

Note: this essay-in-story-form is a companion piece to *The Infected City*. As has happened to me before (notably with *The Consciousness of Earth*), the attempt to write about a subject in prose gave way at a certain point to the composition of a poem. This time, after finishing the poem, I returned to the prose piece, and am sharing it in the hope that the prose narrative may help to "ground" the perceptions and suggestions of the poem.

After sending out the story, I had some discussion with a perceptive reader, which I have added as a postscript.

TAMIMA AND THE LIZARD QUEEN  
a reality check

Guess reality is not what it seems  
Judee Sill

One morning over breakfast, when the corona pandemic had been going on for about six months, Tamima thought to herself: I am living in a novel written by Thomas Pynchon.

Way back in 1973, she had picked up a copy of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and had read it through for some reason, though the experience wasn't altogether pleasant. The writing was clever in a supercilious kind of way, but the characters had all the depth of cartoon figures, and every one of them had some grotesque belief or agenda, except for the protagonist or rather the butt of the story, a naïve lady who was trying to understand what was going on but never got much of a clue. Although the figures were recognizable caricatures of trends already present back then, the atmosphere was garish and vulgar beyond anything she expected to actually encounter in real time. Until, over breakfast on that particular morning, going on half a century later, she read that a speaker had been bumped from the speakers list at the Republican National Convention for retweeting a nasty thread put out by a conspiracy-theory conspiracy (is that clear?) called Qanon. Actually it seemed some supporters of Qanon were still on the speakers list.

At that point....

Thinking about it, she realized that the feeling had been growing on her for some time. It had certainly been almost full-blown a couple of nights previously, when she'd watched that movie *Plandemic*, which was said to be based on a conspiracy theory. She hadn't found a name for it then; she'd just felt shattered. But when did it start?

Maybe it had started with the realization, a few months back, that some close friends of hers were into things she considered a bit, well, marginal. (Not that her own

thinking was exactly mainstream, but still...) One of them had posted on Facebook about a New World Order. Another kept telling her about the Illuminati, who were allegedly plotting to reduce the world's population; the Queen of England was said to belong to this organization and had been observed turning into a lizard. And Tamima, in the course of futilely trying to keep a group of writers together, had found herself polemicizing with a writer who had turned from writing about her own experiences to uncovering sinister plots in high places, who asserted among other things that the Freemasons were controlling the world and practiced Satanic rites derived from those of the Templars.

Tamima felt very uncomfortable with all this. Any suggestion that the world is controlled by some specific evil "cabal" (a word derived from "Kabbalah") always made her flash on "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" (which, she understood, was enjoying something of a rerun these days).

And yet ... When she griped about all this to a correspondent, the response came back: "History is a conspiracy." Furthermore, in the course of arguing with the writer who had attributed dire plots to the Freemasons, she googled a few of the other matters that writer had brought up, and in her last riposte had to make some concessions:

On the other hand:MKUltra/Monarch and Operation Paperclip – spurred by Hulda's essays, I've checked it out – happened. The kidnapping of Yemenite babies happened. The Mossad does not play by Marquess of Queensbury rules. All of our authorities are untransparent and we really have very little idea what they are up to. If the imagination of "conspiracy theorists" embroiders on these realities, they have plenty of material to work with. Do I really want to line up with the respectable people who say it's all just conspiracy theories, go back to sleep...?

She tried to strike a balance:

The reality is that there are in this world a certain number of people ("the wicked") who live to control and hurt and destroy others. They are found in various configurations, they affect different masks and aliases. In any given environment, they tend to gain power because they want it so much and the rest of us have better things to do and don't want to get our hands dirty. The "global village" created by technology of course fosters international alliances of such people. But even demonic humans are only human, which means they are always bickering among themselves. That is part of what makes it possible for the rest of us to survive.

This helped arrange things in Tamima's own mind, but didn't seem to alter anyone else's thinking. The friend who had told her about the Illuminati said to her, "There is such a thing as black magic." And Tamima had to admit that when it came to strange ideas, she herself was perhaps not the one to start pointing fingers.

She'd grown up in a rationalist environment – her father had been a scientist – and this had given her an indelible respect for the laws of nature, or say the logic of Creation, and had made her slow to credit things that seemed beyond the bounds of nature. But she did have a tendency to believe in *signs*, or at least not to ignore them. That was connected with her literary training. Part of literary analysis as it had been taught to her consisted of seeing patterns of imagery, coincidences, odd connections that point to some underlying coherency. At a certain juncture in her life she'd suddenly started seeing a great many of them. They had arranged themselves, like iron filings around the poles of a magnet, around the collision between the poetry of Paul Celan, a Holocaust interim survivor, and her own too-susceptible brain. In the wake of this collision she had said to a therapist, "G-d is an author with a heavy-handed sense of symbolism." If she'd seen rightly, then there were in fact forces in the world other than material forces. And if you accept this, where do you draw the line? Freud of all people, at the end of his life, admitted the existence of telepathy and saw the "slippery slope": if such forces could bring about a meeting of minds between two people distant from each other, then who was to say what else, in greater concentration, they might bring about?

