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Hassidim and the 1786 plague in Tiberias: We've been here before

By the month of Iyar, the plague had subsided but people remained in lockdown until after Shavuot.

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In the year 1777, a group of hassidim [made the journey](#) to the Land of Israel. The convoy was headed by two hassidic masters, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730-1788) and Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk (1741-1810).

The group comprised 300 people – a sizable crowd for such a journey. Indeed, previous groups that had come to the Land of Israel had been significantly smaller.

The size of the group was also noteworthy considering how many Jews lived in the Land of Israel at that time. According to estimates, the hassidic aliyah resulted in a 5% increase in the local Jewish population, which numbered some 6,000 people.

Over a century after the event, the Zionist writer “Rabbi Binyamin” (Yehoshua Radler-Feldman, 1880-1957) would describe this hassidic voyage as the “Mayflower.” It should be noted, however, that not all of the travelers identified with the nascent hassidic movement.

The new immigrants settled in Safed, before local tensions resulted in some of them – including Menahem Mendel – moving to [Tiberias](#) in 1781.

In 1786 – nine years after the [hassidim](#) had arrived in the Land of Israel – a plague struck the Galilee region.

Before setting out for the Land of Israel, Menahem Mendel had been an influential local hassidic leader. He had tried to meet Rabbi Elijah of Vilna – the foremost leader of the mitnaggedim, the anti-hassidic faction – in an earnest attempt to lower tensions between the feuding camps. Alas, his mediation efforts were unsuccessful. Even in absentia, Menahem Mendel continued to serve as a long-distance hassidic leader.

The fledgling hassidic community in the Land of Israel relied on the generosity of its European counterparts, and Menahem Mendel regularly corresponded with colleagues and disciples. In the wake of the 1786 plague, he wrote a letter describing some of the tumultuous events that had occurred. The letter appears to have been written in the summer of that year.

MENAHM MENDEL did not have a specific name for the outbreak, nor did he describe the symptoms; he simply used generic terms. According to the letter, the plague broke out in Tiberias, and though it was torrid, the plague did not last long. It raged for about seven weeks, from around Purim to the beginning of the Hebrew month of Iyar.

The rabbi recounted that the Tiberias hassidic community decided not to flee the city, primarily because it was not clear where it was safe to be. Instead, they closed the courtyard shared by the hassidim. With only a few more than 10 men in the courtyard, they were able to hold daily services and pray not only for themselves but “for the lives of all of the House of Israel.”

Others in Tiberias acted similarly, going into self-imposed quarantine and mostly surviving. Those who fled Tiberias were “chased” by the plague and smitten. Menahem Mendel made a point of noting that the plague did not differentiate between Sefardi and Ashkenazi Jews.

The letter was not just a report; it was also an appeal. During the quarantine, the community had borrowed money, and it was now turning to benefactors in Eastern Europe, asking for assistance in repaying the loans. Menahem Mendel explained that it was no small feat that they had succeeded in obtaining essential goods during this tumultuous episode.

He also recounted what happened to hassidic Jews who were living in Peki'in at the time. When Menahem Mendel moved to Tiberias in 1781, some hassidim remained in Safed. When a plague struck Safed in 1785, they fled to Peki'in. Now, a year later, they chose a different route: They ran to caves in the Galilee and survived in hiding. Alas, when the Peki'in hassidim returned to their village, they found their homes ransacked and possessions looted.

By the month of Iyar, the plague had subsided, but people remained in lockdown until after the festival of Shavuot. The letter was written after [Shavuot](#), and Menahem Mendel noted that even though they were no longer in quarantine and freely moved about Tiberias, they cautiously avoided coming in contact with people from nearby Damascus – just as they had been wary of coming in contact with people from Safed and Acre during the 1785 plague.

By the time Menahem Mendel put pen to paper, the plague had passed, so his tone was buoyant as he expressed thanks to God for salvation. The letter was signed by those who had endured the plague without loss: each name represented a family that had survived. The rabbi warned that a missing name was not an indication of misfortune. The letter had to be handed to the courier, and many people were not available to affix their signatures, particularly those in Peki'in, Safed and on the road to Aleppo. The writer nevertheless added a few names of individuals and families who had not signed the letter but that he knew to be well.

Menahem Mendel concluded with a request that the recipient – Rabbi Yissachar Ber of Lubavitch – copy the letter and distribute duplicates to all the hassidic leaders, in particular to the grandsons of the Baal Shem Tov. In addition to the fund-raising element, Menahem Mendel encouraged the hassidic community to rejoice with its representatives in the Land of Israel who had just survived a devastating plague.

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