DON'T BE AN IDIOT – IT SAYS IN THE TORAH
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
TEMPLE SHOLOM, VANCOUVER BC
April 13, 2019

Sometimes, life imitates Torah and it can be terrifying.

Friday night we will chant solemnly and pour out wine from our cups for the 10 plagues that afflicted Egypt in the time of the biblical exodus.

Last week and this week in the book of Leviticus — we read the conjoined torah portions Tazria and Metzora. Both describe various diseases that infect the people and their homes and how it was the responsibility of the priest to diagnose and quarantine those who suffer from those illnesses. The term that appears, repeatedly, is nega — plague.

We would be excused to think that plagues were things of the past, ancient history or even folklore, except we know they are all too real.

Orthodox Jewry in general, and Williamsburg, NY in particular among other ultra-orthodox Jewish communities, found themselves in the media these past weeks due to the measles outbreak. Authorities in Rockland County, NY have traced this measles outbreak to ultra-Orthodox families whose children have not been vaccinated, causing the disease to spread among observant Jews more than any other community.

Since October, there have been 153 confirmed cases of measles. In fact, measles cases are at the second greatest number of cases reported in the United States since measles was declared eliminated in 2000.

Parts of Seattle, just a few hundred kilometers south now have lower vaccination rates than Rwanda.

In Europe measles killed at least 37 people in the first six month of this year. And in Israel the incidence of measles (per million population) increased from 1.3 to over 62, and the number of actual cases increased from 15 last year to at least 526 this year. This year in Jerusalem an unvaccinated toddler died of measles. Her's was the first measles death there in 15 years.

The impacts of this disease are not only on those who choose to go unvaccinated, it affects the whole of society because we rely on the concept of herd immunity to protect others who may be vulnerable for other reasons. Herd (or group) immunity occurs when a sufficiently large number of members develop immunity to an infectious disease, due either to vaccinations or the development of natural immunity after an infection. In this setting, a bacteria or virus has so few hosts that it fails to penetrate the group that its ability to infect non-immune members is

drastically reduced. The presence of immune individuals provides indirect protection to the non-immune.

But there is still another impact of the disease upon the Jewish community and that is Herd Mentality, the group think that leads ill-informed or conspiratorial individuals to make dangerous assumptions about all people, in this case Jews, based on the actions of a small fringe group in our community.

A measles outbreak in one suburban New York, predominantly Jewish county has sickened scores of people and alarmed public health experts. But it has also intensified long-smoldering tensions between the rapidly expanding and insular ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and secular society.

Much like the impact of the biblical plagues of the Passover story and the torah portions of these past two

weeks, fear and accusation are sweeping our community, calls for quarantine like those imposed by the biblical priests are once again ringing out amongst our tribes and the actions of a small group of people are having devastating and global impacts on all of us.

There are three important concerns that need to be addressed in the midst of what can only be seen as the nascent days of a crisis for our community.

First, Judaism, up and down the religious spectrum from the most liberal to the most halachically observant obligates every Jew to be vaccinated against known diseases. There is not debate amongst the vast majority of Jewish legal scholars or traditions.

There are two related halachic principles that make vaccination mandatory in Jewish Law. The first is that you are not allowed to endanger yourself needlessly. The

Shulchan Arukh, the classic code of Jewish law, says: "Wherever there is a potentially life-endangering pitfall or obstacle, it is a positive commandment to remove it … as the Torah says: "Guard yourself and guard your soul." (Deuteronomy 4:9-10).

Second concern and halachic principle that is at play here is that failure to vaccinate not only puts our own children at risk, but it puts at risk all of those who for one reason or another cannot receive the vaccination.

There is a story in the Talmud about two men in a rowboat. One starts drilling under his seat. The other protests loudly. But the "driller" responds: "I am only drilling underneath my seat." In society, when we drill under our own seat, everyone drowns.

Jewish law demands that we take on the protection of the well-being of others as though it were our own, we are not

allowed to put the larger community at risk because of our own self-interest. You shall cannot stand idly by the blood of your neighbor we read a few chapters later in this book of torah.

Just as we are commanded to preserve and protect our own lives, we are similarly commanded to remove impediments or stumbling blocks that cause dangers to others. This is derived from the mitzvah of erecting fences around flat roofs so that people who climb the roof should not fall down. Moreover, even if I am not the source of the danger I have a duty to do what I can to rescue someone from whatever peril they may be in, such as rescue someone from drowning etc. “Do not stand by idly over your friend’s blood” (Leviticus 19:16). Thus, we have duties owed to G-d not to expose ourselves, our children or others to hazards, risks or dangers. Since failure to vaccinate endangers both my children and the children of others, both obligations would lead to same result - a duty

to minimize danger.

