



## ULTRA-ORTODOX JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN ISRAEL AMID COVID 19

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### **Abstract**

*For decades, religion has provided explanations and answers to existential questions and queries that can emerge during a pandemic. This characteristic of religion has helped communities in finding answers and meanings to their confusions. During a pandemic, healthcare professionals are often unprepared in answering the patients' religious beliefs regarding the diseases. Moreover, patients are faced with religious clichés and stigma that results because of religious beliefs and practices. To overcome the religious stigma, a deeper understanding of religious beliefs and values is required so that a perception or practice change can take place. Therefore, the inclusion and collaboration of spiritual leaders with healthcare professionals are needed to ensure a holistic understanding and overcome the stigma that can shape as a barrier for reaching an optimal therapeutic outcome.*

**Keywords:** Religious clichés, Stigma, Barriers, COVID 19

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 is a global crisis, and efforts are focused concomitantly on limiting the transmission and reducing the impact of the virus (World Health Organization 2020b). From hand hygiene to vaccine development, the world is striving hard to explore an effective and efficient disease management protocol against the COVID19. However, like every other disease, the COVID-19 has developed a religious cliché and stigma that is shaping as a potential barrier to disease prevention and management. Religion and faith are part of the human makeup, and for that very reason, faith healing exists in societies as one of many philosophies.

### **B. Faith-Based Practices**

Shifting our concerns to the religious cliché and COVID-19 management in developing countries, certain faith-based practices have resulted in avoiding the established precautionary measures against the disease (World Health Organization 2020a). Correlating with our argument, a group of Islamic faith believers avoided the recommended precautions by referring to the Holy Quran; "Allah is

sufficient for us; and what an excellent guardian He is" (The Noble Qur'an 2016b). Additionally, the prevailing belief of life and death is controlled by the Almighty also shaped as a religious stigma in adopting precautionary measures against the COVID-19 (The Noble Qur'an 2016a). In the very context, drinking cow urine and hosting cow urine drinking parties as a potential treatment for COVID-19 were also reported (BBC News 2020; Irish 2020). It was further believed that cow urine has immunity-boosting and virus-eradicating properties and hence was sprinkled in certain areas as a potential disinfectant leaving alone the concept of social distance and communal hygiene (Ghosh 2020).

Continuing with the examples of such faith-based practices, combining and consuming water and sacred soil found at the grave of Maronite monk Mar Charbel (Mount Lebanon) was also observed against COVID-19. Moreover, healthcare officials were approached by the people proposing to acknowledge the soil-based treatment and to use it against COVID-19 infection (Darwias 2020). In certain areas of the globe, COVID-19 was related to gay pride events. It was claimed that the COVID-19 is divine retribution for gay pride parades and the disease will not hit the Arab countries as they don't have these episodes and practices (Staf 2020).

Although there are no scientific or evidence-based data to support the abovementioned claims and unlikely to be, we also cannot deny that faith-based practices and beliefs have sometimes resulted in "miracles" producing significant change. Consequently keeping in mind the substantial influence of religion on people and subsequent communities, we are proposing a collaborative model between religious communities and healthcare providers/policymakers to manage the COVID-19. Our suggestion is based on two observations. Across the world, religion influences all sorts of health behaviors and it can play a major role in the medical decisions that people make (Carey and Cohen 2009; Koenig 2004). In agreement with what we are proposing, Koenig mentioned "Faith in God" as the second most important factor while discussing the list of influential factors during a course of treatment (Koenig 2003). In a nutshell, religion and faith can contribute substantially during this time of global crisis and we must take advantage of this resource to promote health education and precautionary measures against COVID-19.

### **C. Judaism In Brief**

According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics for 2018-2019, the number of Jews in Israel reaches one million and 250 thousand, and the largest percentage of them live in occupied Jerusalem, at 36%, and they are spread between strict and less strict sects, and the largest neighborhoods in which they lived in Jerusalem were Haredim Water, Gola and Kerem Abraham.

In the city of Bnei Brak near Tel Aviv, most of the Haredim live, and their number is about 220,000, and in Beit Semesh in the south, 130,000 live, and in Modi'in Illit, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, ninety thousand. In the city of Ashdod, about 80,000 religious Jews live, in Beitar Illit, near Jerusalem, 70,000, and in the settlement of Elad, 55,000, and in Petah Tikva, built on the land of the Palestinian village of Malabes, fifty thousand people live, and in Haifa two tens of thousands and 25,000 Safad, and finally in Tiberias 35,000 lives alpha.

