

## Cover Story



# Calling for a new ethos

Haviva Pedaya says the coronavirus is an 'apocalypse' requiring a novel code of ethics

By Peggy Cidor

Prof. Haviva Pedaya: I refer to the pandemic as an 'apocalypse' since it connotes the end and the beginning of an era

**PROFESSOR AND** poet Haviva Pedaya, one of the most creative voices in Israeli academia, believes the novel coronavirus pandemic is "apocalyptic" and requires a new ethos and code of ethics.

"I refer to the pandemic as an 'apocalypse' since it connotes the end and the beginning of an era," Pedaya says in an exclusive interview with *The Jerusalem Report*. "As I see it, we are heading towards a new version of post-modernism: While many of our systems would like to return to normal, others will be busy drawing lessons."

Pedaya is married to David Sorotzkin, has one daughter and lives in Beersheba. She was born in Jerusalem in 1957 to a family of Kabbalists from Baghdad. Her great-grandfather, Rabbi Yehuda Fatiyah, and her grandfather, Shaul Fatiyah, were renowned Kabbalists. She studied Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, graduated from the Jerusalem School of Visual Theater in 1991, and holds a doctorate in Jewish philosophy.

In 1987, Pedaya was appointed a lectur-

er in the history department at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and since 2009 she has headed the Elyachar Center for Studies in Sephardi Heritage, holding the Estelle S. Frankfurter Chair in Sephardic Studies. She was a senior fellow at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, where she has led two research groups – *Piyyut* (Jewish liturgical poetry) and *The East Writes Itself*.

She is the recipient of the Gershom Scholem Prize for Kabbalah Research in 2018, the 2012 Yehuda Amichai literary award, and the 2004 President's Literature Award for her book of poetry, *Motzah Hanefesh* (Origin of the Soul). According to Pedaya, "the condition of animals is a mirror of the human condition."

Her first prose book, *Ein HeHatul* (Eye of the Cat), includes stories of the animals she cares for. As a Mizrahi (descendant of local Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa) feminist, she has participated in various Mizrahi cultural events and organizations, and is a fierce critic of the way, she believes, society continues to oppress

women.

Pedaya's early research dealt with the birth of Kabbalah in Provence, France, as well as Nachmanides and his students in Spain in the 12th century. She later began researching the hassidic movement of the 18th century, focusing on Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the charismatic great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer) who revived the hassidic movement by combining Kabbalah with Torah scholarship.

In her book, *Hashem veHamikdash* (God and the Temple), she deals with the concepts of heavenly Jerusalem, the apocalypse and Kabbalah. In her two books on Nachmanides, she discusses hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) and the Land of Israel, the relationship between the symbolic and the concrete, and how it applies to the categorization of texts and attitudes toward the Jewish Diaspora. Currently, she is focusing on the issue of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – the site of the First and Second Temples.

One of the ideas that sets Pedaya apart



Pedaya with her father, Chacham Eliyahu Ovadia, a few months before his death

from other researchers of hassidism early in her career was her argument that it is one of the major expressions of Jewish modernism, as opposed to other scholars who believe that the Enlightenment is the best expression of Jewish modernism, while they perceive Hassidism as archaic.

Pedaya is also one of the founders of what has been called “The Piyyut Revolution,” establishing “The Yonah (Dove) Ensemble” to create a renaissance of mystical and liturgical music from the Near East, a movement that has brought back Jewish liturgy, mostly Sephardi in origin, to the front stage. It was a dramatic move that created a stylistic change in Hebrew music, which some define as a revolution. Pedaya spoke to the *Report* via Zoom, first addressing her views on COVID-19.

*Since the early days of the coronavirus crisis, you have called for a new ethos to face it. What are the guidelines of these new ethics you advocate?*

I called this event “the first global event,” because it is the first that unites the globe behind a set of behaviors forced upon it by

an emergency it was totally unprepared for. With some local variations, this involved the suspension of external public space combined with stressful behavior, given the growing morbidity and mortality rates.

When a single virus ignores petty human distinctions between superpowers and abject minorities, so too the new ethics we formulate should clearly be based on rules that fulfill our needs in these unprecedented times, and apply them to all nations and social classes.

