

Adult Learning
Temple Beth Am
Rabbi Jason Levine
December 23, 2020

Jewish Community Statements on Vaccinations

Reform

Compulsory Immunization (CCAR Responsa, NYP No. 5759.10)

<https://www.ccarnet.org/responsa-topics/compulsory-immunization/>

1. Immunization is in the category of *refu'ah bedukah* or *refu'ah vada'it*, proven medicine, and as such is part and parcel of the traditional obligation to practice and to avail ourselves of medical treatment.
2. Because it can create the conditions that lead to herd immunity or community immunity, compulsory immunization is a vital aspect of the medical policy of society. So long as exemptions to vaccination requirements are granted to those individuals to whom the vaccines pose a particular medical risk, neither Jewish tradition nor our own Reform understanding of that tradition would object to compulsory immunization against disease.
3. A congregation is entitled, should it so choose, to adopt a rule that requires immunization of students before their admission to religious school.

Resolution on Mandatory Immunization Laws (Union for Reform Judaism, 2015)

<https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-mandatory-immunization-laws>

1. Affirms that in the case of mandatory immunizations, *pikuach nefesh* and *refu'ah bedukah* are our guiding principles. Reform Jewish religious tenets prioritize protecting the health of all individuals, the most medically vulnerable members of the community, and the community as a whole, and do not provide a basis for a religious exemption from mandatory immunizations.
2. Supports mandatory immunization laws, with the only acceptable exemptions being:
 1. Medical exemptions; and
 2. Religious exemptions, which must be suspended if community immunity is deemed at risk by public health officials.
3. Urges Reform Movement congregations and institutions to
 1. Adopt policies that require mandatory vaccinations with medical exemptions in programs that serve children and youth; and
 2. Educate members and the broader community about the scientific evidence and Jewish values in support of mandatory vaccinations.

COVID-19 Immunization: Should It Be Mandatory? A Conversation (Rabbi Mark Washofsky, The Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah, 2020)

https://www.freehofinstitute.org/uploads/1/2/0/6/120631295/mandatory_immunization_for_covid19_a_conversation.pdf

All of this suggests that Rabbi Yaakov Emden (18th-century Germany), and the entire tradition upon which his words are based, would regard the COVID-19 vaccines as

mandatory medical treatment. This is because immunization, unknown in Emden's time, is now accepted as proper medical therapy and because the COVID vaccines have been established as effective – “definitive” and “proven” therapies – by the consensus opinion among epidemiologists. On the strength of this scientific opinion, the halakhic opinion is clear: these vaccines should be mandatory for all, excepting those for whom the vaccines could pose serious and unacceptable health risks.

Should the COVID-19 immunization be mandatory? Yes, it should; no other response is halakhically correct or morally appropriate. But let the words of Rabbi Yaakov Emden remind us that in practice it is people – millions upon millions of individual people – who hold the power to decide whether to do the right thing. Our job is to persuade them to do so. We can do that, in part, by insisting that governments and institutions enforce vaccine requirements. We can do it as well through the personal example that we set through our own behavior. But we must also take the time to listen, with empathy and real concern, to those who resist that obligation. Unless we actually listen to them and try as hard as we can to engage them in productive conversation, we will never begin to rebuild their trust in science and in the expertise of physicians, the ones qualified to tell us just what counts as proven and tested medicine.

Conservative

Compulsory Immunization in Jewish Day Schools (Rabbinical Assembly, HM 427:8:2005)

https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2005/2010/prouser_immunization.pdf

Timely administration of vaccines with a proven record of effectiveness and safety is “a basic and necessary requirement for appropriate pediatric care.” Unless medically contraindicated for specific children, in extraordinary and compelling cases, parents have an unambiguous religious obligation to have their children immunized against infectious disease. By effectively removing their children as potential sources of contagion, and simultaneously contributing to “herd immunity,” parents fulfill a related religious obligation to remove hazardous conditions which imperil the public's health and safety. Failure to immunize children against vaccine-preventable disease is a serious, compound violation of Jewish Law: there is no basis in Halakhah to support a parent's request for a religious exemption from state-mandated immunizations.

“The opinion of the father and mother has no effect one way or the other... We do not find anywhere at all in the Torah that parents have a right to endanger the lives of their children by preventing the doctor from treating them.” [Melamed L'ho'il 2:104]

Furthermore, the obligation to remove hazardous conditions which place the public in mortal peril is also incumbent on Jewish educators, as well as on the administrators and trustees of Jewish Day Schools, such as those under the aegis of the Solomon Schechter Day School Association. Local schools fulfill this religious duty in part by requiring that children be immunized against infectious disease, and by shielding their students from those who are not. Unless a specific immunization is medically contraindicated, and so documented by a reliable physician, unvaccinated children -- even those who, in violation of Jewish Law,

have secured a religious or philosophical exemption from the state -- are properly denied admission to Jewish Day Schools.