The government plans to create a new city for Judaism near Beersheba in the next three years. The city will be built on the land of the Bedouin village of Tal Arad and other unrecognized Bedouin villages following the expulsion of Palestinians under the pretext of their illegal residence, and the new city, which will bear the name Kisif, will house 100,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews. Haredim accounts for 13.6% of the country's population, and the number is doubling every ten years, and it is expected that by 2028 they will be more than one-fifth, and by 2059 their proportion will exceed 34.6% of the total population. The average number of births in a Haredi family is 10 children and above. 85% of married Haredi men are from the same community, 50% of whom are unemployed, and spend most of their time in religious schools, while women go to work close to their homes in various fields. And religious schools educate 300,000 students, which is 18% of the average Jewish student population.

There are many sects that adhere to Judaism, and they are not a single sect or party, and some of them have joined political parties such as those of the Shas party and United Torah Judaism. The term Haredi refers to religiously orthodox Jews, particularly Jews in Eastern Europe who are distinguished by the long beard and hair that hangs over their ears.

#### **D. What A Strange Ritual**

Omar Masalha, a researcher on Judaism and Israeli society, spoke to Al-Jazeera Net about the most prominent features of the Jewish religious community in general, and Haredim in particular. They don't watch television, they don't listen to the radio, and they don't read newspapers.

This is one of the most important reasons that deepened the crisis between them and the government during the Corona pandemic, and Masalha said, "I said in some media that the security services and the government should not direct them to this instruction, but they should talk to their leaders, because they just listen to them."

Haredim, who lives in the Mia Shaarim neighborhood of occupied Jerusalem, considers that the state was not founded at the right time, and politicians must wait for Christ's coming to establish the state and build a third structure, so that the current state is, in their view, prohibited and illegal. . They believe that if it weren't for their prayers, prayers, and love for the Torah, the State of Israel would not exist today.

This commitment has always prompted them to attack the country and its symbols, and perhaps they began to condemn the police - who have spread to limit their movement in their neighborhoods recently due to the spread of the virus - with the word "Nazi" which is one of the worst insults in the history of society. Israel, according to Masalha researchers.

With the spread of the virus in Haredim's neighborhoods and their refusal to comply with instructions from official authorities, resentment has increased, especially as the government ordered the closure of religious schools and "pools of public purity" which Haredim frequented for purification according to their rituals.

Commenting on this, the researcher said, "The hardest slap Haredim received

was when the religious school was closed, because men rarely returned to their homes, and as a result major social problems arose.” With the ponds closed, the crisis is getting worse as Haredi women are prohibited from having intercourse with their husbands after the end of the menstrual cycle before washing in a public purity pool set up specifically for these gatherings, according to Masalha.

Washing in the pool and staying in the ritual places all the time is not the weirdest ritual for Haredim. Perhaps a woman shaves her hair as soon as she is married and the prohibition on growing it again is one of the most reprehensible rituals.

Regarding religious coercion, Musalaha commented, “Poetry is seen as a temptation for men, so it must be shaved, and women wear wigs or head coverings instead so as not to seduce men other than their husbands.”

### **E. Corona ... Israel faces a dilemma of Judaism**

Israeli police are deployed in religious circles, particularly in the “Mayh Shaarim” neighborhood in West Jerusalem, the city of Bnei Brak, in central Israel, and the “Beitar Illit” settlement, west of Ramallah.

Israel faces difficulty in persuading religious Jews to comply with Israeli Health Ministry instructions to limit the spread of the coronavirus. Israeli police are deployed in religious circles, led by the “Mayah Shaarim” neighborhood in West Jerusalem, the city of Bnei Brak, in central Israel, and the “Beitar Illit” settlement, west of Ramallah.

According to data from the Israeli Ministry of Health, the areas that are Jewish are the most affected by the Corona virus. At the end of 2019, the Institute for Israel Democracy, which is affiliated with Tel Aviv University, estimated the number of believers in the country to be between one million and 125 thousand, representing 12% of Israel’s population, which is around 9 million.

But the percentage of religious people infected with the virus does not match their percentage of the total population, as the Israeli newspaper “Jerusalem Post” said on Thursday that one in every 7 people infected with the Corona virus in Israel is religious.

