

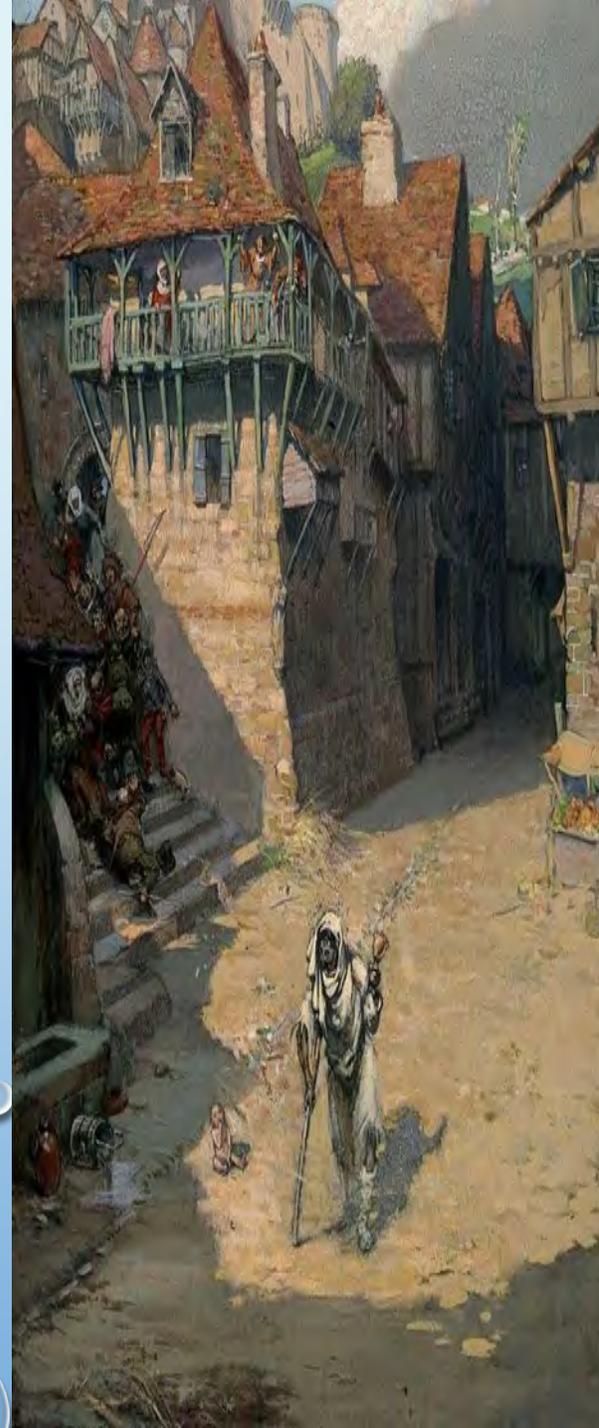
IMPURE OR INFECTIOUS?
A NEW LOOK AT THE BIBLE

JUDAISM AND PUBLIC HEALTH: LIVING IN THE SHADOWS OF PANDEMICS

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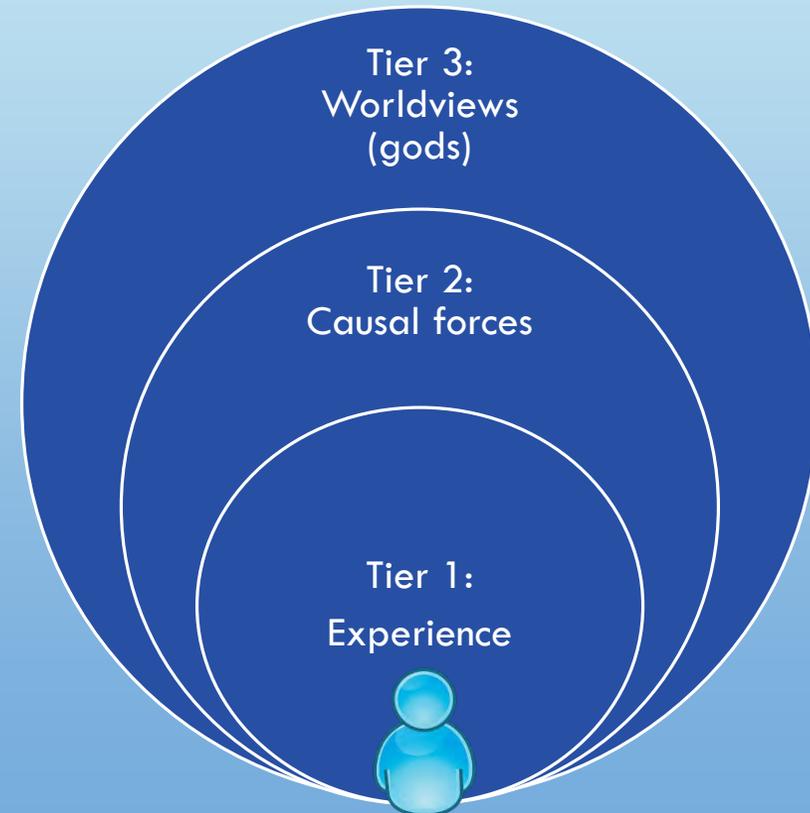
CAUSALITY AND EXPERIENCE: SOME PROPOSITIONS

