

From the Rabbi's Desk

January 2021

Friends,

This secular New Year is bittersweet. A dark winter is upon us. As I am writing, COVID-19 caused deaths have surged to over three hundred thousand. The pandemic is now the worst human tragedy in our lifetime. Far too many have died. Even as Southeastern Connecticut has not suffered as much as other parts of the country, most of us know someone who has died. The human toll for those left behind is also tremendous. Our most senior community members are isolated. Although our schools and teachers have moved mountains, the transition to hybrid or virtual learning has been difficult. Our new normal is wearing masks, keeping our distance, and washing our hands frequently. We are anxious for this to end. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel, yet it is a long way off. That light is vaccines. Yet, many of us may have serious reservations and might be hesitant to accept a vaccine. Jewish values should be our guide.

One of the most fundamental Jewish values is *p'kuach nefesh*. The Talmud teaches us that to save one life is as if to have saved an entire world. The sanctity of life outweighs almost all other considerations. Our tradition also teaches us to accept rational science. Maimonides, the medieval Jewish thinker, and physician, in his commentary on Mishnah Pesachim 4:9, observes that medicines are as essential as food and water to our bodies. We would not deny ourselves food and water, nor should we abstain from proven vaccines. Our tradition further teaches that to refuse proven medical treatment is to commit a sin of arrogance. We are obliged to accept appropriate medical treatment for ourselves and provide it to our children as well. (see CCAR Responsa 5759.10)

Questions remain. Are these new vaccines appropriate and proven medical treatment? How do we know that these vaccines are effective and safe? Most of us cannot answer these questions ourselves, and everything is progressing so quickly. How do we know what reliable information is? For answers, we should depend upon public health, medical, and scientific experts. They have spent lifetimes preparing for this situation. Scientists have been working hard to develop these vaccines for many years. Because of their hard work, less than a year from the outbreak in the United States, we have two vaccines. As I heard Dr. Peter Hotez, Dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor (also a Cornell alumnus!) say recently, the work to develop these vaccines has been progressing for more than 30 years. Scientists have been able to work so quickly because they've been working hard all along. The FDA, NIH, and CDC are staffed with professionals that have been similarly preparing. The vaccine is neither political nor opinion.

Yet, we may still be anxious. Is the vaccine safe? How does it work? Am I just a guinea pig? Will I have a reaction? How long will my immunity last? Will I still have to wear a mask? Can I get the vaccine if I'm pregnant? We *should* be asking all of these questions. The key is looking in the right places for answers.

We are working on creating a public forum for you to learn about the vaccines, how they work, why you should take them if you can, and how our communities are protected even if you cannot take the vaccine. In the coming weeks, we will let you know more details.

In the meantime, remember that we have a long way to go. Use this time to educate yourself with information from reliable sources. You will find links to many resources at www.ct.gov.

We must look out for each other. This is not the time to let down our guard, just the opposite. We need to redouble our efforts to **Wear our Masks, Watch our Distance, and Wash our Hands.**

Happy New Year,

Rabbi Marc