She herself, at the start of the pandemic, had written a poem identifying the corona virus as an expression of evil forces. In a Kabbalah class she attended, people had noted that the word "corona" means "crown," or in Hebrew *keter*, which is the name of the highest of the Sefirot, the Divine emanations. (A sign...?) Another name for Keter is Ratzon (will), so people were trying to figure out how this nasty plague could be an expression of Divine will. Then Tamima remembered reading somewhere that besides the ten emanations of holiness there are also ten emanations of uncleanness, and that seemed to fit the corona virus to a T. So she'd written this Hebrew poem in the form of a "corona." (Someone had reminded her of this very complicated form, just at that juncture. Another sign?) In her poem the coronavirus figured as one expression of the force that produces decay and death, that attacks social cohesion, the social body, as well as the individual body. That force has other expressions. Like corporate culture, which, as has been pointed out, acts in many ways like a virus. The poem had also alluded to the fact that one effect of the corona pandemic was to strengthen the grip of the corporations, through corporate welfare and the destruction of small business.

So the poem had taken the coronavirus as a *metaphor* for corporate culture, though it had stopped just short of asserting a *causal* relation between what lit-crit calls the "tenor" (corporate culture) and the "vehicle" (coronavirus) of the metaphor. (Could that be the line between poetry and paranoia?)

That was several months back; the rather abstruse poem had not gotten much of a response, and its thesis, such as it was, had moved to the back of her mind. But then, a week or so after her last post in the exchange with the "conspiracy theorist," another friend sent out that movie *Plandemic: Indoctrination* to her personal email list.

Subject line: "An absolutely must watch film." Tamima, after some internal debate, went ahead and watched it.

Here the reader may choose between pausing to watch the film "Plandemic" -- <https://collectiveevolutionmedia.acemlnc.com/lt.php?s=dbe46be0831cc51c0dca918fd918497d&i=1289A1417A15A17986> (unless it's been taken down) -- or reading Tamima's notes. Or, of course, just clicking the little x in the upper right hand corner. Who wants to think about this kind of thing? Unless of course you get some kind of thrill out of imagining the Queen of England turning into a lizard. (Though this particular movie doesn't mention lizards.)

So here are the highlights of the notes Tamima took upon viewing the movie for the second time (some names deleted for reasons explained in the Postscript):

It opens with footage from a discussion of the World Economic Forum and the [Who-Shall-Be-Nameless] Foundation in October, 2019 about an exercise (Event 201) simulating a worldwide pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus, which will create problems that can only be solved "by global business and government working together." This, it is anticipated, will lead to conspiracy theories. (Other anticipated phenomena were people avoiding public spaces, demand for supplies such as gloves and masks, overwhelming of health facilities, control of information in the interests of public health, tradeoffs between shutting down economy and spreading the virus, riots, economic and societal impacts that will last for years, breakdown of trust in government and social cohesion....) The event must have been scripted well in advance.

After that there's an interview between the filmmaker, Mikki Willis, and a Dr. Judy Mikovits, which seemed a bit of a sidetrack. The next speaker is David E. Martin, Ph. D., claiming to be an intelligence analyst who has worked for the government and analyzed patents. He and his associates monitored 168 countries for anything resembling biological and chemical warfare. In 1999 coronavirus patents started showing up. The Center for Disease Control (CDC is not a government agency but a privately owned agency of the large pharmaceutical companies) *patented* the virus, the means of detecting it, and the means of measuring it. Martin says that under the US code, nature is prohibited from being patented. If the coronavirus was natural, patenting it was illegal. If it was manufactured it was a violation of international law which prohibits germ warfare. Because of CDC patents, they can control who is allowed to look at the virus. In 2012-2013 the National Institute of Health had misgivings and ordered researchers to stop research on coronavirus -- but made the stopping *voluntary*, so of course no one stopped. But due to pressure, CDC offshored the research by funding the Wuhan lab – funding was run through a number of cover organizations. So China and the U.S. could blame each other.

Next comes Meryl Nass, who says she has been investigating diseases caused by artificial organisms and was convinced from the start that Covid19 was artificial. She notes an article that appeared in Nature Medicine by five scientists claiming the virus was a natural occurrence and not a construct, but she says the arguments do not hold water. But a lot of other scientists started "parroting" its findings. "Somebody must have made them publish this, and somebody must have told these other people that they have to say it's a great piece of science." The medical journals are all tied in with the CDC, the [WSBN] Foundation, etc.

The film then turns to fact-checkers and Google. They all publish the same reports – the ones Google wants us to hear. Google uses subliminal messages to manipulate public opinion. Dr. Robert Epstein, identified as a behavioral scientist, says their methods are the most sophisticated he's ever seen. Factcheckers use Google as base. Wikipedia has political ties. There is an "approved narrative." At the time of the swine flu epidemic there was mass vaccination and the public was not told about possibility of neurological damage which in fact occurred.

Martin thinks the lockdown is motivated by desire to keep people from assembling, to keep them isolated and dependent on the media "they" control. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 allowed a small number of large corporations to control the vast majority of reportage and entertainment. There is an industry that is paid to target whistleblowers. Most talk shows are owned by the same corporate overlords.