- *Non-reflective* beliefs serve as basis for *reflective* (linguistically-articulated) beliefs
- All behavior is predicated on ‘beliefs’ (assumptions), based on regularities of experience:
 - Objects fall unless they are propped up
 - Embodied schemas: trajectories of motion, containment, contagion
- We do not necessarily understand the causal laws that are expressed in these experiential regularities
- This ignorance does not impede our competent functioning in the world
- “Nature” = regularity of experience (G.E.R. Lloyd)

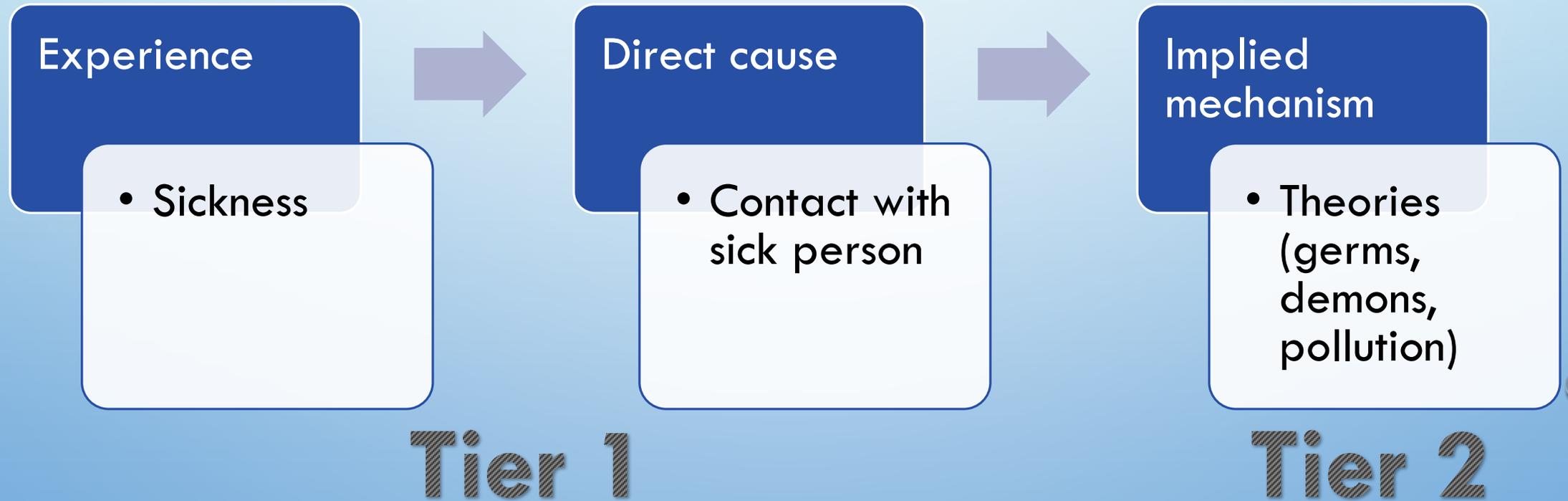


THE UNIFIED FIELD THEORY: EMBODIED GROUNDING OF METAPHYSICAL SCHEMES

- **Tier 1: “natural” world = regularity of sensory experience**
 - Concrete, sensible experience is the vehicle for understanding unseen causal forces (Tier 2)
- **Tier 2: This “natural” world must take into consideration causal forces which are not understood and must be taken as givens**
 - To the extent that they are mysterious, there is no basis for distinguishing ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ forces
- **Tier 3: These causal forces may receive explanation from cultural theories (theologies, cosmologies)**



CHAIN OF INFERENCES: CAUSALITY OF DISEASE





THE “TOUCH” OF DISEASE

Letter from Mari (18th cent. BCE):

The god is striking in the upper district, so I without delay took a bypass.
Furthermore, my lord should give orders that the residents of the cities that have been *ouched* not enter cities that are *not touched* (*lapātū*), lest they *touch* (*ulappatū*) the whole land. (ARM 26.17)

