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BLAMING THE JEWS AND ISRAEL FOR THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT-DAY REACTIONS

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The coronavirus pandemic, which began to spread across continents at the end of February 2020, was immediately followed by the accusation that the virus had been developed by Jews and Israelis, who were spreading it worldwide – intending to make a fortune by being first to find a cure and/or vaccine for the disease, and selling it to all affected countries. The team at TAU's Kantor Center, together with its international network, began to monitor this phenomenon, quickly discovering that the libel, which first appeared in March, spread far and wide during the months of March and April. Materials to this effect came from 35 different countries, and the libel became a kind of consensus, conveyed in a range of offensive verbal expressions and nasty caricatures. The Kantor Center collected and published these materials in eight weekly reports, followed by a conclusive report in June.

The question arising from this development is: How did the libel spread so quickly, coming not only from extremist circles like white supremacists, ultraconservative Christians and Israel's opponents in the Middle East, like Turkey, Iran and the Palestinian Authority, but also from populations that have no distinct political or ideological affinity. The traditional answer, that Jews will always be blamed for any trouble under the sun, from natural disasters to economic crises and wars, is not satisfactory in this case. This paper attempts to provide an additional answer, rooted in the image of the Jew as a spreader of disease, which has been associated with the Jewish people since its early beginnings.

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Four main stages may be discerned in the development of this image: the appearance of literature on the banishment of the tribes of Israel from Egypt, well-poisoning accusations during the Black Death pandemic in the Middle Ages, the perception of the Jews as a biological threat to the Arian race and the rest of humanity according to Nazi ideology, and the Doctors' Trial in the days of Stalin.

As early as the later centuries BC, and especially after the destruction of the First Temple, when a Jewish community was formed in Egypt, a narrative about the beginnings of the people of Israel began to be written and circulated, contradicting the Jewish narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. According to this alternative narrative, the community from which the tribes of Israel originated had contracted leprosy – an incurable disease in the ancient world. To prevent contagion the pharaohs sent them to a remote area – the so-called Land of Goshen from the Passover Haggadah. This narrative had many versions, and Egyptian-Hellenistic writers passed it on from one generation to the next, adding more details. To cite just one example: Lead plates were tied to the lepers' bodies to make them drown in the Red Sea, and only those who survived followed Moses into the desert. Josephus Flavius' relentless writings, disproving this narrative's claims one by one, were of no avail. It spread in Greek and then in Latin, reaching Rome, where it was even mentioned by an influential historian like Tacitus, and from there to the Roman Empire and its successors.

The Bubonic Plague that raged through Europe in the 14th century, killing over a third of its population, came to be known as the Black Plague. Trying to find someone to blame for the great disaster, Europeans pointed a finger at the Jews, accusing them of poisoning the wells. The main evidence for this was that Jewish communities were allegedly less affected by the disease than the surrounding Christian population. It is true that Jews observe the mitzvahs of handwashing (netilat yadayim) and immersion (tevilah) in a mikveh, but there is no historical evidence that they did in fact contract the disease to a lesser degree than their neighbors. Be that as it may, whole Jewish communities were burned to death in 1348-

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1349, mostly in Germany, France and Switzerland – along the Rhine River, in Basel and Strasburg. The Jewish community of Frankfurt assembled and burned themselves before their neighbors came. This is where the custom became a tradition – of burning, rather than isolating or banishing, anyone carrying the plague, to make sure that the affliction would not spread any further.

Nazi ideology, quite typically, took this one step further: the Jews are not just a symbol of biological danger or carriers of disease; they themselves, in their very bodies, *are* the disease and the threat. A 1937 exhibition in Munich, dedicated to the Jewish threat, later followed by posters pasted up near Jewish ghettos to warn the local population, showed the Jews as rats spreading the plague, typhus-spreading lice, bacteria and mice. Therefore, for the Germans, the means for getting rid of the affliction was fire, which burns the cause itself. This is one key to understanding the goal they set for themselves: killing Jews and burning their bodies as a "final solution". The hospital for infectious diseases in the Kovno Ghetto was burned down along with its occupants and the entire medical staff; and when a German had to open the door of a building in which Jews lived or worked, he would kick the handle with his boot, so as not to touch it with his hand. The Germans felt a deep, even obsessive anxiety about the biological threat that they themselves had invented. They disseminated this anxiety throughout the lands they occupied by means of constant propaganda, trying to make most of Europe adopt it as well.

The Doctors' Trial began in January 1953. Nine doctors, six of whom were Jews, including Stalin's personal physician, were accused of plotting to assassinate the leaders and top military commanders of the USSR – by poisoning. Soviet propaganda called them the 'assassins in white coats' and circulated the accusation over and over again through all parts of the population. False confessions were obtained by torture from the imprisoned doctors. Only Stalin's death in April turned the tables, and Khrushchev ordered their release. But

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the damage caused by the propaganda, which had repeatedly presented the image of the dangerous Jew who plots and poisons, could not be undone.

In this way, the image of the Jew as a spreader of disease and pandemic was built, layer by layer, over centuries, until the present day - with the coronavirus adding a new layer of its own. Yet, when the Kantor Center published its special report, presenting the current manifestation of this phenomenon over a period of about three months, the Israeli public and media seemed surprised, displaying a range of reactions: Astonishment and shock – "We are living in the 21st century, and this is what they have to say!? Its impossible! Inconceivable!"; Anger – "We too are getting sick, Jews around the world are sick, our economy is collapsing!"; Questions – "Who says these things? Who listens to them? Where are the global leaders who will stand up and refute this nonsense?" These reactions came mainly from the young and middle –aged, who, born in Israel, have encountered antisemitism quite rarely. But when people calm down a little, and the elderly react, acceptance sets in: "Apparently it's all just part of Jewish history, past and present, and possibly also in the future as well."