

“The Moses Vaccine”

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

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Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

How many of you get an annual flu shot or flu mist? It can be a life saver during this season right?! Even if you bump elbows instead of shake hands or never leave home without your travel size instant hand sanitizer, the germs are everywhere. Especially if you have kids or grandkids...or if you ever reach for a doorknob, or touch anything really that could have been touched by another infected person. I think the flu vaccine is fascinating...On the face of it, it seems absurd. I'm going to inject you with the flu...by the way *five strains of it*, so that you don't get the flu. The mist is referred to as LAIV, which stands for LIVE Attenuated Influenza Vaccine. That's live as in live virus—being sprayed into your nasal cavity! In fact studies show that some people decline the vaccine because they can't get over that intellectual hurdle. But of course the injection or spray of a certain amount of flu virus into your body triggers your body's immune system, which produces antibodies to attack the flu should you contract it in the future.

Well, with all this crazy weather we've been experiencing here in Washington, not to mention the scourge of strep and colds that has plagued my own house, I got to thinking about that vaccine—particularly in connection to our parasha. As Andrew described, this parasha features one of the most egregious sins the Jewish people commit against God. The commentators liken it to a bride cheating on her husband on their wedding night! There was Moses on top of Mt. Sinai, finalizing the terms of an eternal relationship between the God and the Jewish people He just rescued from Egyptian slavery, with unprecedented miracles and divine intervention never before witnessed in history. And when Moses tarries...when he doesn't return when they expect him to return...when they start to have *schpilches* and grow impatient, they don't pray...they don't give him the benefit of the doubt...they don't figure he's running on Jewish time, and might be a little late. No! They build an idol to replace him; A Golden Calf to comfort them, and give them a sense that they are not alone in the wilderness. We know what happens next...God is infuriated, and wants to destroy the entire people in one fell swoop. Moses counsels against that but can't restrain his own anger when he sees the people whirling and

twirling around the golden calf and he hurls those tablets down the mountain shattering them and the golden calf in the process. But the part of this episode I am particularly fascinated with is what Moses does in the aftermath of that rage. *Vayikach et ha'egel asher asu*, Moses took the remains of the calf which they had made, *vayisrof ba'eish*, and he burned it in fire, *vayitchan ad asher dak*, he ground it to powder, *vayizer al p'nai ha'mayim*, and he scattered it upon the water, and here's the kicker: *vayashk et b'nai Yisrael* and he made the Jewish people drink that concoction of water and burnt up, ground golden calf ash. Sounds like a wonderful aperitif doesn't it?

The question is, why did he make them drink it??? Wasn't it enough that he smashed the tablets that had been inscribed by God on Mt. Sinai? Wasn't it enough that he made a spectacle of utterly destroying this idol by burning and grinding it into dust? Didn't they get the picture that what they did was pretty awful? Every traditional commentary that I could find made one of two claims about this. Either Moses was trying to demonstrate the fact that this could not possibly be a god...No believer in their right mind would annihilate their god, then consume it, and then, you'll excuse the descriptive language, turn into excrement. But that's exactly what Moses wanted them to think of their golden calf idol. The other explanation claims that drinking the concoction was as a punishment. It surely didn't taste good, and many people got sick from it. It's kind of like an extreme example of washing the mouth of a sassy kid with soap. The punishment is the vulgarity—the very grossness of the act!

But I want to make another suggestion, that I have found substantiated in exactly *zero* commentaries, traditional sources, or scholarly texts. **I want to suggest that the golden calf dust water concoction was a not as much a punishment as a remedy.** What Moses gave to the Jewish people was none other than an ancient vaccine, in this case a vaccine against future outbreaks of idolatry. Nearly every vaccine, whether for the flu, or for tuberculosis, mumps, measles, polio, chicken pox, tetanus, you name it, involves using the very pathogen that you hoping to inoculate against. Sometimes the virus that's injected into your system is live, sometimes it's dead, and sometimes it's a protein or derivative of the virus...but the idea is to give the body a head start in building up a defense against a really threatening strain that could cause severe illness or death. And, remarkably, it works! Think of how many lives have been

saved, how many crippling, debilitating, agonizing diseases have been practically eliminated by these vaccines! It's a medical miracle! And that is precisely what I believe Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher, Moses our *Toxicologist* (there's no real Hebrew word for that), was trying to do. We live in a world of idolatry! We live in a world that worships so many gods...the god of money, the god of workaholism, the god of perfect physical appearance, the gods of gadgets and possessions and materialism, the gods of alcohol, food, and drugs. We still have golden calves everywhere...the golden calves of power, glory, and prestige that we so desperately long for. But the Jewish people have the antigen! We've got the vaccine! We received that shot long ago at Har Sinai, and it became part of our DNA. Judaism is nothing if not a sustained protest against idolatry in the world. A sacred reminder that the many idols we bow down to are just that, and that our attention, our service, our energies, our devotion should be to God and to increasing holiness, compassion, generosity, and goodness in the world. That is the highest calling! That is what we should aspire to and yearn for!

You know it's interesting: gold has been associated with medicinal uses for thousands of years. In ancient Alexandria, gold was thought to restore youth and stimulate the body's life force. In the Middle Ages, gold was administered to cure sore limbs; In the 1900's gold was implanted to relieve joint pain; Rural Chinese people have cooked rice with gold for time immemorial; gold has of course been a part of dental care for centuries, and up until recently gold compounds were also used to treat arthritis. It seems like Moses the Alchemist, Moses the Toxicologist was really on to something. Moses administered a gold potion to the Jewish people not as a cure for sore joints or to fill cavities or to lengthen life. He gave it to our ancestors as a powerful vaccine against the many dangerous strains and manifestations of idolatry in the world. May that remedy be as strong today as it was then, as we tear down today's idols, and take a stand for what is truly good and holy in our world.