There is a clip of a man yelling at a television audience that they are being manipulated. "This is mass madness! You maniacs!"

Martin: "We are living in a time where leadership unfortunately is compromised. And by that I mean that individuals are placed in power for their ability to be influenced, not their merit." Example: WHO, funded mostly by Big Pharma, [Who-Should-Be-Nameless] foundation etc. Communist Party of China buys out leadership. The current head of WHO is the first WHO Director General not to be a medical doctor. Before his appointment he was a member of a "People's Liberation Front" which was brutal and corrupt. Friend of [Who-Should-Be-Nameless]. Had support of CP of China. Massive conflicts of interests.

Pharma CEOs no longer go to jail for misrepresenting medications but only pay fines, which they regard as part of the cost of doing business (Nass).

[Who-Should-Be-Nameless] has developed a strategy of patents held by holding companies (a swarm of corporate logos fills the screen). In 1998 he was tried for antitrust violations. "What non-Microsoft browsers were you concerned about in January 1996?" "I don't know what you mean by concerned." "What is

it about the word concerned that you don't understand?" "I'm not sure what you mean by it." To distract from negative press he set up the [WSBN] Foundation. [WSBN] describes vaccines as his "best investment." The foundation has investments in the worst polluters and corporate bad actors. Wants to vaccinate everyone. In 1986 Reagan signed a law making vaccine companies immune to lawsuits. Documentary footage stating that two major pharmaceutical companies administered an insufficiently tested vaccine to thousands of tribal girls in India, seven died, many were injured, the Indian parliament investigated and kicked out the [WSBN] foundation. No compensation for the victims. But the [WSBN] foundation is back in India whose citizens are again going to be guinea pigs for corona vaccine. An Indian politician says India is going to be "a good place for pharmaceutical companies to make a killing, and also kill a lot of people in the process." More about the harm caused in poor countries by vaccination programs. Africans used as guinea pigs. Strategy of population reduction. [WSBN] is involved in development of a program to inject your medical records under your skin along with the vaccine ("the quantum dot tattoo"). Also they are planning to launch a bunch of satellites that will make it possible to monitor everyone on the globe. Also they plan to make genetically modified mosquitoes into "flying syringes." Friendly relations between [WSBN] and J. Epstein. A vaccine in a year is not realistic so it may have to go out with insufficient testing ([WSBN]). No liability for companies. Trials have been done on 30,000 people – 80% experienced systemic side effects.

Martin: "This isn't a vaccine story, this is a population management story. If your goal is to make this beautiful earth that we live on an exclusive playground for the entitled few, then populations that get in the way are a problem, and it is the empirical (sic) impulses of individuals who have decided that by outranking the rest of society they can dictate upon humanity the conditions of their existence." Then we hear a woman, evidently in law enforcement, talking about identifying sick people and removing them from their families, and emergency regulations allowing police to enter your home without a warrant. Getting people to snitch on one another. We are being conditioned to accept tyranny. [WSBN]: "This won't be the last pandemic that we face."

Martin sums up: "This is our moment to reclaim our humanity ... the moment when the hero rises from defeat." Then comes a sampling of philosophy that struck Tamima as somewhat half-baked, and a plug for natural medicine, and some choreographed footage apparently intended to convey the idea of human resilience. Finally on a black screen the following lines of type appear:

Plan (noun)

A detailed proposal for doing or achieving something

Demic (adjective)

Characteristic of or pertaining to a people or population

End.

Tamima had made the mistake of watching this in the evening. She woke from dreams of which she remembered only that they had been extremely unpleasant, and suddenly felt as if her head was exploding. She felt that she must write something about this, on the other hand she felt as if her mind was shattered and she'd never be able to do it.

There wasn't much she could do to check all that out. One thing did check out, however: she could not find the film *Plandemic* itself on Google, only a brief and dismissive Wiki, no detailed refutation of its claims, only the statement that it was a conspiracy theory and a couple of allegations against Willis and Dr. Judy (she is anti-vaccine). So yeah, the censorship part checked out. She also felt that what the movie showed about the way the law was being used, was consistent with some impressions she'd formed in law school (in an access of mistaken practicality, she'd taken a law degree in the '90's). Later she found a number of videos on YouTube that attacked the film. They said things to the discredit of Dr. Judy, showed a different perspective on one of the laws discussed, pointed out that the filmmakers had an interest in promoting alternate medicine, which is also a big business. So the filmmakers also had an agenda. But the critics didn't go after what she saw as the most important claims of the film, namely that the coronavirus had been patented, that the event had been scripted, that [WSBN] operates through a system of holding companies, that [WSBN] affiliates were involved in deadly experiments in India, that there is a plan to inject us with our medical records (she gathers it's possible, with nanotechnology) and control us in other ways. The critics did nothing to dispel the impression created by the shifty facial expression of [WSBN] under questioning in 1998, and they didn't go after Martin or Nass. And if they didn't take on the film's main points, how trustworthy was anything that they said? Moreover, if the allegations were false, wouldn't they be grounds for a massive libel suit? [WSBN] and associates could certainly afford to hire the lawyers. Oh, and from the Internet it seems the "quantum dot tattoo" and the "flying syringes" are indeed ideas in which [WSBN] is interested.

