-digital-currency-the-basis-of-coronavirus-conspiracies/>

24 <https://www.organicbakerymi-ami.com/post/rabbi-amnon-yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>

25 In Rabbi Amnon's commentary of the two *parashot*: *parashat Vaera* and *parashat Bo* (the two portions of the Torah: Exodus 6:2 – 9:35 and Exodus 10:1 – 13:16), he explains that there is a structural analogy between the metaphysical power (sacred power) and the terrestrial power. https://youtu.be/ic6It_AVFxA Each plague of the ten plagues is a demonstration and enunciation mode of God’s absolute power and

sovereignty. The identity of the plagues, the way and the manner God used them one after one – and not all at once – reveal God’s purposeful use of his power: liberation of his people Israel from slavery: “I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God but I did not make Myself known to them by My other name Yahweh. I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan. I have heard the moaning of the Israelite slaves. I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelites, ‘I am the Yahweh. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments. I will take you to be My people and I will be your God. You shall know that I am God who freed you from your labours in Egypt and gave you the land promised to Abraham, Isaac

and Jacob.” Amnon, underlines two lessons to be learned here: God’s absolute power is seen by both friends and foes, and that God should not only be remembered as the creator of the universe but also as the liberator and saviour through the Egyptian experience. No Vaccine, as it were, could help them. <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII> The only thing that shielded them from God’s violent enunciation of God’s power was to be on his side. Here, Rabbi states that only 20% of the Israelites made it the exodus, and that 80% of the sons of Israel perished with the Egyptians. Likewise, not all Jews will be saved, only those who return to orthodox Judeity (*Ba’alei Teshuva*) (https://youtu.be/ic6It_AVFxA)
26 <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/the-rabbi-and-the-new-world-order/>

filment of biblical prophecy (*nevu`ah, raz,*), a violent enunciation of God's power, and a historical-eschatological event, the meaning of which is that we are living in the last days. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to be a cosmic war and enunciation of scared power in terms of terrestrial powers: ²⁶Time and again, Amnon Yitzhak warns world leaders of their downfall and the victory of God's people. He does not divide the world through ethnic lines, but through submission to God's commandments. Zionism, in his eyes, is not Judaism. It is rather an enemy of God, and as such it will suffer the same fate as the world order.

In a TV-interview with the Journalist Amnon Levy about Coronavirus on the Israeli channel 13, Amnon Levy stated in his introduction that Amnon Yitzhak represented a dissenting voice among the Rabbis since he rejects the state's explanatory framework, and recommendation of a vaccine as the only solution for the deadly pandemic. His answer to Levy's question: "of course we did something bad if such a judgment (or decree) fell on us" Rabbi Yitzhak answered by stating that sometimes [bad] things happen in faraway places. Events that impact Israel in order so that Israel performs *Teshuva*, i.e., repent. He continues to say that everyone who sees these incidents should understand them as warnings from Hashem (God). But if that person does not heed the warning and carry on in bad ways, that person accepts to die. God gives signs to both Jews and non-Jews in accordance with their actions. And if you know gematria (the numerical values of Hebrew letters), eating a limb of a living animal has the numerical value of the word Corona²⁷. You know that in China, they eat living animals. And this is forbidden in the Noahide Law. When the gentiles (heb. *goyyim*) transgress this law they receive retribution. At that moment of the interview Levy asks the question, what about us – Jews – we do not eat bats, why should we be punished? Here, Rabbi Yitzhak answers: because we eat forbidden meat. The Midrashic lesson here is: what should we learn from seeing God striking the gen-

27 In another ultra-orthodox Gematria interpretation that blames women as the cause of Coronavirus (punishment) on the basis that: "Corona epidemic = lack of modesty," one such poster seen in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem announced, using gema-

tria, or Jewish numerology, which ascribes a numerical value to letters and words and draws significance from words or expressions with equal values. According to the poster, both "corona epidemic" and "lack of modesty" have a numerical value of 900, indicating a conceptual link." <https://www.timesofisrael.com/>

slammed-by-covid-19-ultra-orthodox-jews-try-to-understand-what-god-hath-wrought/ On Gematria see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6571-gematria>
28 On this point see the next section.

tiles when they transgress his commandments: to repent²⁸.

