

WEAR A MASK!

COVID-19 spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or raises their voice (ex. while davening, shouting, chanting or singing). These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Recent studies show that a significant portion of individuals with COVID-19 lack symptoms (are “asymptomatic”) and that even those who eventually develop symptoms (are “pre-symptomatic”) can transmit the virus to others before showing symptoms.

To reduce the spread of COVID-19, CDC recommends that people wear cloth face coverings in public settings when around people outside of their household, especially when other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain.

According to the CDC and health experts, it is important to wear a cloth face covering to help prevent people who have COVID-19 from spreading the virus to others. Wearing a cloth face covering will help protect people around you, including those at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and people who frequently come into close contact with other people (for example in stores and restaurants). Cloth face coverings are most likely to reduce the spread of COVID-19 when they are widely used by people in public settings. The spread of COVID-19 can be reduced when cloth face coverings are used along with other preventive measures, including social distancing, frequent handwashing, and cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces.

TEXT STUDY:

(Suitable for Middle School and High School)

1. Read the text below and consider how this may resonate with the CDC recommendation of wearing a face covering.

He [Rabbi Hillel] used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when?

הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה (יד)
אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עִכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתַי

2. During a 1955 epidemic of tragic speeding accidents on the new interstate highways, the National Highway Safety Council produced a public service announcement. It featured the movie star Gig Young interviewing a young James Dean. The commercial cut to a slogan that said, “The life you save may be your own.” At the end of the commercial, Dean looked into the camera and said, “Take it easy driving. The life you save might be mine.” Three weeks later he was killed in a speeding accident on a highway.

Relate this anecdote to the public service of wearing a face covering.

Among the Jewish tradition’s most cherished values is the sanctity of human life. With a few notable exceptions, one must not endanger their life in order to fulfill a religious obligation. And one must violate even the most significant commandments in order to save another person’s life. Saving one life is regarded as the equivalent of saving an entire world, and consequently, taking a life is seen as tantamount to destroying an entire world.

Read the two texts below and consider how this may resonate with the CDC recommendation of wearing a face covering.

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 18:5)

וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּכֶם הָאֱלֹהִים
נְתִי בְּיָדְכֶם אֲנִי ה' :



And I gave them my statutes, and showed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them.” (Ezekiel 20:11)

וְאַתָּן לָהֶם אֶת־חֻקוֹתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי הַזֵּהֲעֵתִי אוֹתָם אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָם הָאֲדָמָה וְתִי בָּהֶם:

Does the implication here suggest that Jews should live by Torah law rather than die because of it?

CONSIDER:

(Suitable for Middle School and High School)

1. The Talmud discusses a number of cases as examples in which biblically mandated laws can be disregarded for the sake of saving a human life. (Yoma 84b). However, the principle of preservation of life, pikuach nefesh, has limitations.

The individual whose life is to be saved must be a specific, identifiable individual, rather than an abstract or potential beneficiary. Another question is what constitutes a life-threatening situation. Some situations are clearly life-threatening, such as one who is dying of a disease and will die without medical intervention, or one who is drowning and will not be able to escape the water without help from another. In other situations, it may be unclear if a life is truly in danger.

For example, if a person is feeling “extreme pain,” this may be tremendously uncomfortable, but it is unclear whether it may lead to death. It is always considered preferable to err on the side of caution (ex. “violating” Jewish laws), even if this retroactively turns out to be unnecessary.

If one is in danger of losing a limb, mobility, eyesight, suffering the loss of some other function vital to one’s future survival, or may be in danger of a new health problem developing that may ultimately shorten one’s life, the situation is considered to be life-threatening.

If it cannot be ascertained whether or not a situation is life-threatening, the situation must be considered life-threatening until proven otherwise, thereby allowing action to be taken. It is of prime importance that if one believes a life may be in danger, and seconds may count, that persons involved not delay helping the victim out of fear of violating halakha, or in order to determine if such a violation is permissible according to halakha. If one takes action in violation of halakha to save a life when they believe the situation is life-threatening, but later learns that there was no threat to a human life, they have not sinned, and must not feel guilty over having made such a mistake.