In one other way the film seemed to her to check out, though this was harder to put your finger on. While the people who were accusing [WSBN] & co. seemed reasonably real, the people in that "Event 201" simulation, [WSBN] and all the other corporate spokespersons and announcers, did not. Their faces were in some way similar to the swarms of logos of the various corporations and holding companies [WSBN] was allegedly affiliated with, that filled the screen at one point.

Thinking about this, she remembered a poem she had written long ago, in the spring of 1968, a few months after starting to read Paul Celan.

## THE INVADED

They've got those suits now

(Oh darling I'm so frightened)

that fit you from neck to toenails

thick asbestos-filled and very tight.

A blow through one of those doesn't leave marks;

they take you out, dead and perfect as a bad girl in the gangster movies.

Last night a car passed the border.

They took the lids off the suitcases

the sides off the car

they scraped the passengers down to the tendons

and sent them on still with suspicious side-looks

for the red on their bones

In a dream I came and sat next to you

you did not look at me

I took your hand

it closed on mine then

died

was it one of them

the people we cut out of magazines

They walk around there are more than I

remembered they are lifesize flat and very brightly colored

You must try to tell me if you see one of them

I will try to tell you if I see one of them

the last movie was thirty hours long

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT CAN YOU HEAR ME

NOW I WANT YOU TO LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY

THIS IS IMPORTANT

In the back of her mind must have been a 1956 film called *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which she hadn't seen but which everyone had heard of. In that film, space aliens take over the bodies of humans who continue to look and act like themselves except that they are devoid of human feeling. The corporate types in *Plandemic* reminded her of "the people we cut out of magazines."

Other associations came to mind, observations she'd made over the years. She thought of a moment, sometime in the 1990's, when she'd walked into one of the few remaining independent bookstores in her city and saw that the atrium, where she and other local poets had often held readings to an audience of themselves and whatever family members they could guilt-trip into coming, was packed. The audience was spilling over into the side rooms. The people in the audience were all young, handsome men and women, dressed to the nines the way people dressed for corporate jobs in those years, the best and the brightest. The people she would have loved to reach with her poems... And what was the focus of their attention? On the platform a scrawny woman in a sleeveless blouse and cotton slacks was reading in a harsh flat voice from her book about *depression*.

Depression. Tamima remembered a Hasidic view – Rabbi Nachman? -- that depression (or "sadness") is the root of other sins. If she'd understood correctly, depression is a sign of being cut off from the Source of life, which is also the Source of joy,

Being in that system does things to people.

And she thought of another old poem of hers, also from the 1990's:

#### SUPERFLUOUS PEOPLE

We are the superfluous people.  
We are the unionized workers replaced by robots or slaves,  
the secretaries ousted by computers.  
We are the people of color, the over-50, the people with disabilities,  
the ones who don't belong on the team.  
We are the displaced homemakers,  
the parentless children,  
the partnerless parents,  
the poets without readers,  
the teachers without students,  
the students who can't afford college,  
the graduates who didn't get hired,  
the scientists without grants,  
the executives who got downsized.

Why is this?  
Isn't there enough work to do in the world?  
Aren't there enough stomachs to be filled,  
enough limbs to be clothed,  
enough babes to be rocked,

enough children and youth to be taught,  
enough neighborhoods to be beautified,  
enough trees to be planted,  
enough fields to be tilled,  
enough songs to be sung,  
enough stories to be told,  
enough riddles to be solved,  
enough wounds to be healed,  
enough houses and cities to be built right?

But the market does not ask these questions.  
The market cannot ask what people need.  
It can only ask what those who have the money  
want.  
Only community can ask  
what people need.

And time may be short.  
As slave labor replaces free,  
as machines replace people,  
as large corporations swallow up small ones  
and cut their staffs  
and buy up the press and the government,  
I tell you Spaceship Earth is flying  
with a shrinking crew,  
a skeleton crew  
with skeleton motives,  
and the rest of us are not passengers.  
We are ballast.  
And we feel the moment edging closer  
when we could be pushed off. ["Population management"?)

But let's keep our heads, my friends.  
Let us put them together.  
Together let us learn to ask the question  
what we, the people, need.

We are the superfluous people.  
Nobody needs us  
except ourselves.  
But if you'll say you need me  
I'll say I need you.  
And we can start.

Tamima thought of some of the types she'd seen around the state capitol building in her former home city. A man she'd been in an elevator with, a big man in an expensive suit, she felt a kind of hatred coming off of him, like he would zap her if he could, and the whole atmosphere of the Capitol hummed with an unholy sort of power, which she'd felt again emanating from the lawyer who'd represented the developers who wanted to ruin her neighborhood with skyscrapers, and of course the commission decided in his favor, so her pleasant scruffy neighborhood that could have been fixed up will be dominated by ice-cube trays in the sky. Living in places like that also does something to people.

