

[Beginning of Haggadah, through retelling of Ten Legendary Plagues, goes here]

THE TEN PLAGUES OF 2020

Leader: Today, like the Egyptians of legend, we face ten plagues of our own. In 2020, for the first time in modern life, they are not merely symbolic. This Passover, we face a literal plague, together with the rest of our world, that gives true meaning to the word.

The First Plague is Coronavirus. This night is called "Passover" because the "Angel of Death" passed over Jewish homes, sparing them. Tonight, like them, we also shelter in our homes, hoping to be "passed over" by a plague that threatens our health, separates us, fundamentally alters daily life, and holds our world at a standstill. As Humanists, we understand that diseases are natural phenomena, not supernatural ones, and that, no matter how much this one frightens us, medical science already understands it and can defeat it, like countless others before it.

The Second Plague is Fear. As Humanists, we understand that fear is an evolutionary response that allowed our species to avoid danger and survive through endless generations, so we might eventually build civilization, discover science, practice medicine, and defeat disease. Fear is healthy, but – like any strength – if we overuse it, it becomes a weakness. We are wise to fear reckless behavior, but we cannot allow panic to overpower reason or blind us to the power of science to understand nature, no matter how frightened we become.

The Third Plague is Complacency. While too much fear can be dangerous, so can too little. When people disregard sound guidance from experts who have spent careers fighting epidemics all over the world, they risk not only their own lives, but those of others – especially the most vulnerable among us. We must never allow the hubris of believing that age, strength, occupation, or geography keep us immune from danger, and unthinkingly disregard our responsibility to take precautions, no matter how inconvenient, to avoid unintentionally harming others.

The Fourth Plague is Isolation. Medical science teaches us that "social distancing" is the best way to limit the spread of a highly-contagious disease, yet isolation, itself, can become an affliction. As Humanists, we understand the importance of interacting with others, exchanging knowledge, and sharing our lives, fears, hopes, and joys. We evolved as social creatures, and the power of human ingenuity offers us unprecedented tools to overcome isolation. Telephones, email, social media, and video chat now allow us to stay connected, to learn, and to share information that can save lives. We must never allow isolation to imprison us, despite the absence of physical contact.

The Fifth Plague is Selfishness. As fear and isolation spread, human behavior can turn inward, to selfishness. Panic buying and hoarding have left store shelves empty in many places, as some take more than they need, leaving others without enough. As Humanists, we recognize cooperative behavior as an evolutionary trait that helps us survive. Like any problem we create for ourselves, we can solve self-imposed scarcity through human reason, by devising new and creative ways to help others meet basic material needs, even while observing "social distancing".

The Sixth Plague is Despair. As any crisis drags on, human nature tends toward despair. As our distance from life "before" recedes further into the past, and our timeline for life "after" slides further into the future, it becomes difficult to remember that a constant state of anxiety does not represent who we are. No matter how traumatic any temporary ordeal, we must always remember the fullness of life that preceded it and that will, inevitably, follow it. We must never allow despair to deceive us into hopelessness.

The Seventh Plague is Failure to Adapt. We face a new normal, albeit temporary. Our daily routine is suspended until further notice. What once we took for granted, now we live without: casual shopping and dining; cinema, theater, and concerts; public gatherings to welcome Shabbat or share this Seder. Many of us now work from home, our children pass days without school, and some of us live hungry, or short of basic hygiene, for lack of supplies. Life has become harder, and will get harder still, but we must adapt. We must use human intelligence to invent new ways for provisioning ourselves, educating our children, and maintaining community. We cannot allow nostalgia for what we have lost to paralyze our human potential for limitless adaptability.

The Eighth Plague is Overreliance on Others. As Humanists, we recognize our interdependence on one another, but also that people are responsible for solving human problems, and that each of us must assume a share of that responsibility. As human beings, however, we reflexively look for others to save us when disaster strikes. We put our faith in authority figures, whether supernatural or political, for deliverance. History teaches us the folly of that initial reflex. So long as we are able, the solution to our current crisis lies – literally – in our own hands: with soap and water, "social distancing", and the resolve to follow medical guidelines for however long it takes. The cavalry that rides to our rescue, almost certainly, will be us.

The Ninth Plague is Cynicism. When people suffer disaster, and witness human failure to address it adequately, they grow distrustful. They look for scapegoats. They fall victim to rumors and paranoia. They open their minds to wild accusations of conspiracy in government, the military, or science, itself. Such claims sow suspicion and confusion at the very time when citizens most need to trust those whose knowledge and experience can save lives. We must not allow cynicism to overwhelm human reason in responding to any crisis.

The Tenth Plague is Bigotry. As Humanists, we understand that all people comprise a single species, and that so-called "racial" differences are artificial constructs, not biology. When people are afraid, demagogues exploit their fear to divide them. Already we have heard people – even leaders whose job is to unite us during crisis – point blame at certain countries, cultures, and ethnicities. A hundred years ago, Americans denounced as "Spanish Flu", and Spaniards denounced as "French Flu", a disease whose first recorded case, ironically, was in Kansas. We must never allow bigotry, or those who feed on it, to divide our Human family by exploiting a natural disaster that lacks nationality or borders.

Leader: Tonight, each drop of wine stands for the hope that we can wipe out these plagues that cause pain and loss to people everywhere.

Together: We pour a drop of wine for each plague we face in 2020.

Against Coronavirus,

 And against Fear.

Against Complacency,

 And against Isolation.

Against Selfishness,

 And against Despair.

Against Failure to Adapt,

 And against Overreliance on Others.

Against Cynicism,

 And against Bigotry.

(Based on "Plagues of Injustice" in Haggadah of Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Fairfield County CT; modified and used with permission; all original content by Bill Parsons of Or Adam Congregation in Phoenix AZ)

[Remainder of Haggadah continues here]