Shayla: How do you treat those who've contracted HIV/AIDS?

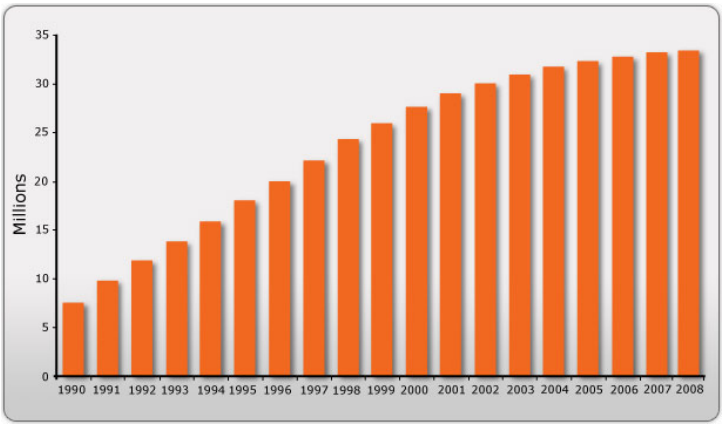
Responsa:

We consider HIV/AIDS to be the greatest humanitarian emergency in the history of the human family. It is estimated that there are currently around 33 million people living with HIV/AIDS. This curse has not only been visited upon adults. There are over 2 million children who also suffer from it. There were 2 million newly infected people in 2008 to replace the 2 million who died that year. That's nearly 5, 500 people dying per day.

More than 25 million have died of AIDS since 1981. It is forecast that about 70 million people will die by 2020.

AIDS is creating widows and orphans at an incredible rate. Teenagers are heading households, raising their siblings. Grandmothers are raising their grandchildren, having buried their own children behind their simple houses because of AIDS.

Today, the center of gravity of the pandemic is Africa. In Africa, there are 14 million AIDS orphans. The pandemic has been raging for over twenty years, while most of the world has slept. African pastors are burying people every day of every week; they are in the burial business. Many of those impacted by HIV/AIDS are our sisters and brothers in the Lord.



We are at the beginning of the pandemic, not the middle nor the end. Africa is only the first wave of an emerging global pandemic. China, India, and Russia – home to almost one-third of the world's population – have growing HIV prevalence rates and poor prevention efforts that could lead them to the situation in which Africa now finds herself.[1]

Many African churches have taken the lead in responding in prevention and care. A few Asian churches are doing the same. Churches in other parts of the world have been slower to respond. What is missing is global commitment on the part of all believers to provide what God has given them to the fight against this scourge.

HIV/AIDS is a complex and multifaceted pandemic with a wide variety of interacting causes, sustaining factors, and impacts. Therefore, this pandemic demands a holistic mission response from us.

What is our response?

To fight such a phenomenal disaster we must draw on a biblical worldview that seamlessly unites the material, psychosocial, social, cultural, political, and spiritual aspects of life; a worldview that deliberately unites evangelism, discipleship, social action, and the pursuit of justice. We must develop strategies and tactics that address the following issues:

Medicine. The virus destroys the immune system God created to sustain human life. The virus is complex and mutates easily. There are three major challenges before us: (1) developing vaccines; (2) promoting prevention and (3) providing medical care for the infected.

The Church should be teaching that Adonai is just as able to heal our physical ailments as He is our spiritual ones (Psalm 103:2-3). He has given us the plant kingdom in part to supply our need for medicines. (Ezekiel 47:12). Appropriately gifted and trained Adonaists should make the healing of the sick their sacred ministry (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3; 1 Peter 4:10).

[1] Chart from www.avert.org/worldstats.htm

Behavior. Values formation takes place in communities of faith. Where churches call for saving sex for marriage and sexual fidelity, infection rates are declining. The moral authority of Scripture empowers us to speak to the cause of this pandemic's spread.

We teach that careful obedience to God's moral and physical laws extends a certain amount of protection to God's people (Exodus 15:26; 23:25). Hashem gave us good general principles of sexual health that, if observed, can protect us from the tremendous risks run by foolish people (Exodus 20:14; 1 Corinthians 6:16-18).

Education. Today's youth generation is the largest in human history; they have never known a world without AIDS. On the one hand, youth account for half of all new infections. On the other hand, children and youth are the greatest hope of turning the tide against HIV/AIDS. Children establish the values that shape their behavior at an early age (Proverbs 22:6). Thus, we stress the importance of targeted biblical education for children.