And she thought of a conversation that had taken place in 1962 or 1963, where a personable young lad had tried a thought experiment on her: "Suppose you were on top of a high building and the people were just little dots on the ground below, and you had a high-powered rifle. Would you shoot them?" She'd said something like "Of course not! How could you even think of such a thing?" He'd insisted: "But they would just be little dots!" She could see he was pleased with himself for having shocked her. What had he gone on to do, she wondered now. Of course it's well known that if you start thinking of people as little dots or numbers or holes in a punch card, there are no limits on what you might be willing to do to them. The Shoah happened (she's heard IBM with their punch cards helped round the Jews up); why is anyone still surprised at anything?

There was also that tower she'd seen in the summer of 1970, the summer after Celan's exit, in Seattle – a new skyscraper shooting up over all the other buildings around it, and the glass in all its windows was black, and she'd thought of the Dark Tower in Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings*, which everyone had been reading in the '60's, and where the Dark Tower is the stronghold of the evil Lord Sauron who wants to rule the world and enslave everyone. Sauron, from Greek *sauros* (lizard).

Lizards. Literary imagination, "paranoid" political fantasy – maybe they were both just glancing off a sensing of something that was *there*, in the depths. Figure it out, Tamima. A system that links people together for the sole purpose of profit, in which there is no provision for family and community ties, for love of place – doesn't it strip people of whole dimensions of their humanity, press them down to what could be called a reptilian level? Maybe you still don't see the Queen of England turning into a lizard, but this is close enough.

Seeing that tower had given her a funny feeling, like seeing an image jump out of a book, and while she'd said aloud "The Dark Tower!" something in her said she was being silly. But she had put the glass and concrete of that tower into the elegy for Paul Celan that she'd started that summer.

Paul Celan – after all those years, her thoughts on most subjects still seemed to keep circling back to him. (Come to think of it, he was the reason why she'd bothered to pick up that copy of *The Crying of Lot 49* despite its garish cover: 49 was his age at

death, and she'd already read in a book by a rather disreputable Kabbalist that 49 was a significant number, signifying the border between the finite and the infinite, or something like that.) He'd lived through the Shoah only to see the forces of inhumanity operating in other ways. Not only did he expect the resurgence of anti-Semitism, but he was also aware of the siege of the mind by commercial culture. She'd read once that he'd said to someone, "Against manipulation there is no defense but solitude. And can anyone tell me today what is *not* manipulation?" In the poems, you couldn't always be sure what he was talking about, it was almost as if he was operating under some kind of censorship, but she thought he was talking about something similar when he wrote, for instance:

A flickering  
brain-lobe, a  
sea-fragment,  
hoists, where you live,  
its capital city [or: head-city], the  
unbesiegeable.

What had he meant by it? As with most of Celan's poems, Tamima could only say what it reminded her of -- namely the way we have become accustomed to being lied to on a constant basis, besieged by verbal, pictorial or auditory messages put there by persons or entities wanting us to think what serves their interests. It must have hurt him almost physically, as it would hurt a person with exquisite pitch to be subjected to a concert in which every instrument is out of tune.

Tamima had thought she had picked up (despite that reported line about solitude) in the depths of Celan's encrypted verse a thin-voiced hope that people would listen -- amid the cacophony, the pandemonium, of fakery, phoniness, hype, spin, marketing, post-truth and general cognitive dissonance -- that people would pick up on the note of truth and would try to sound it to one another.

Over the years she'd tried and tried and tried and tried to amplify that voice. She'd even come up with a plan of her own, a form of meeting and organization for people who might want to think together about how to fix things, who might be willing to divert some real brain power to fixing things, as opposed to just yelling or muttering about them. The people do need a plan of their own. But she'd never been able to get people to listen. She wasn't an expert on anything, she wasn't in the system, and people didn't really seem to believe in anything but the system any more. Like her father of blessed memory, with whom she'd had such terrible arguments, who hadn't liked the way things were going any better than she did, but who was always saying that things had to be done "through the proper channels."

Maybe the people who made "Plandemic" were trying to get people together? Maybe she could write to them, talk to them about her plan?

She tried to find out more about them. She went to the website -- collectiveevolution.com -- which the "Plandemic" movie had referenced. But she couldn't find a "Contact us," just an offer of a one week free trial subscription. And the site had a general garishness that was, well, a bit Pynchonesque.

It looked to Tamima as if this clue, too, had led nowhere. Really a lot like *The Crying of Lot 49*. We who still care, she thought, we who remember what humanity was supposed to be, have only each other.

But who was "we"? *Where* was "we"?

On the Sabbath after she'd watched *Plandemic*, dinner table conversation centered on *Plandemic* and on reptiles. Someone said, "It's like a movie where you can't get out of the theater." Tamima, without much hope, stated that she had been thinking about these things for a long time and she did have an alternate plan, if anyone would ever listen to it. The one who had made the remark about the movie said, "The trouble is, you speak in such a civilized way."

Tamima wasn't surprised. She had seen over and over that people seemed unable to get together on the basis of what they really believed to be true. They seemed to feel somewhere deep inside that only fakery could prevail in this world. If you tried to offer something else, if you came off as honest, they might pay you a few compliments. Afraid to take a chance, they looked for someone with a loud voice to tell them what to do or waited for sheer force of circumstances to decide for them, while telling themselves that whatever bubble they were in could never break. Even the corona, it seemed, had not convinced them otherwise.