On Thursday, the Israeli Ministry of Health announced that the total number of people infected with the coronavirus had risen to 6,211, including 107 in difficult health.

However, it appears that West Jerusalem and Bnei Brak were the victims most. Ministry of Health data shows that 916 of the injured were in West Jerusalem and 900 in Bnei Brak. By comparison, Tel Aviv, which has a population twice that of Bnei Brak, saw 324 injuries, according to data from the Israeli Ministry of Health.

According to Israeli media, the biggest problem is persuading religious people to obey the Ministry of Health’s instructions, just like any other Israeli. Amichai Atali wrote in the Israeli newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, saying, “Members of this community are used to living in small and crowded apartments, more than any other segment of the population. They are also less aware, knowledgeable, much less aware, and less exposed to the abundance of information on the Internet. for fear of what they see as content. In the negative. “ “They also carefully and proudly

follow the instructions of their rabbis, and they will do whatever their spiritual guide instructs them to do,” he added.

In carrying out the Health Ministry’s instructions to prevent gatherings, Israeli police closed synagogues (places of worship) and religious schools, and prevented collective prayer and participation in large numbers in weddings and funerals. But religious people consider this a “violation of their faith.” Video footage circulating on social networks of a religious child shouting: “Nazi”, then spitting and coughing at police officers who entered one of the religious circles. Successive statements from Israeli police indicated that religious people were arrested after refusing to comply with police instructions. “Police officers arrested 6 suspects who were holding prayers at a synagogue in the town of Modiin Ilit, against emergency regulations, and after disobeying police instructions to disperse, they refused to identify themselves and confront the police,” police said in a written statement. According to Ministry of Health data, more than 70 injuries were reported in the predominantly religious “Modiin Ilit” settlement. Similar incidents took place in neighborhoods in West Jerusalem and the city of Bnei Brak, according to an earlier police statement.

#### **F. The Israeli government has so far rejected demands to isolate the city of Bnei Brak.**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday evening, “I have instructed all ministries to provide special assistance to the city of Bnei Brak. We are tightening restrictions on movement and movement to Bnei Brak, and from there, as well as to other areas, to avoid cases of infection.”

He added, “We have taken the decision to reduce operations in and out of the city as much as possible, and in connection with this, we are moving the isolation of healthy and sick people from homes to hotels and inns that fit this audience’s unique lifestyle.”

He added, “We are doing this to avoid the possibility of transmitting the infection to other family members, and noting that movement inside the Bnei Brak will be available under instructions followed elsewhere in the country, meaning 100 meters from the building, and the like.” “I know how difficult it is, but it is for the benefit of the population, not only for their health, but also for their lives, and for the benefit of the lives of all Israelis,” Netanyahu added. “If the situation continues, the number of injured in Bnei Brak will reach 1,500 next week,” an official at the Israeli Health Ministry quoted the Jerusalem Post as saying. However, Netanyahu appeared more optimistic and said, Wednesday evening, “I want to point out the positive changes that have taken place in the behavior of the Orthodox community, as they have become very aware of the dangers associated with the spread of the Coronavirus.

#### **G. Orthodox Judaism ... with Corona facing the Israeli government and army**

A scene reflecting the ultra-Orthodox Jewish situation in Israel, during the Corona period, where crowds in the streets, shops and public areas went against government, army and health system instructions, have become the most important



event in Israel, although the virus is spreading rapidly and deaths are steadily increasing.

But the situation among religious Orthodox Jews is causing terror among the Israeli people, as the Corona virus is spreading among them, and one of the cities where these people live, Bnei Brak, has the highest percentage of people infected with the epidemic. and with this, they are dealing with the army and the government and all the instructions that will limit the spread of this virus, Thwart the walls, instructions and actions to prevent the epidemic and prevent its spread, by adhering to their religious beliefs which affirm that God is able to protect them.

From his room at home, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went, on the evening of Wednesday, April 1 (April), to Israel to seek compliance with instructions to limit the spread of Corona, but his main address was directed at religious ultra-Orthodox Jews, as he spoke candidly about the dangers this posed. The Jewish segment of Israel's position in the face of the epidemic

#### **H. A state within a state**

The talk about them came as if they were a country within a country, which did not listen to any instructions, and the situation led Israeli officials to ask to close all Bnei Brak. The increase in the implementation of the order in recent days, today's implementation is unprecedented, and if the decision is made to close the city, we can do so immediately, so that the army will step in to carry out the action. "

These statements increased tensions between "Haredim" and the whole establishment of Israel, but local authorities in Bnei Brak were forced to seek help from abroad, so military officers and officials came to form a special body to fight Corona in the religious Bnei Brak, and through coordination with the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry. Health and front of house leadership.