Just as we teach our children about "stranger danger" we should openly speak of the social mores that drive the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic (Proverbs 4:14-15; 5:3-8).

Gender inequality. The virus disproportionately singles out women. In Africa, women and teenage girls are 5-6 times more likely to become infected than men. HIV/AIDS takes advantage of the low economic and social status of women, who have little control over sexual practice. Men's sexual behavior is one of the major drivers of this pandemic.

The church needs to be calling men to be the protectors of women, to return to the chivalrous ideals of the tzaddikim. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Ephesians 5:28; 1 Peter 3:7)

Poverty. HIV/AIDS reveals the fracture, stresses, and strains in society, exploiting disorder, inequality, and poverty. The virus seeks the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable. It destroys more quickly where nutrition is low, where health systems are weak, and where governments do not govern effectively.

Pastors, evangelists, doctors, teachers, civil servants are dying when they are in their most productive years. Fewer have the strength to farm and famine follows. Livelihoods are lost and economic opportunity fades. Losing productive adults, combined with children raising their siblings, tears the fabric of society with implications for generations. HIV/AIDS is consuming the future of nations.

We teach that we should be eager to help the poor (Galatians 2:10) and that ignoring the needy is a sin (Amos 5:12). We believe that helping the poor brings God's blessing (Psalm 41:1) for in doing so we honor Him (Proverbs 14:31). Our church routinely helps to support the poor in our community even if they do not attend our congregation (1 Timothy 5:5-6).

Cultural conversion. People suffering with HIV/AIDS are stigmatized and there is reluctance to discuss sex, death, and dying. Women, too often, are not permitted to inherit land when their husbands die. Along with these problems, sexual practices are imbedded in culture. Changing culture is hard work, which is why most people don't bother. However, God and His people are in the culture changing business.

We teach that we should not be conformed to this world's culture but that instead we should be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). We teach conformity, not only to the dogma of the Bible, but also to the culture of the Bible. We attempt "cultural conversion" in the hope and expectation that God actually knew what He was doing as He undertook nation-building using Israel as our template!

Justice. People living with AIDS can extend their lives through use of antiretroviral drugs only if treatments are affordable. In developing and transitional countries 9.5 million people are in immediate need of life-saving drugs; yet of these only 4 million (42%) are actually receiving anything at all. Debt, trade, corruption, and poor governance affect accessibility to adequate health systems, nutrition, and livelihood.

Who more than God's people should be concerned about justice? We are to act on behalf of those in need. As Hashem put it in Amos, "I want to see a mighty flood of justice – a torrent of doing good." (Amos 5:24)

Compassion. Following the lead of our Savior through whose stripes we are healed, throughout history, the church has cared for the sick and comforted the dying. We must vow to do the same today. A failure to do so will incur our Father's wrath.

- Isaiah 9:19 HCSB The land is scorched by the wrath of the LORD of Hosts, and the people are like fuel for the fire. No one has compassion on his brother.

Good discernment. Many Cultural Christian churches have too quickly and uncritically yielded to the temptation to wonder "who sinned, this man or his father" (John 9:2). Condemnation and judgment have replaced grace and compassion. Too many have been deceived into believing that HIV/AIDS can be reduced to biology and condoms alone.

We encourage our congregation to be as shrewd as serpents in regards to tactics but harmless as doves when it comes to our motives (Matthew 10:16). We urge them to look past the sin to the immortal soul within and to love the sinner while despising the sin (Jude 1:22-23).

The elder's call to action finds its root in a repentant spirit. We acknowledge that far too many times our practice of evangelism has been better at saving souls than creating Christian minds and creating Christian behavior. We believe that too many congregations have been slow to respond to HIV/AIDs. Acknowledging this, we encourage believers:

- to speak out on HIV/AIDS.
- to celebrate and learn from those who are already engaged in the battle.
- to encourage and speak prophetically to those who are not.

When we come to the Bimah seat, will we want any doubt as to where we were when this diabolical holocaust was visited upon humanity? We need to decide now what type of people we need to be and what strategies and tactics are needed in order to be able to face our Lord when this question comes. If the tzaddikim care for the sick and the dying, comfort the orphan and widow, share the Gospel message of redemption and transformation, disciple each other, and work for justice, then the worth and truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will shine like a light on the hill (Matthew 5:14) and the nations will stream toward it.

- Isaiah 42:6-7 HCSB "I, the LORD, have called you for a righteous *purpose*, and I will hold you by your hand. I will keep you, and I make you a covenant for the people *and* a light to the nations, (7) in order to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, *and* those sitting in darkness from the prison house.