And out there people were dying, people were being ruined, people were demonstrating and rioting without a clue as to what was really hurting them.

What a pity.

She thought again of the last lines of that poem "The Invaded," written at a time when she only half knew what she was saying:

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT CAN YOU HEAR ME  
NOW I WANT YOU TO LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY  
THIS IS IMPORTANT

She'd been thinking then of a play she'd seen on television (while it still carried some OK stuff) in which a child was trapped somewhere and the rescuers were trying to tell him what he had to do to help them free him. She thought, that's how it is. They are trapped, trapped by their own instincts as well as by those who want to enslave them. There must be something inside them that does want to get out, that could cooperate in their release.

Could that something ever be reached?

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#### APPENDIX: TAMIMA'S PLAN

So here is what Tamima had come up with over the years when she tried to think of a way out. [Author's note: a first reader told me to cut this section out, as she found it an "anticlimax." I wrote back: "It's what I most want people to read, even if it's not as exciting as all the conspiracy stuff. Dante had the same problem -- almost everybody finds the Inferno more interesting than the Paradiso, and I'm sure people said that to him at the time. He didn't cut it though." Puh-leese, people....]

First of all you have to start with a kind of vision of what humanity was supposed to be. Like what Scripture calls the image of G-d (tselem elokim). Somehow Celan's poetry had given her a feeling for what the phrase means. A sort of a holistic perception, not easily defined conceptually. But it seemed to imply a commitment to freedom, not primarily political, but starting with the determination of the mind to think what it thinks, not what someone else wants it to think. To resist manipulation. And yet to be open to communication. To distinguish between communication and manipulation. To *listen for the ring of truth*, for what comes from the tselem elokim in someone else. And this means also a determination to respect the tselem elokim in others, to try to communicate with them but never to manipulate them.

So suppose you have a core of people who have internalized this and are able to practice it with each other.

They could then think about pooling their knowledge. Each would take stock of his or her resources: what do I know, whom do I know that I could talk to.

They would need some kind of organizational armature, because when you get a set of people larger than, say, ten, there is too much to keep track of. So they would need to close the group at ten and yet find a way to communicate with other such groups. The best way would be to choose as representative *the one best able to comprehend and summarize what others have said*. As the community expands, a tiered structure would be created. (Like what Jethro proposed to Moses in Exodus 18, only from the bottom up rather than from the top down.) At the top would be a leader who would not be an autocrat but would represent the best thinking of the community.

This would of course require a lot of humility on everyone's part. It might just be possible if everyone could get scared enough to realize the time for ego trips is past. Here it would be helpful if everyone would study some teachings on the subject of

how to build a community based on truth. Like this one from the Talmudic tractate *Avot* (a name that can be translated "fathers" or "principles"):

There are seven things that characterize a boor, and seven that characterize a wise man. A wise man does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom or age. He does not interrupt his fellow's words. He does not hasten to answer. His questions are on the subject and his answers to the point. He responds to first things first and to latter things later. Concerning what he did not hear, he says "I did not hear." He concedes to the truth. With the boor, the reverse of all these is the case.

Tamima thinks that the first of these items might be problematic, because everyone must be assumed to have something to say, but there is something to be said for recognizing when someone knows more than you. But the rest is just like traffic rules, which make it possible for a lot of cars to move up and down the street without turning into a demolition derby.

In the same interest, Tamima thinks that meetings of the groups of ten should also be governed by "traffic rules." Human nature is human nature, and in most groups there is at least one person who likes to go on at great length, saying little, till everyone else is exhausted but too polite to call a halt, while others are timid about speaking up. The solution: sit in a circle, have people speak in turn going round the circle, with no speaking out of turn, and give each speaker a specific length of time, say five minutes, as measured by a timer passed from speaker to speaker. With order and length of speaking settled, the speakers can relax, and what they will say will come from greater depth than if they were arguing back and forth or jockeying to be the next to speak. Tamima has seen it start to work, when people were willing to try it for a round or two. It requires a bit of something like what Hasidism calls *bittul* (self-nullification).

Perhaps this seems plausible to Tamima because she's had experience writing formal poetry. True, she's written free verse, as exemplified above, but she's also written a lot in rhyme and meter, including forms that are supposed to be hard and are in fact impossible without a kind of letting go, where you just let it happen. She thinks that if people would approach the form proposed this way, there might be little miracles of communication and understanding, which would add up to something.

