

# **Tits, magpies and peanut butter: Exodus in times of Coronavirus**

By: Jan Jorrit Hasselaar

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It's a happy scene outside my father's nursing home window. Birds fly by and sing their songs. Yesterday, 19 March, the Dutch government decided that residents of nursing homes were no longer allowed to receive visitors due to coronavirus. Following that, my mother decided to install a birdhouse outside the window. The peanut butter she stuffed it with is very appealing to tits and magpies. The birds are taking on some of our duties, now that we can't visit him.

The situation continues for a few weeks. My father's condition has worsened, regardless of coronavirus. The first tests have also been administered in the care home. As a family, we therefore decided to take our husband and father home with us. We do not want to risk him being in isolation during the final phase of his life. While I'm writing this, I realise that we are lucky to be in a position to have this option. My thoughts go out to those who live in care institutions and those who have a child, partner, parent, or friend in that situation. Despite the enormous efforts by the staff, the pain is overwhelming.

Here, at home, I see how meaning and perspective are being created in a situation that could have been very different. With the support of home care and our general practitioner, we're able to take proper care of Dad at home. He isn't isolated in the living room, as might have been the case in the nursing home. Instead, he's surrounded by love and attention. Every now and then, children and grandchildren peek around the corner, do puzzles in the other room, play football outside, and eat dinner with him near his bed. My father usually eats bits of herring, a slice of bread made soft in the microwave, and occasionally he surprises us by taking a bite of sauerkraut or asking for chips. What could have been a terrible time is now filled with beautiful and precious moments.

On the news I see how the world outside is fairing. Everyday there are reports from the Dutch 'frontlines', and the government regularly holds press conferences. In its bi-annual prognosis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shows how badly the Eurozone economy will likely suffer under coronavirus. Germany's economy is expected to shrink by 7%, France's by 7.2% and The Netherlands' by 7.5%. At a 9.1% decline, Italy is hardest hit. These abstract numbers represent businesses, shops, bars, and restaurants that have had to shut down in villages and cities, people who are losing their livelihoods. Some predict that the financial crisis of 2007-2008 will pale in comparison with what the world economy is going through now. After the Great Depression of the 1930s, there is now talk of the Great Lockdown of 2020. Time will tell.

The coronavirus crisis once again makes us realise that society, the economy, and the future are not feasible and predictable, but rather are vulnerable and radically uncertain. Economists point out the radical or fundamental uncertainty regarding prognoses. There's uncertainty about how the pandemic will progress, but also about the effectiveness of the policies to deal with the consequences. There are a number of other variables as well. From behavioural changes in people and the disruption of international production chains of businesses, to the situation on the financial markets. Robert Shiller, winner of the Nobel Prize in economic sciences in 2013, add that there are not one, but two pandemics. The first pandemic is that of COVID-19. The second pandemic is the fear of what COVID-19 will bring. The two pandemics are not simultaneous, but they are related. The fear of the virus can fan the flames of the fear for economic and social losses. Experts are working hard on a vaccine for the first virus, but a vaccine for the second virus is an entirely different matter.

Now that houses of worship are closed, it's easy to forget that the outbreak of coronavirus coincides with Pesach and the Easter period (the time until Pentecost). This is the time we are invited to enter into conversation with the ancient story of the Exodus. At first, the story might seem to be about a god who frees the slaves from Egypt using 10 plagues. In short, it seems to be about an almighty god who works for us people. How we would love to have a god like that in times of coronavirus; a leader who liberates us from our burdens.

Jonathan Sacks, leading British intellectual and former Chief Rabbi in the UK, claims that this is a shallow interpretation of the story. In his comments regarding Exodus in *Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, he demonstrates that there's a hidden counternarrative in Exodus. There's the shared suffering of the slaves in Egypt. They are *people of fate*. They are forced to serve the Pharaoh, child of god, and are worth even less than the stones of the Pyramids they are forced to build. Moses is called to lead the slaves on a journey, into a radically uncertain future. However, there is the promise that it is possible to build a society in which not just the Pharaoh is a child of God, but everyone is. The foundation of this society are the building blocks of faith, hope and love. Sacks emphasises that faith isn't about accepting a set of (religious) creeds, but to have faith is a path of love. One on which people aren't a means to an end, but are seen in all ways as valuable, regardless of achievements or who you are. That makes the story of Exodus a story about *people of faith*, people who won't let themselves be defined by shared suffering, but by who they want to be with and for each other. That way a new society can be born from the crisis, one in which new and creative connections are made and human beings become more human.