Does Halakhah Require Vaccination Against Dangerous Diseases such as Measles, Rubella, Polio, and COVID-19? (Responsa in a Moment, Volume 15, Number 1, Rabbi Professor David Golinkin, The Schechter Institutes, December 1, 2020)

<https://schechter.edu/does-halakhah-require-vaccination/>

In conclusion, since the discovery of the smallpox vaccine by Dr. Edward Jenner in 1796 it has been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that vaccines against infectious diseases save the lives of millions of people every year, with almost zero percent harmed by the vaccines. Therefore, there is a halakhic obligation for Jews to vaccinate themselves and their children, unless their doctors determine that it's dangerous for that specific person to be vaccinated due to a pre-existing condition. Similarly, it's halakhically permissible for a school or a synagogue or the State of Israel to enact a *takkanah* or regulation that one must receive a vaccination and to prevent an unvaccinated person from entering a synagogue, a school, or a shopping mall.

May God help the doctors finish developing and testing the vaccines against Covid-19 corona as soon as possible in order to save humanity from this terrible plague.

Reconstructionist

Why Vaccinations are Kosher and Required (Roger Price, 2014)

<https://jewishjournal.com/news/131215/why-vaccinations-are-kosher-and-required/>

Concerning a theoretical decision by parents to avoid vaccinating their children, [Rabbi David Teutsch](#) writes succinctly: "Since the duty to heal is communal, this choice is ethical only when parents believe that no one should be vaccinated or when the vaccine poses a grave health risk to a particular child." (*See A Guide to Jewish Practice* (RRC Press 2011), page 505.)

Orthodox

Statement on Vaccinations from the OU and Rabbinical Council of America (2018)

<https://www.ou.org/news/statement-vaccinations-ou-rabbinical-council-america/>

There are *halachic* obligations to care for one's own health as well as to take measures to prevent harm and illness to others, and Jewish law defers to the consensus of medical experts in determining and prescribing appropriate medical responses to illness and prevention. Therefore, the consensus of major *poskim* (halachic decisors) supports the vaccination of children to protect them from disease, to eradicate illness from the larger community through so-called herd immunity, and thus to protect others who may be vulnerable.

While the health of children is an important consideration, everyone should consult with his or her religious, medical and legal advisors in determining what actions to take. Nothing in this statement should be construed to add to or detract from rights or obligations created by New York or other state and federal statutes and regulations.

Halachic Aspects of Vaccination (Rabbi Dr. Edward Reichman, Yeshiva University)

<https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-law/halachic-aspects-of-vaccination/>

It is not only a personal decision to refuse vaccination; it is a decision that affects the entire community. It is thus within the Jewish community's rights to mandate vaccination, for example, as a prerequisite for day school admission.

One might argue that the assumption of risk for treatment of an existing medical condition is different from assuming risk for preventative care, but even preventative care is considered a mitzvah. When global epidemics of infectious disease were more prevalent, posekim were more willing to allow vaccination on Shabbat. But even today, in unique circumstances, posekim have permitted the violation of Shabbat for the preventative procedure of vaccination. For example, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach allowed vaccination on Shabbat in the following limited scenario: If one did not receive the vaccination on Shabbat, and it would be a number of years before he would have that opportunity again.³ Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg permitted a vaccine for tetanus to be given on Shabbat.⁴ While these cases are limited, they reflect the fact that posekim regarded vaccination, though a preventative measure, as enough of an obligation to consider violating Shabbat.

To be sure, there are certain patients for whom vaccinations are medically inadvisable, but such cases are exceptions and each should be discussed individually with a physician. To forgo vaccination purely because of anecdotal claims is halachically irresponsible.

Our success with vaccinations is the cause for our complacency. We in the twenty-first century have forgotten what the lives of our ancestors were like—filled with sadness for the children afflicted with paralysis from polio and with mourning for children dying of smallpox and measles. These occurrences are, fortunately, a thing of the past, due largely to the success of vaccination. May Hashem allow us to continue our success in the battle against infectious diseases.

The Halachic Requirement to Vaccinate (Letter Exchange between Rav Moshe Sternbuch and Rav Malkiel Kotler, Orthodox Rabbinical Courts, Jerusalem)

<https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/general/1631188/rav-moshe-sternbuch-writes-letter-to-rav-malkiel-kotler-about-the-halachic-requirement-to-vaccinate.html>

That which the Mogain Avrohom and Rabbi Akiva Eiger have written, that one in a thousand is not considered even a possible Pikuach Nefesh is in regard to whether we consider the remote one in a thousand chance that it will “enter into a dangerous situation” – as the wording of Rabbi Akiva Eiger indicates – “that it will develop into a life threatening situation.” However, when the danger is clearly present before us – where we have cases of mortality of one in a thousand – like a woman giving birth – it is proper to be concerned for a remote possibility and it is treated like possible Pikuach Nefesh.