Politically speaking, no leader may be

allowed to harness the collective state of emergency for his or her own interests. Economically, no company or business may be allowed to take advantage of the state of emergency to hoard or overcharge for products in high demand such as masks, swabs or foodstuffs; what (Canadian author and social activist) Naomi Klein called a “capitalism of disaster.”

*Are you pointing the finger of responsibility at Western civilization?*

The West tends to focus on threats of a kind for which it is largely responsible, such as the migration waves following international power struggles and wars, and the depletion of global resources. It has idolized the information revolution and artificial intelligence, while geopolitical and ecological disasters destroyed the homes of millions worldwide, claiming the lives of myriads of lives.

At the same time, and as the power centers of the Western world deafened their ears to the ever-louder siren approaching from ignored the planet’s socioeconomic margins, and the combination of the climate and environment crisis change, a double-edged sword is being thrust right in the belly of the West, causing panic in its capitals. Now the West grapples with its own problems, while it disregard the rest of the world, that can be looted while ignoring its global implications on the world. It is all about the West now, with no far-flung colony or rogue state on which to lay the blame.



COURTESY

Pedaya with poet, Erez Biton, at a conference following the submission of the Biton Committee Report on ‘the empowerment of the Sephardi and Mizrahi heritage in the education system,’ of which Pedaya was a member



IRAD MARCIANO



5. Pedaya with artist Itzik Badash and singer Dikla at the premiere of 'Hilula L'Em,' the opera Pedaya wrote following her mother's death

*Let's go back to the beginning: How did you characterize the initial ethical responses to the outbreak?*

Some hope for or fantasize about a Darwin-esque or a *War of the Worlds*-like redemption in the form of a "natural" vaccination and "herd immunity." The opposite view is held by the humanists, who perfectly understand that the death of even many thousands is incomparable to the disasters that strike our planet on a daily basis, yet remain pessimistic. Why? For the very simple reason that the statistician thinks of humanity in terms of nameless, alien numbers, whereas the humanist, or Buddhist, sheds a tear with and for every individual, as does God.

*Let's take one step further: What should be done the day after?*

In a certain sense, we are already in the beginning of a new era, and the gradual resumption of routine worldwide will flesh it out. I refer to the pandemic as an "apocalypse" since it connotes the end and the beginning of an era. As I see it, we are heading towards a new version of post-modernism: while many of the systems would like to return to normal, others would be busy drawing lessons. The global balance of power between empires, states and corporations has changed. Whereas many would want to return to the familiar routine and keep existing systems unchanged, others would like to move forward and realign power re-

lations.

The global experience of the virus has essentially been a rare and unpredictable experience of re-territorialization: a withdrawal into the narrow boundaries of the nation state, the city and finally the home. This effect will not be soon forgotten, particularly as scientists warn that a second outbreak would increase the pressure on systems already in a state of emergency, whose degree of preparedness has yet to be determined.

Thus, we are now witnessing a simultaneous back-and-forth movement, outwards in the direction of ongoing globalization, and inwards as each country seeks to hide behind its national borders and individuals seek, or are forced to seek, safety in their own homes. Unified to the extreme under the auspices of capitalist globalization and the wings of the imaginary, we are now forced back to the real, to the body, the individual and collective body. When the siren test ends, we will have to ask ourselves whether we are willing to stay united and to protect the global body. To do so, we must have a new global ethics that transcends and even counteracts corporate or political interests. We must have it now.

*What about people here in Israel?*

The Israeli economy has screeches to a halt in a desperate attempt to stem the pandemic tide and compensate for past hubristic miscalculations. Now, the government

PELEG LEVY



6. Pedaya giving a lecture on Jewish music at Bar-Ilan University

must immediately propose a New Deal, an emergency socioeconomic plan to help citizens keep their heads above water, rather than abandoning them to anonymous oblivion like so many numbers under the guise of maintaining public health. Effective immediately, such a plan must support laborers, freelancers, small businesses and all those lacking assured income, as well as including the elderly. The same goes for the rest of the world, and this will require global attention, particularly where the sounds of the siren have been most stubbornly ignored. Some blueprints for such a plan already exist.