The Midrash of Coronavirus: Yitzhak's socio-political pantheism

The analysis of pastoral power begins by identifying the plurality of its dimensions: the pastoral structure frames the relationship between men and their sovereigns, between God and men, and between God and the sovereigns of men, who in this perspective are considered, delegated by God to shepherd men. (Foucault 2004) At the heart of pastoral power lies the paradox of post-secular conceptualisation of governmentality, the secular and the religious in modern societies. Büttgen, in his discussion of political theology and Foucault's notion of pastoral power, that when fundamental elements of pastoral power refer to diagnosis of current events, they actually mean that we are not free from pastoral power yet, i.e., we are building the salvation that we desire, the law we obey, the truth we speak, in a way that remains pastoral." (Büttgen 2007:1134). In other words, pastoral power is both a pre-modern period and a mode of governing. The modern age in opposition to the "pastoral age", in the vocabulary of secularisation would then constitute secularized versions of pastoral power, in which religion both is abolished and transformed taking the two sides of the concept of secularization, as liquidation and transfer of the religious. In his Political Theology, Carl Schmitt gives a radical interpretation of this Janus-faced conceptualization: liquidation and transfer of the religious stating that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts." A seemingly secular political system can operate with a pastoral mode of governing. The expression: "we are not free from pastoral power yet" indicates that the process of liquidation and transfer is not completed yet. As a discursive statement, it does not differ from messianic theology. According to the latter, secularization would never liquidate pastoral power as an enunciation of sacred power. In both discourses, the issue of sovereignty and of governing is a site of conflict between God and Satan, and that conflict has only one outcome. Using religious, theological, and eschatological vocabulary, this conflict will end with God's victory and the destruction of the Satanic world; so, Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's political theology! To understand the pastoral

29 <https://youtu.be/4r1jk7OjFII>

function of the Rabbi as the embodiment of Moses and an enunciation of God's sacred power, Rabbi Yitzhak conceives of his office as having the task of shepherding the flock according to his commandments. Calling Jews to perform teshuva is an exercise of pastoral power the chief aim of which is to vindicate God's sovereignty and transfer God's sacred power into what I call socio-political pantheism²⁹. The latter is a practical solution to the theological paradox of God's transcendence and immanence, God's wrath and love, the injustices of the world, and God's justice. Two of God's salient predicates: God's omnipresence and providence are at the heart of what I call here socio-political pantheism. God is everywhere and decides everything. While God's justice is very difficult to defend in our cruel world, the human agency today, in the ultra-orthodox religious rationale is explained and activated through the grids of law and theology. Law in the sense of practical application of Jewish law (heb. *halakha le-ma'aseh*), which in Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's perception is also a socio-political practice.) Theology, in the sense why and for who's sake should, for instance *ba'al teshuva* obeys and perform the mitzvot. Pantheism, here, does not mean that God is identical with the natural and social worlds, but simply that God's sacred power (omni-power, omni-presence) can be enunciated politically and socially. (Mander 2020)

Rabbi Yitzhak's socio-political pantheism is both a theological explanation of the world and a conversion of this theology into social and political management of the world, including the way to understand, explain and manage the Coronavirus pandemic. In one of his recent sermons on YouTube, he warns that Coronavirus, coercive policies, together with the proposed vaccines are weapons of control and extermination that the new world order uses to conquer the world and have its hands on the world's human and material resources. Just after the Covid-19 pandemic in December 2019, he blamed, in a video, Bill Gates for the virus accusing him of using, according to the so-called "Agenda 21," it to reduce the world's population. In this video, that speaks of the new world order, Rabbi Yitzhak insists that "Bill is looking to make billions from the Corona vaccination."³⁰ For this reason, the rabbi rejects any form of vaccination, certain that they are all part of a plot in which the New World Order and Freemasons will use these injections to implant microchips into the population. In this new video, he unveils this new world order's goals and the time frame that it will take the lead-

30 <https://youtu.be/8U6xV4OFxhQ>

ers of this new world orders to implement it. At the same time, he calls upon his followers not to worry or be frightened because God in heaven, blessed be He, will destroy their plan. He reveals the twenty-six goals outlined in their document:

1. One world government
2. A cashless world currency
3. World Central Bank
4. One world military
5. End of national sovereignty
6. End of all privately owned property
7. End of family unit
8. Depopulation
9. Control of population growth and population density
10. Mandatory multiple vaccines
11. Universal basic income: meaning salary austerity
12. Microchip implantation for purchase, travel, tracking and controlling
13. Implementation of a global social credit system like the one China has
14. Trillions of appliances connected to 5G monitoring system
15. The government will raise the children
16. Schools and universities government owned
17. End of private transportation (owning cars)
18. All businesses will be owned by the government- corporation
19. Restriction on what is not essential (flights)
20. Human beings will be concentrated into human settlement zones – cities
21. End of irrigation
22. End of private farms, grazing livestock
23. End of family homes
24. Restricted land use that serves human needs
25. Prohibition of natural remedies that are non-synthetic and naturopathic medicine
26. End of fossil fuels

At the end of this short video, he sarcastically states that “we will be missing Pharaoh”. The Midrashic exegesis of Israel’s slavery in biblical Egypt – a trope of temporary exile and persecution – is that of God fighting on behalf of his people by sending his biological, animal, and natural soldiers to destroy Pharaoh and lib-

erate Israel. Socio-political pantheism, as a political Midrash, means, in this instance, that the lessons that we can draw today from the exodus narrative is that the pastoral power invested in the anointed shepherd (king, prophet, rabbi) are God's guarantee for both his presence and an enunciation of his sacred power.

