



VALUES-BASED DECISION MAKING

Erev Shabbos Parashas Vayeeqash 5781

Dear Parents,

When the Coronavirus first appeared on our shores ten months ago, I mentioned how it is important to focus on facts, rather than predictions and opinions. You may recall the wild theories and misinformation that abounded in the early days, that stoked fear and confusion. We are now at the beginning of a new episode, that of the vaccine, and opinions and theories are almost limitless.

In this letter, I cannot offer medical advice, for I am not a doctor. I will not provide *Halachic* direction, as I am not a *Poseik*. What I can do is share an enlightening quote from one of the greatest *Talmidei Chachamim* of the past two centuries, which sheds light on the Torah attitude towards our situation. Once we have clarity about the values that our Torah espouses, we can more easily hone in on the proper approach to take practically.

The seventh *Mishna* in the eighth *Perek* (chapter) of *Maseches Yoma*, deals with potential life-threatening situations on *Yom Kippur* (similar to *Shabbos*), where some critical information is lacking. The issue is what life-saving measures can or cannot be done in those doubtful circumstances. In connection with that vexing question, when not every fact can be known clearly, *Rabbi Yisroel Lifschitz*, the author of the classic commentary *Tiferes Yisroel*, deals with a topic of relevance in his day (early 1800s). In the *Boaz, Os Gimmel*, he writes:

ומזה נ"ל היתר לעשות אינאקולאשיאן של פאקקען, אף שא' מאלף מת ע"י האינאקולאשיאן
עכ"פ שאם יתהוו בו הפאקקען הטבעיים הסכנה קרובה יותר
, ולכן רשאי להכניס א"ע בסכנה רחוקה כדי להציל א"ע מסכנה קרובה.

"From this it appears to me it is permitted to give an inoculation against (small)pox, even though one in a thousand will die as a result of the inoculation, nevertheless, if the smallpox is left untreated, the danger to life is much more imminent. Therefore **one is permitted to put himself in a distant (less likely) danger in order to save himself from a closer (more likely) danger** (emphasis mine)."

...in a world filled with risks, always go with the lower risk.

A vaccine against smallpox was discovered by Edward Jenner, a British physician, in 1796. The question the *Tiferes Yisroel* was confronting sounds very similar to what we are grappling with today. With no history of vaccines, one can only imagine the resistance faced by those urging mass vaccinations back then.

Apparently, based upon the consensus of medical experts in his day, the *Tiferes Yisroel* weighed the one in a thousand risk of dying by taking the vaccine, against an apparently significantly higher rate of death from untreated smallpox. His directive is clear – if the facts point to a greater amount of risk vs. a lower amount of risk, go with the lower amount.

Notice the *Tiferes Yisroel* did not say wait until there is zero risk. Nor did he say have *Bitachon* (faith) and ignore the question. He followed a logical line of reasoning, based upon the accepted medical expertise of his day. And he stated clearly – in a world filled with risks, always go with the lower risk.

Each individual needs to seek his own medical and Halachic guidance, for each person may have different facts surrounding his situation. If the medical guidance is not clear, one certainly needs to turn to his *Rav* to decide how to proceed in a circumstance of doubt. One may contest the presentation of facts or may doubt the credibility of the source of the information. At the end of the day, the lesson to be learned from the *Tiferes Yisroel* is we don't follow theories that have little or no basis in fact, nor do we rely on 'faith' when *Hashem* has blessed our times with advanced medical knowledge, and we do proactively seek means to protect our lives.

... may the creation, production and availability of the covid vaccine be a clear sign of His love for us.

May *Hashem* protect us all and may the creation, production and availability of the covid vaccine be a clear sign of His love for us. We look forward to a *Refuah Shelaima* to all and may our families, *shuls*, *Yeshivos* and community rebound and serve Him with greater devotion and commitment than ever before.

Best wishes for a healthful *Shabbos*,


Rabbi Kalman Baumann