The Covid-19 epidemic is presenting the world with situations that have not been faced in decades.

A potentially fatal infectious disease is spreading throughout the globe and we are as yet unable to prevent it via vaccination or treatment other than supportive care. This transfers classic halachic discussions regarding plagues in the past from the realm of the theoretical to the practical.

Modern medicine has not yet given us a solution to the pandemic, but it has given us the knowledge at this point to understand the method of disease spread.

The primary mechanism is a droplet, meaning that virus particles contained in bodily fluids sprayed via a sneeze or cough will infect another person if it reaches their respiratory tract via their mouth or nose.

The virus can live on surfaces as well, but will only infect another via hands bringing it to the mouth or nose. This knowledge leads to the importance of the implementation of public health interventions such as maintaining a physical distance between people (keeping them too far apart for the droplets to reach), wearing masks (reduces the distance of droplet spread and minimizing contact between the hand and the mouth) and hygienic measures such as hand washing.

As the disease rapidly spread around the world, even more drastic measures needed to be implemented to slow down the process including the closure of schools, businesses and general lockdown.

Some of these measures protect us, but many of them are also for the protection of spreading the disease to others. In this manner, the pandemic leads us all to be cognizant of our obligations to others and the concept of the commandments Bein Adam leChavero (between one person and another).

Tradition holds that the Ten Commandments, the receiving of which we celebrate on the holiday of Shavuot, were divided equally between two tablets, five commandments on one and five on the other. The five on one side are commandments between Man and G-d and the other are the commandments between Man and Man. The Mechiltah of Rabbi Yishmael on Yitro points out the symmetry between the commandments. Lining up commandments 1-5 with commandments 6 – 10 puts lo tirzach – do not murder, parallel with the first commandment “I am the Lord your G-d.” In this Midrashic explanation, one who murders a human who was created in G-d’s image diminishes the image of G-d.

For the vast majority, murder seems far-fetched. Perhaps, for this reason, our Sages give day-to-day circumstances where we might touch upon this prohibition. For example, the Talmud (Baba Metzia 58b) states, “One who embarrasses his fellow in public, it is as if he has committed murder.” Thus improper use of the tongue via hurtful speech produces something within the spectrum of the prohibition of murder.

Improper use of the tongue is listed as a direct commandment in the verse found in Vayikra 19:17: לא תלך רכיל בעם יז. One explanation of the first clause is that it contains the prohibition of gossip and the second clause is an obligation to save others. There is no vav joining the two causes of the verse, so it is possible that they reflect two separate commandments.

On the other hand, they do share the same verse, and thus commentators such as the Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, finds a connection between them. He uses the juxtaposition to point out that if there is a need to share information to save others then one is permitted to do so. Thus, in the context of Corona, it would be halachically proper to report someone who is endangering others by violating the terms of quarantine.

While praying for this pandemic to end, and for the speedy recovery of all those infected, let us think for a few minutes about our tongues, our hands and our obligations to others. Both literally and metaphorically, let us frequently wash our hands and cover our mouths, using them not to hurt others but to help them.