



Ba'Yamim haHem ba'Zman ha'Zeh: Vaccination and Preventive Medicine

Ever since Hashem granted medical scientists the wisdom to eradicate a vast array of terrible, deadly diseases with vaccination, many millions of lives have been saved. Despite this, there is division among the general public over the relative health benefits and risks of vaccinating themselves and their children. The vast majority of people trust the rigorous research and expert advice of the medical and scientific community, opting to receive available vaccines. However, a sizeable minority holds various, often unconventional, objections to vaccinations on numerous grounds, each more bizarre than the next. This group refuses to administer all or some of the recommended vaccines to their families. People of sound judgment recognize that, with Hashem's assistance, the widespread adoption of vaccination by Western civilization has drastically reduced the prevalence of numerous deadly diseases, even leading to the complete eradication of some.

Yet, with time, the horrors of the dreadful diseases of the past have been forgotten by the modern public. To many, these illnesses have become meaningless historical artifacts, and some even dismiss them as insignificant inconveniences. Consequently, a growing number of young parents feel at ease avoiding childhood vaccination. They argue that there is no need to subject their child to vaccination in the perceived absence of danger. Additionally, when considering the pros and cons, many conclude that might be safer and healthier to forgo vaccination just in case some of the arguments of anti-vaccination advocates hold merit.

This trend intensified during the COVID-19 outbreak when the pandemic coincided with a surge in misinformation. Some went so far as to deny the existence of the virus altogether, while others adopted a more moderate stance and only protested against the vaccine. Thus, when the life-saving vaccines finally became available with Hashem's help, the credibility of the medical community was challenged by aggressive campaigns, and people were persuaded through fear and other tactics that the vaccines were extremely dangerous. Unfounded and unsubstantiated claims of sinister side-effects spread globally, intimidating people contemplating vaccination for themselves and their children. This smear campaign not only posed a threat to the COVID-19 vaccine; its repercussions persist to this day, and they have generalized to other vaccines.

Substantial segments of the public now regard all medical advice related to vaccines as suspect.

Simultaneously, researchers highlighted that we are at a critical juncture. Diseases like measles and polio, once thought to be relics of the past, are reappearing with alarming frequency. The resurgence of these diseases that were on the verge of eradication is attributed to unvaccinated populations allowing them to reemerge and spread.

HaGaon R' Asher Weiss Shlit"a has repeatedly issued unequivocal Halachic rulings that parents are obligated to follow medical advice and vaccinate their children. In the following paragraphs, we will consider some of the grounds that he invokes to mandate vaccination.

The obligation to take preventive measures to protect oneself from harm is explicit in the *Rambam (Hilchos Rotze'ach, 11:4)*:

The requirement (of Ma'akeh – building a protective barrier) applies both to a roof and to any dangerous place in which a person may readily stumble. For example, if a person has a well or a cistern in his courtyard, whether they are filled with water or not, one must erect a mound, ten Tefachim high, around them or make a cover for them, [to ensure] that a person will not fall in and die. Similarly, it is a Mitzvah to remove, take precautions against, and be exceedingly careful regarding any obstacle that could endanger life, as the Pasuk states: "Beware for yourself and guard your soul." (Devarim, 4:9) If he does not remove it and leaves an obstacle that can lead to danger, he negates the Mitzva, and [also] violates the precept: "Do not cause blood to be spilled".

In other words, when faced with a dangerous obstacle, it is insufficient to simply act responsibly around it. It is even insufficient to hire a guard to warn careless people of any impending danger. Instead, one is obligated to address the danger definitively by either eliminating it at its source or establishing a permanent security barrier.

As applied to dangerous diseases, this Halacha informs us that it is insufficient to safeguard one's children from serious infection by insisting on a healthy diet and other lifestyle choices. Rather, one must act to eliminate the disease, for which the only available option is preventive vaccination.

Opponents of vaccination claim that the vaccines may be dangerous, as they may predispose children to contracting other diseases. They argue that it is counterintuitive to vaccinate children to prevent one type of future illness when by doing so we increase their chances of contracting a second type of future illness. R' Asher dismisses this claim

outright. What are the relative risks of vaccinating a child versus not vaccinating a child? On the one hand, if one vaccinates a child, one can rely on the research findings of high-quality studies that have followed hundreds of millions of children post-vaccination. These unequivocally show that vaccines frequently cause minor side effects, rarely result in serious side effects, and never result in death. On the other hand, if one does not vaccinate, one exposes one's child to the clear and tangible danger of contracting a highly contagious disease such as measles. Measles has recently broken out in several Charedi communities and is known to have resulted in the deaths of at least three young people.

Moreover, even if it is proven that vaccination is associated with an increased chance of health complications, one is Halachically required to subject oneself to future risk to protect oneself against an imminent risk. It is also likely that *Midas Chasidus* requires a person to sacrifice his future welfare to protect another person against an imminent risk. It is certainly not forbidden to do so. Therefore, it is obvious that one is Halachically required to vaccinate one's children and to ignore the unsubstantiated rumors that advise otherwise.

Gedolim from earlier generations also wrote forcefully against parents who did not proactively protect their children from infectious diseases. For example, when discussing a person's obligation to protect himself from physical danger the *Shelah haKadosh* states (*Sha'ar haOsiyos, Derech Eretz, 13-14*):

I am shocked [by parents' behavior] regarding the smallpox that spread amongst the children... may we be spared from them; why are the parents not careful to flee from the town with their children to escape [infection]? These fathers will certainly be held accountable for the suckling babies who did not sin and the weaned infants who did not commit iniquity who met their deaths from this disease because their fathers did not take the precaution of fleeing.

In other words, the *Shelah* rules that a parent is Halachically required to flee with his children if there is a suspected outbreak of an infectious disease.

This ruling is cited by the *Magen Avraham* (O.C. 576:3) in his comments on the *Shulchan Aruch's* ruling that one should fast when there is an outbreak of disease:

Likewise, when there is a deadly breakout of pox in infants, we decree a fast day. The Gaon R' Moshe has already composed a Selicha supplication for this. The Shelah states that each person must assist his children to escape from the city in such times, and if he fails to do so, he is accountable for their lives.

The *Mishna Berura* (14) cites the *Magen Avraham l'Halacha*.

However, once vaccines became available, the *Poskim* ruled that a person is no longer required to flee from town. Rather, he fulfills the *Shelah's* obligation to protect his children by vaccinating them.

Finally, R' Asher criticizes those who reason that as long as society at large is vaccinating their children, their individual decision not to vaccinate their children will have negligible impact on others. He states that these people are *Naval b'Reshus haTorah* – within the confines of Halacha but depraved; “*On account of the commitment of the masses to act in good faith, may one depart from accepted practice and unfairly gain [perceived – Ed.] personal advantage!?*”