While the search for a COVID-19 vaccine continues, we can now see a vaccine against the consequences of COVID-19. Amid coronavirus, the Exodus story shines a light on a vaccine of hope, expressed in faith in acts of love and solidarity, larger than love and solidarity to yourself or your own group. Acts of love by doctors, nurses, teachers, and captain Tom are shown in the media. Other acts of love, like those that happen at home, remain largely unseen, but are no less valuable. Such a vaccine does hold up a mirror to our Dutch society, making us wonder if we shouldn't show more solidarity beyond our own group, such as the severely stricken countries in Southern Europe and the children in refugee camps in Greece.

At the time of writing, the Netherlands is taking the first steps to start social interaction at schools, in sports, and the economy back up again. Suggestions are being made to restructure our society and the way we do business at this stage, building new connections and creating a future-proof society. For example, Schiphol airport has proposed to gradually increase the number of flights over a three-year period to allow the interests of residents in adjacent municipalities and the climate to be taken into consideration. Such suggestions about a socially just and sustainable economy are also being made regarding the debate about conditions for government support to businesses.

The vaccine of hope borrowed from Exodus is not a naive invitation to a better world. The vaccine doesn't see the change as a pill or an injection, a quick fix that can easily be realised. This vaccine sees the shaping of fundamental and lasting changes in people, organisation, and society as a track through the desert, with the changing being achieved through trial and error. In order not to lose the way in the desert and have hope be overtaken by fear, opportunism, and status quo, Sacks argues that the institution of a public Sabbath is crucial in this process of change. This public Sabbath will serve as a kind of regular workplace in which people, often with conflicting interests and views, build on trust and learn to take responsibility for a shared future. It's a workplace of resetting, conversations instead of debates, being inspired, and taking concrete steps forward. That

way, differences can become a source of innovation, rather than the source of polarisation it often is today.

The notion of the Sabbath invokes associations with (Christian) worship. In times of coronavirus, Christian communities in the Netherlands have moved their worship online. Various creative initiatives have taken shape that can be loudly heard or clearly seen in society. For instance, there are the 'bells of hope', an initiative from the Old-Catholic Paradijskerk in Rotterdam. Under the leadership of the Dutch Council of Churches, these bells now toll throughout the country on Wednesday evenings to signal hope, comfort, support, and unity. Another inspiring initiative came from the Protestant church in Heerenveen; red flags and posters with the phrase 'Be courageous, be loving!' inspired by the poem of love from 1 Corinthians 13 (New Testament).

Now that the coronavirus measures in the Netherlands are slowly being lifted, churches are also exploring ways to open in a society of social distancing. One obvious option is to pick up very much where we left off before coronavirus. Another option is to – like Schiphol airport – start worship back up in gradual way, asking questions such as: What do we see in these times of coronavirus? What do we miss? What do we learn? What do we want to hold onto? What does that mean for the substance and shape of our worship? The bells of hope are apparently not something churches want to hold onto. On 29 April, they tolled for the last time. However, society's need for hope, courage, and love has not diminished in any way. On the contrary, in fact. Coronavirus is not yet over. Difficult questions regarding agricultural transition and climate change are looming again. In our own private lives, we could frequently also need a bit of hope, courage, and love. The question is whether it is possible to hold on to some of that love and solidarity that has recently been on display and to expand upon it, even beyond our own group. The perspective of hope borrowed from Sacks' work challenges us to create workplaces of hope in the heart of our society for that purpose. These workplaces aren't just for a small group of believers, but for everyone involved, including the birds in front of my father's window.

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