

## "The Evil Diseases of Egypt": Rabbi Nissim Gerondi's Tenth Sermon

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The Black Plague was both the catalyst and the theme of Rabbi Nissim Gerondi's tenth sermon, a sermon clearly written to be preached before a congregation with the intention of preparing its members spiritually and emotionally for the impending crisis of the second outbreak of the plague in 1361. The sermon provides a rare example of a Jewish response to the Black Plague, particularly from its initial, devastating outbreak. On the basis on his medical knowledge and biblical interpretation, the RaN distinguished between natural illnesses whose causes lie within normal human physiology and unnatural illness which are inflicted on humankind through direct divine intervention. The RaN established that the Black Plague, whose symptoms deviated from those of all known illnesses, was an act of God, operating outside the parameters of natural law. On the basis of his interpretation of Deuteronomy 10:12-13 (the textual theme of the sermon), the RaN concluded that his generation, which had survived the first outbreak of the Black Plague in 1348, was similar to the generation of the Exodus. In both cases, those who witnessed direct divine intervention in the course of nature became uniquely capable of resisting the allure of the senses and reaching a state of spiritual elevation including the fear and love of God. While the observations and reactions of the RaN generally concur with those of his Christian and Muslim contemporaries, his description of the plague and attitude towards it may contain hints as to the relative severity of its impact within the Jewish community.