Notice from Vaad Harabbonim Regarding Measles (Council of Orthodox Rabbis of Greater Detroit, March 22, 2019)

<http://cordetroit.com/news/5059/>

In light of the recent spread of measles in our community, each and every individual is halachically obligated to take the necessary precautions to protect one's self and family, and to prevent the spread of the disease to others.

Due to the outbreak, the Michigan Department of Health has issued updated vaccination guidelines. Every member of the community should follow those guidelines to ensure that they are fully vaccinated.

If you are experiencing any symptoms of the measles, as described by the Oakland County Health Division notice, you are halachically required to STAY HOME and immediately contact your health care provider for further instructions. It is absolutely forbidden for anyone experiencing symptoms to go out (even to Shul), and expose others and place them at risk.

May Hashem grant each and every member of the community health, strength and blessings.

Bikur Cholim's Open Letter Urging Community to Vaccinate Against Measles (Los Angeles, May 3, 2019)

https://jewishjournal.com/los_angeles/298092/bikur-cholims-open-letter-on-measles-vaccinations/

We are asking all synagogue Rabbis to publicly speak on the critical importance of vaccinations. On issues of health and public safety, decisions in Jewish law are based on the opinions of the majority of medical experts. In cases of measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR), the opinion held by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, and tens of thousands of physicians is that vaccinations must be taken as outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It is our position that there is an obligation to be vaccinated and no basis that immunizations should be avoided unless medically indicated.

Ultra-Orthodox / Haredi / Chabad

What Does Jewish Law Say About Vaccination? (Rabbi Yehuda Shurpin)

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2870103/jewish/What-Does-Jewish-Law-Say-About-Vaccination.htm

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, one of the preeminent rabbis of the past century, rules that if one has reasonable concern of the dangers of not being vaccinated, and the only chance to be immunized is on Shabbat (or the person would have to wait 4 or 5 years for the next chance to be immunized), then immunization would be permitted on Shabbat...

Assuming that vaccinating when there is a high risk of catching a disease is similar to fleeing from an epidemic, then it's mandatory for you to do it, and others can be compelled to do so as well. The question that still needs to be addressed is whether, from a purely halachic perspective, we can mandate it even when there is no current epidemic.

Some hold that since vaccinations have become the accepted and standard practice, it is incumbent upon all parents to provide them for their children. Thus, it would be right to mandate vaccination. Others, however, are of the opinion that while we can at times force someone to receive medical treatment, we cannot, from a purely halachic perspective, compel a healthy person or a parent to vaccinate, even if his or her refusal is based on an "irrational fear."

Obviously, as in all cases, especially in regard to the health of children, one should consult one's personal physician, a licensed medical doctor. If your personal physician advises you not to vaccinate due to specific concerns, then you should not vaccinate.

Measles Is Hitting Ultra-Orthodox Communities. Why Aren't They Vaccinating? (Art Feldman, January 11, 2019)

<https://forward.com/news/national/417390/measles-is-hitting-ultra-orthodox-communities-why-arent-they-vaccinating/>

Experts say the outbreak has been caused by a mix of ignorance on how and when to get vaccines — common in insular communities — and pockets of stubborn resistance to accepted medical views on vaccination.

"This is not a Hasidic problem, this is an anti-vaccination problem," said Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt, a rabbi and hospital epidemiologist at South Nassau Communities Hospital on Long Island, and who identifies as Orthodox...

Major Orthodox leaders in Brooklyn have encouraged Jews to get vaccinated, with some local yeshivas saying they will no longer accept unvaccinated students. The Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, the largest yeshiva in the world, told its rabbis and over 8,000 students to "immediately get a vaccine" in November.

"The Jewish law is pretty clear," said Glatt. "The vast majority of *poskim* [Jewish legal scholars] strongly advocate for vaccination."

"There is, in my opinion, no such thing as a Jewish religious exemption [for vaccinations]," he added.

Statement from Agudath Israel of America on the Measles Outbreak and "Infectious Hatred" (April 11, 2019)

<https://agudah.org/statement-from-agudath-israel-of-america-on-the-measles-outbreak-and-infectious-hatred/>

Agudath Israel of America is deeply concerned about the recent outbreak of measles and the threat it poses to communities around the country.

For that reason, countless rabbinical figures and leaders, including leading rabbis in the Agudath Israel movement and doctors serving these communities, have repeatedly encouraged vaccination in the strongest possible terms. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of children enrolled in Jewish schools are vaccinated. Governmental records indicate that the measles vaccination rates in yeshivos in Williamsburg, Borough Park and across New York State are high, with yeshiva averages statewide exceeding 96%. Similarly high rates were obtained in areas around the country with large Jewish populations. While vaccination rates in certain schools and for preschoolers may be lower, vaccination is the clear societal norm in Orthodox Jewish communities.