

# WHY THE ‘SWINE FLU’ HITS HUMANS TOO

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*The informal schmooze of a rosh yeshiva to his alumni in response to the recent fear of a Swine Flu pandemic.*

## ‘YOUNG MAN, YOUNG MAN, DON’T CRY...’

There was a group of bachurim sitting in 770, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their maggid shiur, R’ Yoel Kahan, who was scheduled to give them a shiur in Chassidus. Unfortunately, R’ Yoel was late to the shiur. Ten minutes, 15 minutes, then 20 minutes passed, with the restless students seeing no end to their vigil.

One of the bachurim suddenly recalled seeing posters advertising a special event that was scheduled to take place that evening in Boro Park. The famed Maggid of Yerushalayim, R’ Sholom Shvadron, would be speaking. R’ Sholom was known to be a brilliant orator, and his talks were both entertaining and uplifting. “Since R’ Yoel seems to have forgotten us tonight in any case”, he remarked to his friends, “perhaps we should take advantage of the opportunity of hearing the guest from Eretz Yisroel. Who knows when another chance will arise?”

The suggestion met with

everyone’s approval, and in short order they were deposited by their car service in front of the Boro Park Beis Midrash where the lecture was taking place. Although it had already begun, they quietly found their places, to listen to whatever remained. It was during that talk, that they heard R’ Sholom relate the following anecdote:

“In the course of my work, I often have the opportunity to counsel Yeshiva bachurim. They come to me with their questions and doubts, and I do my best to set them straight.

“Once, a bachur came to my office, crestfallen. With tears in his eyes, he poured out his heart about all the (real and imagined) difficulties that he was facing in his life. As I attempted to address his individual issues, he began to cry, and exclaimed: ‘Why does everything have to be such a struggle? Why can’t life just be simple and smooth? Why do I always have to work so hard?’

“In a soothing voice, I began to respond to him. I explained to him that this is the essential difference between a human being and an

animal. Animals have simple lives, their food is readily accessible, and they don’t have worries. Everything with them is straightforward; there are no battles of the conscience, no struggles of right and wrong. But human beings are the purpose of creation. They are not just here to live out their lives, they are here to make a difference, and that takes work, and it involves struggling to succeed.

“I was hopeful that my logical words would calm him down; to my astonishment they had the opposite effect, and his sobbing increased in intensity. ‘What is it now?’ I asked him in wonder.

‘Oy Rebbe,’ he said despondently, ‘it is so unfair. If that is the case, then why did Hashem make me a human, why couldn’t he have made me an animal?’

“I turned to the bachur and replied (concluded Rabbi Shvadron in his famous Maggidic singsong): ‘*Bachur Bachur, vein nisht, du bizt takeh a beheima!* (Young man, young man, don’t cry – you are indeed an animal!)”

## AWAY FROM THE SWINE AND UP TO THE DIVINE

This past week, the World Health Organization (WHO) has raised the alert of a pandemic threatening the civilized world. A pandemic is an epidemic of an

infectious disease that affects very large areas of the world. The name of the disease in the current pandemic is “Swine Flu.”

So you say “*Boruch Hashem. abi nisht by Yidden.*” As long as it’s only the swine that are diseased, we can breathe easy. Not only are we not swine, but we have nothing at all to do with them. We don’t consume them, we don’t raise them (and according to WHO the disease cannot be contracted by throwing around sports equipment manufactured by their hides, or watching other people do so on a screen...).

But somehow this is not working out just so.

While the disease is, in fact, a form of influenza, or flu, that naturally afflicts *dovor achers* (hence its name), it somehow is currently finding haven amongst humans with alarming frequency.

This is probably in view of what the Gemara says (Chulin 5a): A sinner may bring a *korban*, and it is to be accepted. This is derived from the *pasuk* (in the *parsha* of *korbanos*) “*min ha’beheima*” (from amongst the animals [a *korban* may be brought]), that is interpreted as “*lehovi b’nei odom sh’domin l’beheima* (this comes to include people who are similar to *beheimas*).”

When people are similar to animals, then it is no great surprise that the strain of influenza can become confused with regards to its intended destination, and become lodged in some two-legged creatures.

## WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT?

What distinguishes between a human being and an animal? The *Pasuk* defines it very precisely (Koheles 3): “*ruach ha’odom*

*ha’oyloh l’maaloh, v’ruach ha’beheima yoredes l’matoh.*” An animal is naturally drawn towards physicality and materialism. That is all that is important to it. This is also the characteristic of the *nefesh ha’bahamis*, where the faculties of the intellect are merely tools to enable it to better pursue its desires (which is why, in the

***In contrast, a human being is naturally drawn to that which is above him. By his very nature, all of his actions are governed by his intellect. Man walks upright, as a reflection of his character in which the mind controls the heart and its expressions.***

sixth *perek* of *Tanya*, the *middos* are listed before the *seichel*).

In contrast, a human being is naturally drawn to that which is above him. By his very nature, all of his actions are governed by his intellect, which possesses the innate nature of seeking what is just and true, without any ulterior motives. Man walks upright, as a reflection of his character in

which the mind controls the heart and its expressions.

But sometimes man loses his sense of direction. Rather than being drawn towards spirituality, towards G-dliness, he runs off to Mexico, to Cancun (as a matter of fact, the Israelis, who were offended by the reference to a non-Kosher animal, reportedly changed the name to Cancun-disease). In Cancun there are breathtaking beaches, a multitude of hotels, and endless entertainment for tourists.

But you can be sure, no one is traveling there in order to nourish their *neshamos*. In fact, the name of one of the popular hotels there, “Temptation Resort,” goes a long way to enlighten us about what motivates people to travel there.

Presumably one can find there Kosher food, a daily *minyan*, and even a *daf yomi shiur*. But the purpose of going (to that part of Mexico) – unless it’s for *shlichus* – is to cater to the whims of the animal – the swine – that resides within each of us. Which explains why the flu bugs, floating around Mexico, may have become very mislead with regards to their destinations.

The fact that we are being warned of a worldwide pandemic, is an indication that this situation may be a reflection of the overall state of mankind in today’s society, one that may call for some serious introspection from each of us. How are we leading our own lives, as human beings, or as . . . well . . . as swine? Is our primary goal to do something that the *Eibishter* wants, to enhance His presence on the world and bring ourselves closer to Him? Or are we seeking more ways of finding gratification for the animal (with whom we share our body), even if it’s gratification that has a valid *hechsher* from



Since travel restrictions to Cancun have been imposed, the author has included the following picture, so that those who wish can be yoitze with *b'makom sh'machshavto shel odom shom hu nimtzo*.

was the behavior [befitting of] an animal, so too is her korban comprised of animal fodder).

It is the time of the year when we especially focus on correcting these faults, on redirecting ourselves towards living as human beings, on striving towards G-dliness. Forget about the imagined gratification that the animalistic soul will derive from sitting on the beach chair in Cancun. Try instead to cater to the interests of the neshama. Because, in truth, we are not animals, whose sole aim is to pamper their bodies; a good restaurant, an exciting trip, or a thrilling game.

We are human beings, and we have to behave as such.

So, you can put away your surgical mask. The best antidote against *dovor acher disease* is by behaving less like a DA. Learn another maamer Chassidus, another blatt Gemara. Daven like a chassid. An Odom is, by his very being, a reflection of G-dliness (eidameh la'Elyon), and the more effort we put into actualizing this, into living this way, the less chance there is of us being mistaken for swine.

L'chaim! May we all take advantage of these days to elevate and refine our nefesh ha'bahamis, and allow the nefesh HaEloki – the odom (*b'gematria "mah"*) to prevail, until through this we come to Shavuot when we commemorate with a korban of maachol odom!

every possible Rabbi?

This is the time when many of us are formulating our plans for the summer (and/or for the coming year). What are our criteria? Are we looking for good company, lots of fun, and perhaps to make an easy buck? Or are we genuinely interested in listening to the call of our neshamos, to discover its preferred destination, the place where its goals would be best realized?

### ANIMAL FODDER

It is especially noteworthy that,

besides the place, the time of the outbreak of this epidemic was also very significant. The days of s'fira are the time that is earmarked especially to preoccupy ourselves with the animal within us. The Korban of the Omer was brought from barley, animal fodder, because the days of the Omer are for transforming the nefesh ha'bahamis. For this reason, as well, we learn Sota these days, in which the Mishna says (Sota 2: 1): “keshem sh'maaseho maaseh b'heimah kach korbonoh maachal beheimah” (just as her behavior

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