#### **I. Mission fails**

During the two days of commission work, the officials were unsuccessful in their mission, as the crisis escalated with this Jewish segment. Those who do not follow non-religious media, and therefore know nothing about the instructions or actions that Israel is taking to prevent the epidemic or limit its spread, do not have smartphones or internet connection. In addition, there is also the problem of not reporting, the patient is not in a hurry to report his condition or symptoms, whether because of shame, considerations of individual privacy, or even religious reasons, and another problem is overcrowding in the home, as is the case with many families who does not allow. One of them is put into quarantine, and in return they refuse to go to a hotel designated for Corona patients, so that everyone who is infected in the family will pass the infection on to all of its members.

#### **J. Lack of readiness**

Israel, in general, is not yet prepared for the kind of emergency required to deal with Corona, and in return, the economic crisis that has accompanied the

spread of the virus has engaged officials in intense discussion and disagreement about measures to be taken, and to this day Netanyahu has refused. to undertake a total shutdown, and the only closure Netanyahu has agreed to. He is in the cities of religious militants, notably Bnei Brak, and the Minister of Health, Yaakov Litzman, agreed to this, who also went into quarantine at his home because of the epidemic after Netanyahu, chief of military staff and officer in the military command.

And all of this is faced from the Bnei Brak quarantine and the Corona epidemic there, and as of this writing, there are no clear results that have contributed to preventing the spread of the virus among them.

### **K. Anxiety increases**

Currently, the police have set up checkpoints and deployed troops reinforced from its elements in a bid to limit the movement of religious people on the streets, and anxiety is rising among decision-makers with the approaching Easter holidays and imminent religious activities. by the devotees, which could lead to a very dangerous situation, similar to a disaster, as he explained. Some of these “Haredim”, and the agency set up to deal with the Corona threat in Bnei Brak faced problems, not only against the population, their beliefs and behavior, but also for the rabbis there, because every important process required coordination with the rabbis of the three religious and political streams in Fewer, Litites, Hasidids and Rabbis of Syas.

In response to this situation and to ensure the implementation of these measures, the General Staff command unit and other elements of the Military Intelligence Division, including the technology units, were recruited to assist the senior officers in it, including the Unit Commander, and the Ministry of Health in efforts to combat the spread of Corona.

### **L. State and Secular People**

To highlight the side of religious involvement in military service and their poor relationship with secularists, the media consultant specializing in Israeli affairs, Muhammad Masalha, said that some groups are not the equivalent of a quarter of Haredim serving in the army, and that according to their conditions, they are in a special unit where there was no mingling of female soldiers, and the most important unit to which they joined. Honeycomb unit.

He added that other youths used religious institutions to escape conscription, and that the number of Haredi youths required for military service exceeds half a million, but that the number of those joining the service does not exceed 130,000.

Each youth who enrolls in a religious institution receives a monthly salary of 4,000 shekels (\$ 1140) for the duration of his studies, which can be up to three years, after which the compulsory service is canceled.

This is one point that strengthens the hatred between them and the secularists, who think that religious people depend on the state because they have a large budget and otherwise do not work or serve in the army.

Researchers comment on this by saying that the Coronavirus reveals the depth of ideological hatred among various segments of Jews, especially with Haredim

spreading in the streets and public places on the premise that God and the Messiah will save them from the virus, and not a “state of disbelief. secular.”

Due to their actions ignoring the seriousness of the crisis, the police were forced to step in and impose a lockdown on their neighborhoods, and put up a fence between the secular city of Ramat Gan and the religious city of Bnei Brak, which led to the outbreak of a major crisis between these two groups in Israeli society.

## **M. Conclusion**

Given that religious leaders can and have influenced social values, practices, and beliefs with their faith-based teachings, we strongly believe that their inclusion in health promotion and (if suitably qualified as trained chaplains) their inclusion as part of the healthcare team will result in holistic care that is more proficient and acceptable as compared to non-inclusive health care. The COVID-19 is a pandemic catastrophe, and we have to use every possible option that is available in limiting the transmission of the disease and overcome the religious cliché and stigma that is shaping as a barrier in the optimal management of the COVID-19.

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