The working-out of the larger structure would take some experimentation. It's easy to imagine the tiered structure of groups of ten, but practically it would be hard for people to find time to meet more than once a week, and by the time you get a million people in this system there are six tiers. How then do you make the time for information to get passed from the bottom to the top, and conclusions to be relayed from the top to the bottom, between meetings? Well, perhaps in week 1 the original groups of 10 could meet, and in week 2 their representatives, who would then send back a message to the original group, and in week 3 the representatives of the

representatives, who would then send a message to be passed through the intervening tier to the original group. As the organization expands, from 10 to 100 to 1000 to 10,000..., the formal meetings of the original groups would become less frequent, but this could be compensated by ongoing communication among the members, probably in large part through the Internet. The meeting-places for the higher-level groups would probably also have to be "virtual," and for this a platform would need to be designed that would simulate the effect of participants sitting in a circle. Maybe a different kind of "social medium" could be invented, with some structural constraints that would discourage frivolous or superficial use. Or maybe a set of prayers could be written to direct the mind before even opening the Internet. It is such an awesome instrument, it ought to be handled with fear and trembling. There's also the question of the composition of the original groups. Tamima, as noted above, is something of a believer in serendipity, synchronicity, *hashgachah pratit* (detailed Providence) or however you choose to call it, so that if ten people happen to sign up for the group that is just now forming, there's a reason why these ten specific people should be communicating. But perhaps at some later stage they could be sorted into work groups on the basis of profession or other commonality. The kind of computer program that is now used for matchmaking might be adaptable for this purpose.

This level of thinking is not Tamima's forte. On the entrance examination for law school she found the scheduling problems quite difficult. She's always been fascinated by the Internet – as early as 1974 she anticipated it metaphorically – but the execution is another matter. She thinks that the idea needs some bright young guy, or maybe a bunch of them, to take it in hand and come up with the right algorithms or whatever they call them. They would just have to be able to connect and keep in touch – how can she put it – with a great simplicity that is at the heart of things, with the simple will to good that is behind Creation. It's there, she knows it's there.

She can't be sure, of course, but she thinks maybe it all goes back to the Tree of Knowledge. (Maybe no coincidence that the agent of temptation was a *reptile*). She's heard from people who know more than she does that the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life spring from a single root and will one day grow together again. Surely it's time.

When she turns back from such envisionings and sees again the enormous structure of corporate power, of global technocapitalism, her little attempts thinking her and others' way out of the matrix seemed microscopic and preposterous, like trying to raise an army of butterflies to storm that tower in Seattle. She thought of Egypt. The kingdom from which, according to the Midrash, no slave ever escaped. And yet once, according to Scripture, there was a great escape. And there are still spiritual forces in the world, there must be. She'd felt them after all, in that one encounter which had a dimension of the miraculous, even though so far nothing had resulted beyond knocking her mind out of the groove and giving it the impetus to think about these things. Wasn't it conceivable that at higher concentrations these forces might still shift the weight of determinism and get us back to the Garden?

Maybe what it needs is some kind of pulse from the Center, from the Divine Will.  
From the Crown of holiness. To focus prayer on that might help...

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#### POSTSCRIPT: Responses and Reconsiderations

"Tamima and the Lizard Queen" traces a thought process about an unusually persuasive "conspiracy theory" -- the film "Plandemic," which sets out to prove that the coronavirus was artificially manufactured and released by certain powerful individuals and groups, as part of a general agenda of social control. My autobiographical character ends by tentatively accepting, or being unable to dismiss, this theory. Two people wrote in with objections to the theory.

I want to share this discussion, in the interests of truth and at the risk of distracting from the main purpose of the story, which was *not* to determine whether this particular theory is true or false, but rather to analyze the causes for the proliferation of "conspiracy theories" in the current atmosphere and to suggest a response to those causes.

One person pointed out a factual inaccuracy: whereas the film states that the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) is not a governmental institution but a private agency controlled by the big pharmaceutical companies, the CDC is in fact a government institution. (Though I learned in law school that regulatory agencies often end up dominated by the industries they purport to regulate.)

Rebbetzin Devorah Fastag, a writer on Torah subjects, gave reasons for doubting the theory and also indicated that according to halakha I should not have circulated it. First, she disputed the suggestion that if the assertions in the movie were false, the "accused" could have sued the filmmakers for libel. She wrote:

I do not believe that [...] or anyone else planned the pandemic, I think that's ridiculous. I do, however, think that it is quite possible that companies did try out the vaccine on Indian girls and Africans, which could be why they are not taking the writer to court for slander. Even if they would win on some counts, they could lose on others, which would really be bad for them.

This would indeed account for why they did not sue – though as to "ridiculous," in the light of the objection itself it would be difficult to put anything past them. I wrote back:

I do not think you are right to dismiss the idea of the "plandemic" as "ridiculous," if the basis for that feeling is that the idea is monstrous and outrageous. There was once a nasty little man who managed to do a great many monstrous and outrageous things, in part because people dismissed him for too long as ridiculous. In the latter part of the essay I try to show why I think we have to take these "conspiracy theories" seriously, even if they contain some inaccuracies and exaggerations.

To reinforce this point, two of the more grotesque ideas mentioned in the film – the injection of vaccination records via "quantum dot tattoo" and the use of genetically modified mosquitoes as "flying syringes"-- seem actually to be projects pursued by the persons accused

in the film (according to Internet sources which did not look to me like the output of "conspiracy theorists").

In her reply Rebbetzin Fastag raised a further objection:

... really, how could one patent the Corona Virus in 1999? It's not that I don't think that people could behave outrageously. Unfortunately, I know they can. It's that I don't think there's proof and I don't think there's a real motive, since he, himself could become sick from the virus just like anyone else. I do not believe that he would gain anything from it. But again, some of the claims could be real, especially the part about trying out the vaccines in a very bad way. That could have a motive and would not endanger the doers (unless they get caught).