Akkadian lapātu (“to touch”) // Hebrew *n-g-‘* // *contagio* (*con-tangere*)





CASE STUDY: ANCIENT CONCEPTIONS OF INFECTIOUS DISEASE



Mari Letters (18th cent. BCE; Akkadian) – Awareness of infection:

- Letter from the Queen Šibtum to King Zimri-Lim regarding servant infected with plague: “[No one] will approach her bed or chair.”
- Letter from Zimri-Lim to Šibtum: “Now command that no one will drink from a cup that she drinks from, nor sit in a chair in which she sits, nor sleep on a bed in which she sleeps!”

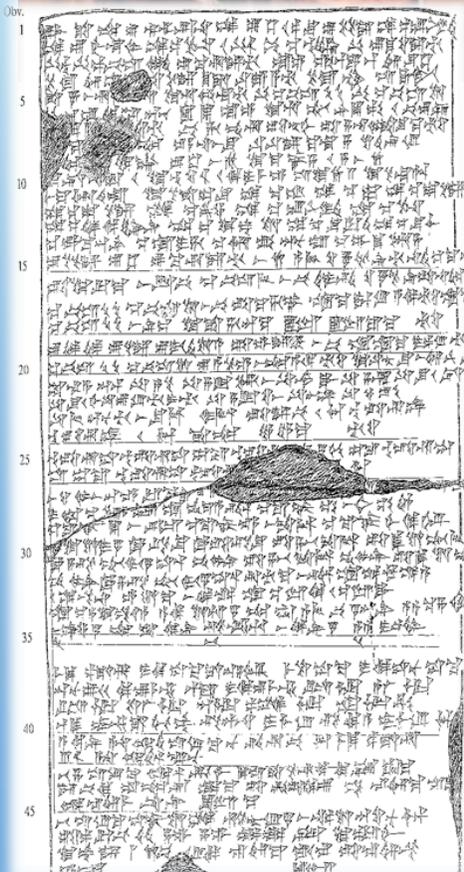
Šurpu incantation (early 1st mil. BCE): deals with the dangers of making contact with an ‘accursed’ (*tamû*) person:

- the curse (*māmītu*) of talking to an accursed man,
- the curse of eating an accursed man’s food,
- the curse of drinking an accursed man’s water,
- the curse of drinking an accursed man’s left-overs.

(Tablet 2, lines 130–133)

MESOPOTAMIAN SKIN DISEASES

- *Saḥaršubbû*: referred to several diseases, very probably included leprosy (Hansen's Disease)
- Banished from the community:
 - “May Sîn cover his body with *saḥaršubbû*, may he wander perpetually in the steppe!” (CAD R 149)
- Healing described in terms of purity:
 - “May Sîn cover his entire body with incurable *saḥaršubbû* so that he will not be pure (*ā ibbib*) until the end of his days !” (CAD E 4)
 - “The one who has *s.* has been cleansed (UD.UD-*ma*), he may return to his house.” (CAD S 37)



BIBLICAL “LEPROSY” (ŞARA'AT)

As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, **and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, “Impure! Impure!”** He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Leviticus 13:45–46



POLLUTION AND INFECTION IN THE HEBREW BIBLE:

- Awareness of infectiousness of disease: banishment of “lepers” (2 Kings 7):

There were four men, lepers, outside the gate. They said to one another, “Why should we sit here waiting for death? If we decide to go into the town, what with the famine in the town, we shall die there; and if we just sit here, still we die. Come, let us desert to the Aramean camp. If they let us live, we shall live; and if they put us to death, we shall but die.” (3–4)

- Disease often associated with curse:

When David heard afterwards, he said, “I and my kingdom will be forever clean before the LORD of the blood of Avner the son of Ner. May it fall on the head of Joab and all of his kinsman. May there never cease to be in the house of Joab a gonorrhoeic (זב), “leper” (מצורע), a holder of the spindle (=effeminate male), a victim of the sword or a person lacking bread (2 Samuel 3:28–29).

- Here “gonorrhoea” and “leprosy” are divine punishments that lead to social ostracism. In Leviticus, these are depicted as sources of **pollution**

MEDICINE OR RITUAL?



Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 817

“In chaps. 13–14, the verbal statistics underscore this point: *ṭāhēr* ‘be pure’ occurs thirty-six times; *ṭāmē* ‘be impure’ thirty times, and *nirpā* ‘be healed’ only four times. **Nothing could be clearer: we are dealing with ritual, not medicine.**”

Mirko Grmek, *Diseases in the Ancient Greek World*, 160–1

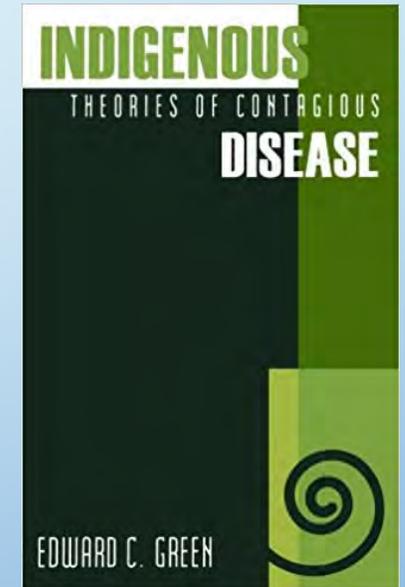
“To a mind not biased in favor of a purely medical interpretation for any ancient account of a pathological state, **one thing is clear: *Zarā‘at*, the mark of divine wrath, is not a medical notion but a ritual one.** It can be and is applied in the Bible not only to a person but also to clothing or a house...To be sure, Leviticus is not a medical handbook; the expulsion of ‘impure’ persons is a matter of tabus, not infections in the medical sense.

Still, medicine itself existed only in the shadow of ritual and without distinction from it. It is hard to believe that such a radical social rejection of person infected with a certain disease is simply the result of mistaken religious ideas about completely benign symptoms.”

POLLUTION AS A THEORY OF INFECTION

Edward Green, *Indigenous Theories of Infectious Disease* (1999):

“Pollution [...] is not so mystical when examined closely. In the anthropological sense, pollution denotes a belief that people will become ill as a result of contact with, or contamination by, a substance or essence considered dangerous because it is unclean or impure [...] **They involve an impersonal process of illness through contact or exposure. Polluted individuals are not singled out for illness or misfortune by a human or superhuman force; they typically become polluted from mere contact, from being in the wrong place at the wrong time”** (13-14).



PATHOLOGICAL “FLOWS”

Leviticus 15

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When any man has a discharge issuing from his member, he is impure **טָמֵא**...

When one with a discharge (Ὁ ΓΟΝΟΡΡΥΨ) becomes pure **טָהוֹר** of his discharge, he shall count off seven days for his cleansing, wash his clothes, and bathe his body in fresh water; then he shall be pure (טָהוֹר) On the eighth day he shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and come before the LORD at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and give them to the priest.

Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15:*

[The use of the same verb טָהַר for males and females] “**makes clear that the Hebrew text operates with physiological categories that are incompatible with modern medical concepts.**”

Gonorrhea - CDC Fact Sheet

Other Languages ▾



Anyone who is sexually active can get gonorrhea. Gonorrhea can cause very serious complications when not treated, but can be cured with the right medication.

I was treated for gonorrhea. When can I have sex again?



Antibiotic-Resistant Gonorrhea

You should wait seven days after finishing all medications before having sex. To avoid getting infected with gonorrhea again or spreading gonorrhea to your partner(s), you and your sex partner(s) should avoid having sex until you have each completed treatment. If you've had gonorrhea and took medicine in the past, you can still get infected again if you have unprotected sex with a person who has gonorrhea.



MICROSCOPICS AND METAPHYSICS



- Infectiousness of certain diseases was recognized, despite their lack of a single account of the mode of transmission
- Accordingly, the terminology was fluid, involving multiple etiologies for disease (curse, witchcraft, demons, and pollution)

