

## Failures in Rabbinic Leadership: The Pandemic Edition

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We've been posting recently about the COVID-19 vaccines – [priorities](#) in their allocation, whether immunization ought to be [mandatory](#). As in most questions involving medical ethics, including medical ethics from a halakhic perspective, more than one answer is possible in these cases. That's as it should be; students of Jewish law are seldom in unanimous agreement as to *the* correct interpretation or application of the halakhic sources to real-life questions. But if those students possess *s'mikhah*, rabbinical ordination, they have to try. The point is to provide guidance from those sources to one's Jewish community, to the best of one's knowledge and interpretive capacity. And especially when a question is as urgent as this one – should we accept the vaccine or not? – recognized halakhic authorities should not evade their responsibility as teachers to, well, *teach*. The phenomenon called *yirat hora'ah*, the reluctance to issue instruction and to take a clear stand because one fears controversy or blowback, is well-known in the history of the rabbinate. This, however, is not the time for rabbis to give in to such fear and stay silent.

Fortunately, as we have [noted](#) on this site, rabbis across the ideological and denominational spectrum have been stepping up. There is already a good deal of halakhic writing on questions raised by the coronavirus. Presumably, there will be more to come, and future researchers on the subject of rabbinical response to the pandemic will have lots of material to study. But this is not universally the case. We want to focus here upon one instance of a *failure* of rabbinic leadership, a failure to respond clearly to the needs of the community. We're referring to a [letter](#) written by Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky (that's him in the picture), head of the Philadelphia *yeshiva* and member of the Council of Torah Sages (*Moetzes G'dolei HaTorah*) of Agudat Yisrael. In it, he forthrightly declares that he neither favors nor opposes immunization and that each person ought to consult their own physician on the matter. The text of the brief letter is as follows:

הנני להודיע שמעולם לא פסקתי ע"ד החיסון החדש על חולי הקראנא, ואיני אומר שום דבר כללי לא לאו ולא הן. אלא כל אחד ידרוש אצל רופא שלו ויעשה כפי צרכו הפרטי.

I wish to make it clear that I have never issued a halakhic decision regarding the new coronavirus vaccine, and I make no general ruling concerning it, either negative nor positive. Rather, each person should consult their own physician and act in accordance with their own needs.

This, in the *halakhah* business, is what we call a “punt.” [1] Rabbi Kamenetsky unloads the task of advising his people onto the shoulders of physicians, as though there is nothing for a halakhist to say about the matter. This is patently false. As we’ve written in the posts linked above, the question of the COVID vaccines, like any other serious question about medicine, is most assuredly a concern of Jewish law, touching as it does upon the *mitzvah* or *r’fu’ah* (the practice of medicine) and of *pikuah nefesh* (the saving of life). The rabbi doesn’t get a pass on this question; it’s his job to answer it. If he doesn’t know enough about the disease or the vaccine to issue an informed opinion, he should say so. But we would think that it’s his duty to inform himself so that he *can* issue instruction. Given the laconic wording of his letter, however, it seems that he’s not so much ignorant as he is neutral about the vaccine; it seems he either doesn’t care or thinks it unimportant for him to issue an opinion. And that’s simply unacceptable for a rabbi, a *posek*.

It is true that the [coronavirus vaccines](#) – indeed, [immunization](#) in general – are [controversial](#) in the *haredi* community. Perhaps Rabbi Kamenetsky doesn’t want to risk his reputation in that community by taking a stand. On the other hand, it isn’t as though a *p’sak* in favor of immunization requires an act of special heroism. The fact is that numerous [Orthodox rabbis](#) are rising to the occasion and [declaring](#) that, according to *halakhah*, [one ought to take the vaccines](#) unless one is a member of an at-risk group. Kamenetsky could easily follow their example. Instead, he issues a non-response to the people who look to him for halakhic guidance. And *that* is disappointing, especially when we remember that the success of the immunization against COVID depends largely upon the number of people who are willing to take it. Silence, the failure to lead or to take a stand, will work to lower those numbers and impede our efforts to end the pandemic.

We’re not saying that Kamenetsky *must* rule in favor of immunization. He’s perfectly entitled to argue against the vaccines in the (we think unlikely) event that he has valid halakhic arguments to support that opinion. But he is *not* entitled to *yirat hora’ah*, to refuse to decide, to shirk his duty as a rabbi.

Especially not now.

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[1] For the literal-minded: this is a joke. “Punt” is a football reference. But we hope you get the pun – er, point.