

**Machon Puah**

**Rabbi Gideon Weitzman**

## **A “New” Theory of Disease**

Last time we examined the argument between Rabbi David ben Shlomo Ibn Avi Zimra, the Radbaz, who lived in Tzfat in the 16th century, and his contemporary Rabbi Moshe Isserlis, the Rema, who lived in Krakow. The Radbaz was of the opinion that a person cannot endanger themselves to save another person. The Rema disagreed and wrote that a landlord cannot block a tenant who has a disease from living in his quarters.

A reader, Rabbi Meir Salasnik, my Rabbi and boss when I worked in the Bushey United Synagogue, in London, wrote to me and presented a fascinating explanation. He noted that the Radbaz died in a plague that killed many in the Tzfat community, including the famous Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the Ari. However, the Ari was only 39 years old when he died, while the Radbaz lived a long life. Some say he was 94 years old, while others claim that he was 110.

At the same time as the Rema and the Radbaz, an Italian scientist presented a new theory of how disease was spread. Girolamo Fracastoro became a professor in Padua University at the incredibly young age of 19. In 1546 he proposed that epidemic diseases are caused by transferable tiny particles or ‘spores’ that could transmit infection by direct or indirect contact, or even

without contact over long distances.

This novel approach to epidemiology, or the spread of disease in populations, stood in direct opposition to the accepted opinion of Galen. The famous Roman physician and philosopher, Aelius Galenus, or Galen, proposed the miasma theory, or the miasmatic theory. This suggested that diseases, such as cholera, chlamydia, or the Black Death, were caused by a miasma, Greek for pollution, a noxious form of "bad air", also known as night air. The theory held that epidemics were caused by miasma, emanating from rotting organic matter.

Fracastoro took issue with this and claimed that there was no bad air but spores that spread disease. While this was suggested during the lifetime of the Rema and the Radbaz, it is possible that they did not know of this new theory and still held by the previous miasmatic theory. As such it makes sense that the Rema did not allow a landlord to eject a sick tenant. He did not recognize the danger of contagion from the ill occupant. Can we propose that if the Rema did know of the ‘spores’ theory, he would have agreed with the Radbaz? We cannot say with any certainty but it is an interesting suggestion.

More on this next week.