

Coronaspection – Introspection 1

Interviews with

Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar, Russia

Patriarch Sahak Mashalian, Turkey

Swami Chidanand Saraswati, India

The first *Coronaspection* “introspection” (our term for an installment in the series, where teachings of an introspective nature are offered) weaves together spiritual and human concerns. The series seeks to provide tools and perspectives for coping with the human and spiritual challenges posed by Coronavirus. Accordingly, all interviews will feature some balance between the more theoretical-spiritual contribution and the more practical-human-social message.

The spiritual message resounds clearly in Rabbi Lazar’s call for trust in God. For the Chief Rabbi of Russia, Coronavirus is a test, and the way for us to get through this test is by trusting God. This sense of trust is not a vague trust in the power of God to save but is rather based on the recognition and realization of His presence with and among us. The Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hassidic movement, taught that when God wants to punish someone, He takes away his or her faith and trust in Him. Affirming faith as a movement of trust in God is therefore the spiritual foundation for coping with the present challenge. It is the God in you Who gives you strength and greatness.

This teaching is echoed by Patriarch Mashalian, Patriarch of the Armenian Church, Istanbul. We seek peace and we seek security and these can only be found in our relationship with God. But that relationship must be real. It is therefore not enough to believe, as a formula or a creed. Faith must be alive and grounded in personal experience. This sense of personal experience of God is common to all three contributors to this installment. All three recognize that the experience of God cannot be taken for granted. It must be cultivated through spiritual disciplines. Patriarch Mashalian considers prayer as the means for cultivating this profound personal religious experience. Deep personal prayer requires time and we now have the time to engage in it. Ideally, we should come to a crisis having cultivated a storehouse of spirituality (a notion echoed by many of the contributors to *Coronaspection*). But it is never too late to cultivate it, and the pandemic also provides an opportunity for us to deepen our relationship with God. The key then is a relationship with the living God.

It is striking how despite the differences in the details of belief and religious practices, two religious leaders of different religions can deliver a message that is fundamentally the same. It is also of interest that they actually share some common means of prayer. Patriarch Mashalian refers to the power of the Psalms as a tool in prayer. The Psalms grow out of the real experience of people, and have been tested for over 3000 years. Our feelings of fear and despair are articulated in them, and through the Psalms we find refuge in God. While Rabbi Lazar does not mention this specifically, we know that his community’s daily practice also includes the regular completion of the entire cycle of

the Psalms on an ongoing basis. The depth of the experience and common practices unite across what seems like a great religious divide.

Both leaders point to a movement of interiority – finding God within yourself and finding God in your soul. This is also true of the third contributor. Swami Chidanand Saraswati of Rishikesh, , intentionally chosen for this first introspection from a religion that is not part of the Abrahamic family , places a great emphasis on interiority. Appealing to his years of living in the jungle, he calls upon us to discover our interiority. This is a time that should not be wasted on external relations and engagement in social media activities, both of which are fine up to a point. We must find the space in our hearts. We must discover the inner story (movie) of our life. We must learn to manage ourselves. We must go within.

The message of interiority is balanced by perspectives on the family and community. Swami Chidanand considers this a time for strengthening relations within the family. We have been so busy running that we have lost the quality of relationships within the family. COVID-19 is an opportunity to address this imbalance. The family is the framework for discovering togetherness and recognizing that we are not alone. While our doors are locked, we can open the doors of our relationships. Rabbi Lazar too highlights the value of family. Due to generations of suppression of Judaism by the Communist authorities and the consequent ignorance about rituals in today's generation, much of religion is practiced in communal settings. The Passover Seder, a highlight of the Jewish year, is typically celebrated as an affair that brings together thousands of people. In a moving testimony, Rabbi Lazar shares with us the story of someone who, thanks to the situation, has discovered the value of celebration in the family. There is a new appreciation for religion being lived in the family. This is the first articulation of a notion that will appear throughout the *Coronaspection* series, profiling the value of the home as a religious center.

The notion of family is thematized by Patriarch Mashalian in a different way, which will also figure time and again throughout the project. Coronavirus teaches us that we are one big human family. The notion of family is extended to describe the unity of humanity. He asserts that this claim is scientifically proven, in fact more so than even our faith. Indeed, one of the lessons and outcomes of COVID-19, as it emerges from *Coronaspection* (see our trailer), is the recognition of our interconnectedness and our belonging to one family.

Watching these three interviews I am struck not only by their thematic similarities and resonances. I am even more struck by the power and example of faith provided by these three leaders. For all of them, God and the spiritual life are real, powerful and defining of their lives. Through this, they are able to find strength in themselves and to offer hope to others. The foundational reality of faith and the power of the spiritual life are a deep commonality that unites us, as we encounter the common challenge of dealing with the global pandemic.