Coronavirus pandemic's dramaturgical form postulates an initial scene, a cause and a sign. In rabbi Yitzhak's explanatory framework, the scene of the Chinese animal market and God's wrath and punishment – as in the biblical ten-plagues narrative – construed as a transgression of God's dietary laws, those that were given to Noah, and incumbent upon all humans in rabbinic perspective, and those that Jews should abide by: In Leviticus chapter 11 there is a description of all forbidden/unclean animals are that should not be consumed, as well as the command that forbids eating living animals. The seven Noahide commandments are prohibitions against (1) idolatry, (2) cursing of God's name; (3) unjustified bloodshed or murder; (4) forbidden sexual relations; (5) theft; (6) eating any limb of a living animal; and (7) the commandment to create a judicial system. These seven commandments are re-iterated in both the New Testament and the Qur'an. In particular, the commandment in Genesis 9:3-4: "Every moving thing that liveth shall be for food for you; as the green herb have, I given you all. Only flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat." According to the religious rationale of Rabbi Yitzhak the transgression of the sacred power as enunciated in his laws unleashes punishment – as we saw with this pandemic, and others such as Ebola and Aids – and would therefore require an act of atoning or cathartic action, a sacrifice, a scapegoat that should pay for the sins of the community³¹. Return to religion would mean an atoning that leads to the creation of a community that dedicates its life to the study of the Torah and prayer on behalf of the world.

Concluding remarks

From a post-secular perspective, this political theology as laid down in its two aforementioned components in relation to the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic and government's social and political management of this pandemic requires – as demonstrated in the present article – that secular reason opens up to reli-

³¹ See for instance the book of Leviticus chapters 9 and 10.

gious reason by renouncing the naturalist and scientific prejudice for which “Religious convictions are per se not true, illusory or meaningless” (Habermas 2008:56–57) Yitzhak, in his tireless missionary enterprise among Jews to make true brand of *Ba`alei Teshuva* – and anti-secular orthodoxy – advocating a total rejection of all sorts of secularism, including Zionism, branding it as political idolatry (*‘avoda zara*). He construes the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of political theology according to which God’s sacred power is enunciated in terms of terrestrial events; a cosmic war, as it were. According to this approach, plagues are what render God’s sacred power ubiquitous, and by being violent this ubiquity is felt by both God’s friends (Haredim) and foes (secular Zionism). Even government decisions such as social distancing, lockdowns, hygienic regulations that by and large are considered anti-liberal laws – a suspension of individual freedom – are interpreted in terms of eschatological exegesis (*peshet*) and socio-political pantheism (*midrash*): God’s intervention in man’s affairs through the very agencies that deny him that right and declare him dead.

This is the reason why I thought it worth investigating Amnon Yitzhak’s understanding, interpretation of and response to the Covid-19 pandemic;³² in order to discover that his blend of **peshet and midrash interpretative methods represents a critical reading** of his *activist interpretative approach*, a theology of crisis. Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak’s holistic explanatory framework conjugates both obeying God’s commandments and catering to the social and spiritual needs of the community. His proselytizing activism together with his theological framing of what is happening as an enunciative mode of God’s omnipotence and Justice provide a theological meaning together with social management action that work for a salvatory solution: return *to* religion, and not return *of* religion.

Peshet interpretation of Covid-19’s outbreak and transnational deadly impact frames this dramaturgic event as an eschatological sign according to which “a verse of Scripture is interpreted with reference to the interpreter’s own time and situation, which is usually seen as the last days.” (Patzia and Petrotta 2010:92) Now that Covid-19 is here, killing anyone – observant Jew or not – it has become clear that Covid-19 is both the sign and the weapon and that everyone is potentially injured and could be killed by Covid-19. The only solution is restoring God’s sovereignty by returning the lost sheep of Israel to Him.

32 As we have seen, the religious responses and the religious communities handling of epidemics crises are often ridiculed by so-called mainstream media and branded as irrational and medieval. On a cautious note, I am aware of this obsession which Hamnett calls “sociology of error” to describe the social sciences fixation with marginal and sensational aspects of religion. We often see this emphasis in media’s anti-clerical caricaturing of scandals and the nonsense of the clerics. (Hamnett 1973; Sabih 2016). 263 <https://journals.openedition.org/rhr/8490#text>

And that the rest of mankind should maintain the Noahide law.

Rabbi Yitzhak's explanatory framework represents a crucial paradox of all monotheisms: In Judaism, there is a fundamental paradox of *transcendence* of God of Israel and his *immanence* in Israel's history. The anthropomorphic language of the Jewish Bible, for instance, describes this immanence in terms of husband-wife, father-son and master-owner relations. Even the very conception of Jewish Law – Written and Oral – could be construed as a kind of socio-political pantheism, God's presence in men's lives is manifest or could be made manifest – in terms of obedience/disobedience, punishment and reward...exile/redemption. I have argued that the religious rationale, in general and Jewish religious explanatory framework of the Covid-19 plague as divine violence operates within the framework of the theology of redemption – or eschatology –³³ that can construe God's sacred power in terms of socio-political pantheism, national redemption, restoration of a lost perfect human society, and catharsis of a primordial anathema that keeps generating every anathema. Yitzhak's pesher exegesis of Covid-19 – as we have seen, kept conjugating revelation with reparation. Revelation of what has gone wrong and reparation of man's relations with God.

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