Proverbial pied pipers on both sides of the Atlantic have promised, implicitly at least, that we would survive the plague but this time at the expense of the old rather than the young. I suggest, rather, that instead of [US President Donald] Trump's policy embodied in the saying that "the cure can't be worse than the disease," we adopt policies promoted by their predecessors during the Great Depression and World War II. We must begin planning for the remedy while the crisis is still unfolding, based on the Keynesian concept that in times of economic depression and unemployment, the government must intervene intensively in the market, and act to jump-start economic growth. *Laissez-faire* at this juncture would literally mean letting the virus do its worst.

*Is this really an apocalypse?*

Not in the sense of the ancient Holy



PELEG LEVY

7. Pedaya with Sabha Abu Ramna, a member of an association in Rahat for empowering women, and Yoni Gold Amit, lecturer at Shenkar, where Pedaya taught for a few years

Scriptures, which may be read naturalistically as foretelling the end of civilization as related to the climate crisis. But a serious postmodern world threat rushes in not only from the four winds of heaven but also from the depths of its own subconscious. It emerges not from the intoxication of enlightenment as in modernity, but from the intoxication of a capitalism already embedded in a post-modernism humanity, which down to its deepest core is simply unable to conceive the reversal of the equation of master and slave, a situation whereby the being defied by the very cosmos it tyrannizes and whose resources it vandalizes would dare defy its rule. This is therefore the most reckless stage of capitalism, and the one most difficult to restrain.

I am protected within my domestic fortress as thousands die worldwide, but as the pandemic threatens to keep accelerating the pace of its spread, these anonymous strangers who fall ill and die do so at my doorstep, crying out to me just like the victims of previous genocides, stubbornly reminding me that everyone has a name. The self-assuredness of Western political leaders, currently eroding under the force of circumstances, reflects an implicit willingness to “shave off” two percent of the population that may turn out to be twenty, when the bells choose to toll true. This means letting “nature” roll the dice, letting “natural selection” select, taking us directly back to the modernist concentration camp

mentality of who goes left and who goes right. In some cases, this is even stated explicitly, in terms of a “tolerable” increase in the mortality of our senior citizens.

*Doesn't that brings us back to the ethical question?*

Yes, absolutely. Humanity, and the Western world in particular in its self-pretense, is notoriously complacent when it comes to catastrophes, but in the midst of the dizzying rush of postmodern life and its virtual neoplasm comes a plague to call it to a halt. If our leaders persist in fantasizing about “herd immunity” they will drain the remaining trust of communities and individuals in the ethical basis of every society, rendering meaningless the question of what we live and work for, as this would be a transparent abandonment of a very particular age group to the ravages of the virus. This is the ethical day of reckoning for all human systems. Each of the systems involved in the crisis is and will be exposed in its miserable nakedness – the bare, brutal skeleton of hardheartedness on which the body of global, postmodern capitalist society is hanging by the tendon. Whatever its choices in the near future, it will only hasten its collapse if it chooses the economy to the detriment of health. Taking the side of statistics and choosing numbers rather than names, means being indifferent to the death of our grandparents, while turning their treatment into a mere nuisance. Narcissist

hyper-capitalism has dealt itself a boomerang blow, and the global citizen must heed the siren. In terms of our ethical system, the disregard for the old and wise has been exposed, with longevity becoming something of a derogatory term.

*Does Judaism have an appropriate answer here?*

Traditional Jewish mutual responsibility (*arvut hadadit*) is urgently needed right now, or Husserlian inter-subjectivity at a scale humanity has not been required to adopt since the dawn of civilization, having been united perforce due to the pandemic. We need not raise our eyes in expectations of the new world paradigms after having overcome it. In Israel locally, the quick steps taken to control the spread of the virus, including the closing of its borders inspired by the religious valuing of human life and a strong national siege mentality, appear to have been effective. Still, it would require greater patience and a willingness to envision a requisite moral backbone for a reformed human society. Perhaps we need to be reminded here of the wrath of Jonah, the narcissist prophet, who turned his back on his mission at the cost of the destruction of a mighty city and its myriads, failing to understand the concept of compassion and repentance: two traditional – but now apparently radical – ideas of mutual human commitment and hope for change. ■