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**Date:** Monday, December 21, 2020 4:23:07 PM

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**From:** Congregation Agudath Israel <[communications@agudath.org](mailto:communications@agudath.org)>  
**Date:** Mon, Dec 21, 2020, 12:39 PM  
**Subject:** A Message from Rabbi Silverstein 12-21-20  
**To:** <[abuelo39@gmail.com](mailto:abuelo39@gmail.com)>



## Message from Rabbi Alan Silverstein

December 21, 2020 / 6 Tevet 5781



Dear CAI family,

As COVID vaccines begin to be administered to health-care workers, first responders, educators, seniors in residential and nursing facilities, and others who are at high risk, people are interested to hear: What does Judaism say about accepting medically approved vaccinations?

In brief, once medical experts affirm the safety and efficacy of a COVID vaccine, it's clear that several Jewish tenets strongly support its acceptance.

- One applicable principle is "*Ein somchin al ha'nes*" — "Do not rely on miracles" to save us from peril when we can take affirmative steps to ward off the threat.
- "*Venishmartem me'od l'nafshoteichem*" — The Torah commands us to take care of the health of our bodies and the health of the public as well. With more than 300,000 American deaths attributed to COVID, our obligation is

clear.

- *Hatzalat Nefashot* — The Mishnah teaches us that whoever saves even one life is equated to have saved the entire world, because that person's future generations are saved as well.
- *Pikuach Nefesh* — Preserving human life takes precedence over all other factors.
- *Avoid Sakanot Nefashot* — Whenever possible one should avoid exposing oneself to health hazards, as, clearly, when a vaccination has been shown to be effective in preventing the threat.

I have included below an article from the [Forward](#) (Dec. 16) by journalist Stuart Ain in which he writes about the consensus of thought in the application of these views among all branches of Judaism.

Also below is a piece that invites us to share “*nachas*” and pride in our fellow Jews. Just as Jews rejoiced when the polio vaccine developed by Dr. Jonas Salk became available in 1955, so too do we rejoice in the role Jewish medical researchers have played in making the COVID vaccines a reality.

***The bottom line: If your personal physician approves your getting the vaccine, I urge you to be vaccinated as soon as it is available to you.***

My prayers are with you for good health and safety as we cautiously anticipate the “light at the end of the tunnel” — an end to the COVID pandemic.

With friendship,

Rabbi Alan Silverstein

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**On TikTok, on the pulpit, and in legal rulings,  
rabbis tell congregants: Get vaccinated**

*By Stewart Ain*

[The TikTok video](#) of Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld receiving a shot of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine isn't racking up Cardi B numbers, but it has reached an impressive 400,000 views.

“I saw an advertisement that they were looking for people for their clinical trial,”

Rabbi Herzfeld, 46, said. “I am not a doctor or a nurse, but I wanted to see what I could do to make a difference. So I volunteered.”

Herzfeld, spiritual leader of [Modern Orthodox] Ohev Sholom in Washington, D.C., also posted videos and images of his vaccinations across social media, just in case anyone missed the point — get vaccinated.

Herzfeld is far from the only rabbinical voice on behalf of vaccination. Rabbis across all denominations, and around the world, have thrown their authority behind the new vaccines.

Herzfeld’s wife Rhanni, a neurologist, is also participating in the clinical trial and received her shot a few days later.

“Everybody has a responsibility to get vaccinated, and those who don’t should not be allowed to come into synagogues and day schools and participate in other religious programs,” the rabbi said. “If people are not taking it seriously, it is not just their life they are affecting but others.”

### **Many are hesitant**

But many Americans are not following Herzfeld’s lead. A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that more than a quarter of Americans said they would probably not or definitely would not get vaccinated, with 59% of the 1,676 adults interviewed between Nov. 30 and Dec. 8 saying they feared side effects. And 59% said they were concerned about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines, while slightly more than half said they believed politics played a role in the development of the Moderna vaccine and another developed by Pfizer. The latter vaccine has received FDA approval...and is being used now to vaccinate frontline health care workers.

Rabbi Herzfeld said many of the responses to his TikTok video made him well aware that there are people who refuse to take the vaccine.

“I’ll pass,” wrote one viewer. Another wrote, “Thanks for taking a vaccine with less than a year of studies.” And a third said simply, “I don’t trust this.”

### **Religious leaders are responding with encouragement**

That skepticism is why public health experts say it’s important for faith leaders to speak up. Elaine Howard Ecklund, of Rice University’s Religion and Public Life Program, told [Religion News Service](#) that faith leaders can be a bridge between science and believers who may remain skeptical.

### **The ultra-Orthodox**

Three of the most senior rabbis in the ultra-Orthodox world, Chaim Kanievsky, Gershon Edelstein, and Shalom Cohen, recommended this week that “anyone who has the option of getting the vaccine should get it.” They said it has been proved safe and was developed using accepted scientific methods.

The three had consulted with Rabbi Elimelech Firer, chairman of a medical

support organization, and their opinion has been published in major ultra-Orthodox newspapers.

In Israel, senior rabbis there issued a decree urging ultra-Orthodox Jews to get vaccinated, saying that “according to all acceptable medical parameters, it has been proved that the vaccines are safe.”

These comments are particularly important in ultra-Orthodox communities because the views of rabbinical leaders govern public attitudes.

### **The Reform movement**

Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, issued a statement on Dec. 16 on behalf of all the arms of the Reform movement calling for the COVID-19 vaccines to be widely used and “equitably distributed.”

“Systemic racism in our health care system and disparities in access to care have caused marginalized communities to suffer most during the pandemic,” he said. “We call on our leaders to develop a comprehensive plan that protects the most vulnerable people and communities who are most susceptible to our current health and economic crisis.”

### **The Conservative movement**

The Conservative movement is planning to issue its own rabbinical opinion on vaccinations. Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, chief executive officer of both the movement’s Rabbinical Assembly and its United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, said the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards is now studying the issue [including] the opinion written in Israel by Rabbi David Golinkin, who said it is “a halachic obligation” for Jews to vaccinate themselves and their children unless their doctors determine it is medically inadvisable.

He added that it’s halachically permissible for a school, synagogue, or the State of Israel to prevent an unvaccinated person from entering.

[Years ago, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, the current chair of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, wrote: “It would be a violation of Jewish law...for a Jew to refuse to be inoculated against a disease, at least where the inoculation has a proven track record of effectiveness. Jews, to the contrary, have a positive duty [a mitzvah] to have themselves and their children inoculated against all diseases where the preventive measure is effective and available.”]

### **Modern Orthodoxy**

Similar guidance has been issued also by the Orthodox Union and Rabbinical Council of America. “The Torah obligation to preserve our lives and the lives of others requires us to vaccinate for COVID-19 as soon as a vaccine becomes available,” they wrote.

Rabbi Adir Posy, director of the OU’s Department of Community and Synagogue Services, which works with 800 congregations, said that Orthodox rabbis are

“echoing those sentiments.”

Posy, assistant rabbi at Beth Jacob Synagogue in Los Angeles, said his synagogue issued a similar statement and then distributed the national statement “because we firmly believe in the importance of making sure that people take the vaccine. We highlight the Jewish value of doing whatever we can to protect human life.”

### **A recommendation to help the process**

Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, former head of the Rabbinical Assembly, said she would like to see synagogues assist members get vaccinated. She said they could arrange to have babysitters in the synagogue to care for small children while their parents get the vaccine. And synagogues working with health care professionals could also hire home health aides to relieve aides who are caring for homebound elderly while they go to get their vaccine.

### **Conclusion**

With the...FDA approval of the Moderna vaccine, Rabbi Herzfeld said, it’s not just time to get vaccinated, it’s a time to give thanks.

Congregations should offer “communal blessings this Shabbat recognizing the miracle we have with these vaccines.”

Meanwhile, he will continue to speak about the vaccines from the pulpit.

“My faith commands me to take the vaccine and evangelize about it,” he said. “This is the most important sermon of my life — getting vaccinated.”

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*CAI congregant Leslie Elfenbein shared the following list (from “The Jewish Voice”) of some Jewish scientists who have made major contributions to the breakthroughs in the fight to stop COVID-19.*

**Mikael Dolsten**, chief scientific officer at Pfizer, is Jewish. He grew up in Halmstad, Sweden, the son of a Jewish father with prewar roots in Sweden and a Jewish mother who escaped Austria in the early days of World War II. He visited Israel several times as a youngster and did a year of his doctoral work at the Weizmann Institute. There he learned cutting-edge immunology, which led him to pharmaceutical science....

Pfizer CEO **Albert Borla** is a Sephardic Jew from Thessalonika, Greece, a city whose Jewish population was almost completely wiped out during World War II. The Borla family’s history in Thessalonika goes back five centuries, and Borla visits his remaining family members there yearly....

The chief medical officer for Moderna, a Cambridge, Mass.- based company, is an Israeli immigrant named **Tal Zaks**. Previously, he served as head of Global Oncology at Sanofi Pharmaceuticals. Zaks received his MD and PhD degrees at

Ben-Gurion University and conducted post-doctoral research at the National Institutes of Health.

The scientist responsible, with a colleague, for the pioneering breakthroughs that allowed the development of an mRNA vaccine (the novel approach used by Moderna and Pfizer for dealing with COVID-19) is University of Pennsylvania's **Drew Weissman**. A professor of medicine at Penn, he received his BA and MA degrees at Brandeis and his MD/Microbiology and PhD at Boston University. Weissman once worked with a fellowship at the NIH under Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Final related notes: President-elect Joe Biden this week named his new head for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **Dr. Rochelle Walensky**, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of Infectious Diseases at Massachusetts General Hospital. She works as a physician at a Jewish camp for a week each summer.

Another Jewish medical expert is **Jeff Zients**, who will be Biden's overseer for the entire federal coronavirus response. Zients led the successful effort to fix the government's [Health.gov](https://www.health.gov) website when it became damaged during the launch of the Affordable Care Act.

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