But until there is true evidence, the kind that could stand up in court, you simply can't believe anything. People make up all kinds of lies. There are people who claim that the Jews blew up the twin towers and they could probably claim all kinds of motives and suspicious behavior.

In the case of Hitler, there was clear evidence of what he wanted to do. He wrote Mein Kampf. He said clearly what he thought. There was no problem of proof that he really and truly wanted to do terrible things, it's just that people couldn't believe he could really try it and get away with it. Here, however, there is no proof, it's all conjecture. I think that people like to find someone to blame, and they chose someone rich and powerful.

To this I replied:

Your argument that [...] could catch the virus as well as anyone is a good one, though I'm tempted to retort: "Maybe they have a good supply of hydroxychloroquine." Certainly they would be better able than most people to shield themselves from infection. And the film did suggest some plausible motives: the prospects of profits from a vaccine, the potential for social control through vaccination (the "quantum dot," which apparently is a real project), the opportunity for "corporate welfare" (most of the corona "relief" money went to big business), the elimination of the small business sector, which is a bastion of freedom, through the lockdowns. Furthermore, conservatives believe that the social chaos produced by the virus (and the perhaps deliberately-orchestrated panic about it) was part of the campaign to discredit Trump, like the race riots that followed.

As for there being no proof, there of course you are right, but that is not the end of the inquiry. A major aspect of the situation is that we are unable to evaluate what we hear from media sources, whether mainstream or "alternative." And we have reason to suspect that everyone has some motive for misleading and manipulating us. There is a very real assault against human freedom going on, whether this particular conspiracy theory is true or not, whether there is any central planning or not, even if it is merely a matter of some people pursuing their material interests ruthlessly and others taking the line of least resistance. And those who value human freedom need to think about how to put up a resistance.

To this Rebbetzin Fastag replied:

I do believe that there are those who have control over the media, and you certainly can't believe everything the media says, but as for many of the other claims -- such as the desire to discredit Trump -- this wouldn't make sense for the rest of the world, who are doing the same thing. And there are many countries with lockdowns, such as here, which I do not think have any desire at all to destroy small businesses.

I don't know. In the global economy everything is interconnected, and the actions of an American president, notably this one's attempts to cut China down to size, have worldwide repercussions. And I don't think the wish to destroy the small business sector can be ruled out at a motive, here or elsewhere; in any case, the motive would not necessarily be on the part of the countries ordering the lockdowns in response to a well-orchestrated, worldwide media panic.

Rebbetzin Fastag and I were closer on the ultimate meaning of the p[andemic]. Rebbetzin Fastag wrote:

But the main point of all of this is that there really is Someone who planned this pandemic. It is of course, Hashem. Anyone who gets lost looking elsewhere is missing the whole point. Hashem wants His world, but most of all us Jews, to do teshuva and He is showing the world that they are not as knowledgeable or strong as they think they are, that they need Him. And that is the plan of the pandemic!

In a later reply she repeated that "The issue is teshuva," and added: "Maybe your idea of people getting together in groups of ten and communicating could actually help people to do teshuva."

And in my final reply in this exchange I wrote:

Fastening suspicion on those who exercise a lot of control over the media isn't just paranoid fantasy, but the point is not just to point a finger at these people. It is rather to get people to look at *whom and what they have been trusting*. And this is an aspect of teshuva.

Rebbetzin Fastag wrote: "I agree that ceasing to trust those who are not worthy is an aspect of teshuva." However, she added a final caveat:

Also, I want to make it clear that although I think it's possible that Indian girls and Africans were used for vaccination trials, I don't connect this with [...] or any other individual. Nor am I saying that I know this is true, only possible. Until one has proof or real basis for suspicions, and not because of previous hatred, one cannot believe suspicions, and people should not be blamed. When there are people who are very anti an individual it is highly probable they will attribute to him that he did not do. When there are people who are very anti an individual it is highly probable they will attribute to him [things] that he did not do. [...] blaming an innocent person is prohibited (unless he is so very evil that you can believe anything about him). Unless you have real proof of guilt, it is wrong to believe such theories. Isn't there a rule that a person is innocent until proven guilty? One can be careful, that's true, but one may not believe what could very well be slander. And there can be a number of good reasons why [...] or anyone else would not want to sue people for making such a film. It would publicize the film much more, which would only hurt him even if he

won the case. People have a tendency to think "where there's smoke, there's fire". Even if he won the case, they'd say that, and they would claim that the court was bribed or whatever. The public would still remain with the idea that he was guilty. It is simply not worthwhile for a very famous person to pay attention to all the claims against him, unless he is so pressed that he must. It hurts him more than it helps him even if he wins.

In response to Rebbetzin Fastag's arguments, I have deleted the names of the "accused" from the text posted on derondareview.org, and have added this postscript. But I hope it will be clear that the focus of "Tamima" was not on specific persons, but on a process of which (if guilty) they are only some of the more prominent agents, in which we are all caught up, and to which it is high time to frame a *planned* response. (Please, reader, reread those last pages....)