The third consideration in the midst of this crisis is that there are very real dangers for the whole of the Jewish community separate from the immediate effects of the diseases in question. Failure to vaccinate by this fringe group of Ultra-Orthodox Jews has led to an echo of an ancient anti-semitic libel against the Jews — that we are spreaders of plague.

Consider this incident reported in the mainstream media last week.

Erica Wingate was working at a clothing store in town this week when a male customer, with the black hat and sidelocks typically worn by ultra-Orthodox Jews, started coughing.

Another shopper standing next to him suddenly dropped the item she had been holding and clutched her child. "She was buying something, and she just threw it down," Ms. Wingate recalled. "She said, 'Let's go, let's go! Jews don't have shots!'"

It was among the first anti-semitic accusations in history. The ancient Egyptian grammarian, Apion, believed that the Egyptians actually expelled the Jews from their land not because of the Ten Plagues visited by God on the cruel Pharaoh but because Jews were lepers and the CAUSE of the plagues that had befallen Egyptian society.

An accusation that was repeated against the Jews in medieval times — that we started the cataclysmic Black Death by poisoning the wells of Europe.

The Orthodox community has not been silent in the face of this growing epidemic, they have not be shy about calling

out their own for stupidity and dangerous misreading and application of Jewish law.

Consider this editorial published in the Yiddish language newspaper of the Satamr Hasidim, one of the ultra-orthodox Jewish sects that has been most impacted by the spread of measles in the community. Its title almost says it all, “Senseless! Heartless! Torah-less and Reckless”

The City, doctors, community leaders and the yeshivas have been appealing with public for weeks and months to stop the foolishness that penetrated to a small percentage of observant Jews not to vaccinate their children which has directly led to the measles outbreak. Our publication has devoted many pages during the past few months with various reports and announcements regarding the danger of measles and the critical importance to vaccinate.

Yet, a small number of stubborn parents still know better.

We are obliged by the Torah “Venishmartem Meod L’nafshoseichem,” -“to guard our health” and if the recognized experts are telling us to vaccinate, then we must do it.

This week we heard some [in our community] saying that their child has ‘measles’ and it’s wonderful.

It is beyond silly to even respond. No one denies that most people recover from it, but nearly one-in-ten are hospitalized, many of them are developing pneumonias, and during the current outbreak five patients in New York were admitted to the Intensive Care Unit and we pray to Hashem shall protect them they should come out healthy. The infection can – Go-d forbid – result in the worst, swelling of the brain and more real serious complications. Is a Jew permitted to take the risk because it worked out for their child before?

We heard an argument from the anti-vaxxer group that those who are in danger because they are sick, they should watch themselves. Let the unhealthy children stay home so my unvaccinated child can go to school.

Is it possible that a Jew is really presenting such a ridiculous argument?

This is brutal, heartless!

They want sick kids who have to go to the hospital for serious medical treatments, or are hospitalized for other reasons, to not be able to spend time with their friends in Yeshiva because others have baseless myths against vaccinating?

Where is your heart to feel that it is ok to harm sick Jews? How can one endanger others due to outright fantasies?

If you believe in those myths and if you want to go back in time to a hundred years ago when people weren't vaccinating, then keep your children home as was the norm a century ago, and don't make life more difficult for those suffering enough.

Their entire fight (of the anti-vaxers) is conducted in a short-sighted non-Jewish manner, which only harmed their interests and brought a terrible defamation of Hashem's name, and plays in to the hands of those who want to destroy the independence of our yeshivas which has zero to do with vaccinations.

What else has to happen until they realize that this is the wrong path?
Trust me, it sounds even more cutting and accusatory in the original Yiddish.

Its hard for me to imagine and comprehend that in a world where Jews just brought science and technology to bear in order to land a rover on the moon (albeit it was a hard landing but, but as they say it's the journey not the destination, as PM Netanyahu observed, we will try again and next time we will do it softer). It is hard for me to fathom that Jews or any people for that matter would question the efficacy and necessity of vaccinations given all we know about science and human biology, let alone our own history as a people going back to the this week's parasha with plague and disease and its devastating effects.

But as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

At times my most fervent prayer is, “Dear God saves us from our own intentional stupidity.” Kein Yehi Ratzon, may it be God’s will.