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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, July 9, 2021

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Yes, The COVID-19 Vaccine is a Mitzvah

I've been asked recently about whether the COVID-19 vaccine is mandated by Jewish law. The answer is a clear, simple, and unequivocal yes.

Vaccination is a mitzvah. Jewish law obligates Jews to vaccinate themselves, and encourage others within their care to receive vaccines that have a proven and safe track record. The COVID-19 vaccination fulfills this requirement.

(In this week's message I am going to borrow heavily from *Vaccination and Ethical Questions Posed by COVID-19 Vaccines*, a Halachic response to the emergence of the COVID-19 Vaccine, approved by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, which provides guidance in matters of Halakhah (Jewish Law) for the Conservative movement. I thank my colleagues, especially Rabbi Micah Peltz, the author of this document, for their efforts and scholarship.)

Rabbinical authorities have encouraged and approved vaccinations since their introduction. The first Rabbinic rulings addressed the response to the smallpox epidemic, which killed 400,000 people annually in Europe in the late 19th century. Indeed, smallpox had been a serious health concern since the 10th century, and the annals of medical history contain the writings of Persian, Chinese and Indian physicians about smallpox and their awareness of its danger, as well as their efforts to eradicate it from their communities.

Vaccines received greater Rabbinic attention when the smallpox vaccine was introduced 1796 by Edward Jenner. Though vaccines in their various forms predate Jenner by hundreds of years, the smallpox vaccine was the first successful vaccine to be developed. When the smallpox vaccine was introduced, there was debate among Jewish authorities about the very nature of the vaccine, which was dependent on introducing a small amount of smallpox into an otherwise healthy person.

Two of the leading authorities at the time, Rabbi Israel Lipchitz and Rabbi Abraham Nanzig endorsed these vaccines. The response of Rabbi Nanzig is particularly poignant. Rabbi Nanzig lost two sons to smallpox, and his rabbinic arguments passionately made the case for inoculation against it. Rabbi Nanzig explained that smallpox was so widespread and contagious that everyone should be considered at risk. Therefore, the benefit of the vaccine, even one that (at the time) was new and without a long track record, as Professor Edward Jenner's was at the time, nonetheless outweighed that risk.

Think about what he ruled: the greater societal benefit of taking the vaccine, along with the serious consequences of contracting the disease, outweighed the potential risk it might pose to a few individuals.

My professional organization, The Rabbinical Assembly, along with most Orthodox authorities including the Orthodox Union (the OU), have reached the same conclusion. Indeed, I have found in my research that similar questions were asked in the 1950s of the Lubavitcher Rabbi regarding the polio vaccine, which he enthusiastically endorsed. The halachic literature, both in the USA, and Israel, have endorsed vaccines on the basis of our paramount obligation to protect our own health, and the health of the society in which we live. Indeed, there is no religious exception or exemption recognized by Jewish law from vaccine mandates where approved or endorsed by civil authorities.

It is not my desire in this message to address the political ramifications of the ruling which I have just offered, or entertain a debate with those who have raised objections to the COVID-19 vaccine on policy as well as medical grounds. Should anyone wish to discuss this matter further with me, I am always happy to have those conversations with you. But ultimately, Jewish law deals with what is permitted and forbidden, and what is obligatory, and what is not. This question has been asked since the dawn of the age of vaccinations and sadly continues in our time. The COVID-19 vaccine is no exception. So please know this: Vaccines are kosher and obligatory. You have an obligation to get vaccinated, for your own safety, and those who share this beautiful world with you.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner