

BS”D

## **Black Wedding**

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This week is Rosh Hodesh Elul and on Erev RH Elul some people have a custom to visit the cemetery. So this reminded me of another esoteric custom performed in a cemetery known as the Black Wedding.

For those of you who haven’t heard of it, there is a ceremony among Jews dating back to at least the 1700s, wherein a shiduch is made between two destitute people, usually orphans (yitomim), with little chance of marrying. They are brought together by the community which organizes and pays for their wedding and establishes a home for them. The wedding is held, as said, in a cemetery.

Why is this done? To arouse mercy from heaven in times of communal distress – specifically, in times of pandemic plagues (mageifot). There is a simple principle in Jewish thought known as *midda-keneged-midda* – according to the way we behave, so God responds in kind. Thus, if we are merciful to each other, God, in kind (*midda-keneged-midda*), is aroused to be merciful towards us.

To fill you in on a little history of this ceremony: At the outbreak of a cholera epidemic in Eastern Europe in 1785 the Black Wedding ceremony was held in the presence of many great Hassidic leaders – notably R. Elimelich MiLizhensk and the Hozeh MiLublin. During the Locust plague (magefat makat arbeh) in Israel in 1865 this ceremony was held in the graveyard in Tzfat and on Har HaZaytim in Jerusalem. And during the last infamous plague of Influenza (shapa’at) in 1918, the ceremony was held in a number of places in the United States and Canada.

Now you might be thinking that this is all ancient history. And indeed, an essay on this ceremony wrote just that in a prominent orthodox journal, published in February of this year, exactly one month before the Coronavirus hit the whole world. The essay explained that the Black Wedding custom arose because people had no idea what was behind a plague. Indeed, in 1918 they called the plague INFLUENZA / SHPAAT because they believed it was due to the INFLUENCE / HASHPAA of the stars. And since they were helpless in the face of the all the death and disease, they turned to rather strange customs, like the Black Wedding. The essay, written by a religious Jew, ends:

As we wait to see how far the current coronavirus outbreak spreads, we should pause and reflect on our good fortune. We now understand the etiology and can often conquer those diseases that were mysterious and life-threatening to our great-grandparents. Vaccines, public-health interventions, and antimicrobial drugs generally keep us safe. And, in the face of an epidemic, we no longer need to gather at the local cemetery and marry off a destitute couple in order to invoke God’s mercy.

כשאנחנו מחכים לראות עד כמה הנגיף הנוכחי יתפשט, עלינו להשהות ולהרהר במזל הטוב שלנו. אנו מבינים כעת את האֶטְיוֹלוֹגְיָה, ולעתים קרובות אנו יכולים לכבוש את אותן מחלות שהיו מִסְתוּרִיּוֹת וּמְסֻכָּנוֹת-חיים עבור דורות קודמים. חיסונים, התערבויות בריאות-הציבור ותרופות אנטי-מיקרוביאליות בדרך כלל שומרים עלינו. ולנוכח מגיפה, איננו צריכים עוד להתאסף בבית העלמין המקומי ולחתן זוג חסר-כל ולעורר את רחמי אלוהים.

Basically he said that we didn't need to arouse God's mercy. I wrote to the editors and explained that we should be a bit more humble about our abilities and that we should remember the words of the "Prayer for the Physician" attributed to the Rambam:<sup>1</sup>

אדון הכן, נתת לאדם את החכמה להפיג את סבלו של אחיו, להכיר בְּהַפְרָעוֹתָיו, לחלץ את חומרי הריפוי, לגלות את כוחם ולהכין אותם וליישם אותם לכל מחלה. בהשגחתך הנצחית בחרת בי לשמור על חייהם ובריאותם של יצוריך. אני עומד ליישם את עצמי לתפקידי כרופא. אל עליון, עזור לי בעבודות הגדולות האלה להועיל לאנושות, כי ללא עזרתך לא יצליח ולו הדבר המעט ביותר.

"Thou hast endowed man with the wisdom to relieve the suffering of his brother, to recognize his disorders, to extract the healing substances, to discover their powers and to prepare and to apply them to suit every ill. In Thine Eternal Providence Thou hast chosen me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. I am now about to apply myself to the duties of my profession. Support me, Almighty God, in these great labors that they may benefit mankind, for without Thy help not even the least thing will succeed."

The editors wrote me back saying that they had changed the ending to accord with my comment:

איננו צריכים עוד להתאסף בבית העלמין המקומי ולחתן זוג חסר-כל **בכדי** לעורר את רחמי אלוהים.

While I accept their change, it is a weak admission. The fact is that only about a month and a half later – black weddings were held in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak to plead for God's mercy to remove the Coronavirus. Indeed, as we enter now the seventh month of this ongoing plague with deaths mounting around the world, not to mention the financial devastation, for all of our science and technology, we are not invincible.

This could be one of the most important lessons of this virus: without God's help "not even the least thing will succeed."

ללא עזרתך לא יצליח ולו הדבר המעט ביותר.

So, whether you believe a black wedding is a good idea or not, let us increase in hesed that God have mercy on us and remove this dreadful plague from amongst us.

<sup>1</sup> See Fred Rosner, The Physician's Prayer Attributed To Moses Maimonides, Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Vol. 41, No. 5: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44449883>