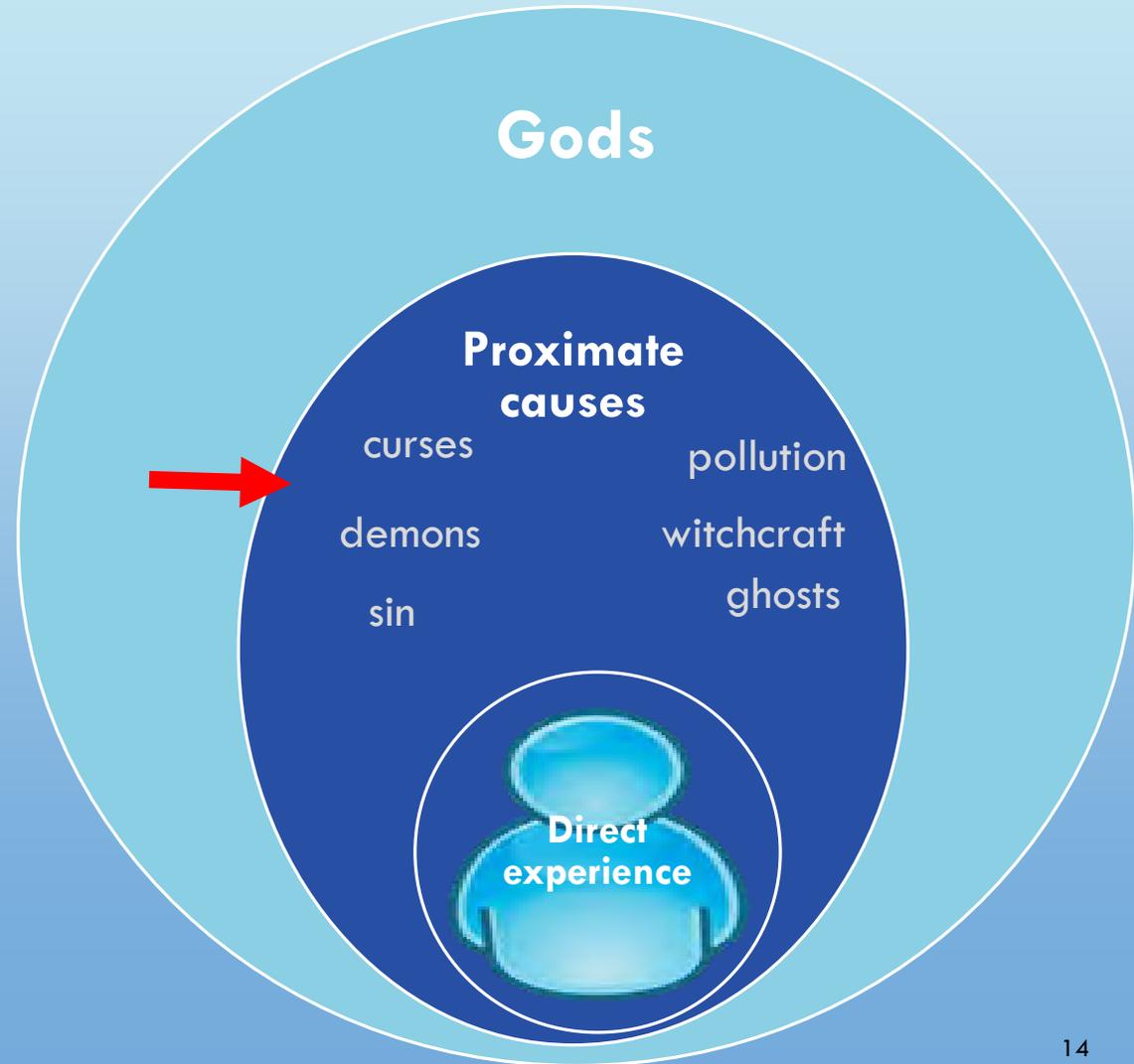
“In other words there is overwhelming evidence that the Babylonians saw disease in great part as resulting from the invasion of the body by a demon. We should add that there is rarely a description of the demon, of its face or its size. No doubt that if the modern doctor would meet an *āšipu* and tell him that we had found out what these demons looked like and that they were exceedingly small, this would perhaps be unexpected but it would hardly be unacceptable to him.”

E. Douek, “Ancient and Contemporary Management in a Disease of Unknown Aetiology,” in *Disease in Babylonia*, 217



RITUAL AND THE METAPHYSICS OF DISEASE

In magical healing one *indicates* to an illness that it should leave the patient. After the description of any such magical cure we'd like to add: If the illness doesn't understand *that*, then I don't know how one ought to say it.



IMPLICATIONS

Relationship between science and religion

1. Common tendency to distinguish between religious 'beliefs' and scientific 'theories' implies that religion is irrational
 - "non-overlapping magisteria" (Gould)
2. Against the tendency to emphasize contradiction between "natural" and "supernatural" explanations, they coexist in minds and are learned together.
 - C. Legare et al, "The Coexistence of Natural and Supernatural Explanations"
3. Moreover, a sharp natural/ supernatural distinction is inappropriate for cultures which explain empirical phenomena in terms of metaphysical causes.
4. In the case of infectious disease, "supernatural" explanations are remarkably down to earth
 - So too, the behaviors used to control their spread

THANKS FOR LISTENING!

Here are a few links which may be of interest:

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/tumah-ritual-impurity-or-fear-of-contagious-disease>

<https://www.thetorah.com/blogs/coronavirus-what-we-can-learn-from-the-bible-and-the-ane>

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/tzaraat-in-light-of-its-mesopotamian-parallels>

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