Does donning a face covering fall into this category?

2. It’s not just about saving people who are in mortal danger (known as pikuah ha-nefesh). Jewish tradition also expresses its commitment to the supreme importance of human life through laws related to the preservation and protection of life. This class of commandments is known as shmirat ha-nefesh; literally, protecting life. It is derived from a biblical verse which teaches, “Be cautious with yourself and seriously guard your life”

But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children’s children. (Deuteronomy 4:9)

רָק הַשְּׁמֵר לָךְ וּשְׁמֵר נַפְשְׁךָ מְאֹד פְּנֵי־תַשְׁכַּח אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ וּפְנֵי־יָסוּרוֹ מִלִּבְּךָ כִּלְיָי תִּיָּדָה וְהוֹדַעְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וּלְבָנֵי בָנֶיךָ:



3. Rabbinic tradition understood this verse to mean that we are not allowed to knowingly endanger our lives or engage in behaviors that would likely result in disease or death. And we are similarly obligated to take steps to protect others' lives, like building a parapet around the roofs of our houses to minimize the risk of someone accidentally falling.

Seen from this perspective, Jews ought to regard actions which help prevent us and others from contracting or communicating the novel coronavirus, like thoroughly washing our hands, wearing face masks, and remaining at home, as mitzvot, sacred obligations. These behaviors are more than wise acts of self-preservation and kind contributions to public health; they are holy deeds, religious requirements, with the force of divine injunction.

And if behaviors like thoroughly washing our hands, wearing face masks, and remaining at home are mitzvot, then they should be preceded by blessings. Relevant blessings accompany the performance of most other mitzvot.

We recite a blessing before fulfilling a commandment to indicate that the deed we are about to perform is thoughtful and deliberate. We affirm that we are doing the action intentionally, and for the sake of fulfilling a religious obligation. In this way, we affirm the spiritual significance of the behavior, turning the thoughtless and the mundane into the intentional and the sacred, and helping us live with more meaning and purpose.

Since protective acts like hygienic hand-washing, wearing face masks, and sheltering in place should be considered mitzvot, at least during this pandemic, should we recite an appropriate blessing, just like other mitzvot. Requiring a blessing would underscore the significance of these acts and encourage vigilant observance.

Since there is a traditional blessing over erecting a parapet, it is tempting to simply apply that blessing to actions like hygienic hand-washing, wearing face masks, and staying at home. There are undoubtedly parallels between putting a fence on one's roof for others' safety and, say, donning a face covering for others' safety. Still, it feels odd to use the same blessing for both acts. While analogous, they aren't identical.

Create a new blessing for the actions we take to keep ourselves and each other safe and healthy during a pandemic:

You are bountiful, Infinite our God, majesty of space and time, אֱשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ, בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ, וְצִוֵּנוּ עַל שְׂמֵרַת הַנַּפֶּשׁ
who has sanctified us with divine commandments and has commanded us about protecting life.

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4. The face covering has become a tribal symbol, like the kippah or a woman's head covering. The style and even the fabric of the kippah often indicates the subgroup one identifies with.

Consider the mask during this pandemic. What does the type of mask say about the wearer? What stereotypes do we make? The plain paper mask, often distributed in doctor's offices and hospitals have given way to all sorts of fashion statement coverings.

If you created a mask, what would yours look like?

Activity: Make a Face Mask for you and make one for a friend or family member!

<https://www.nytimes.com/article/how-to-make-face-mask-coronavirus.html>



5. Consider the six sources below. Which text reflects the current pandemic?

Bava Kamma 60b:2-5

The Sages taught: If there is plague in the city, gather your feet, i.e., limit the time you spend out of the house, as it is stated in the verse: "And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning." And it says in another verse: "Come, my people, enter into your chambers, and shut your doors behind you.

ת"ר דבר בעיר כנס רגליך שנאמר ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח ביתו עד בקר ואומר (ישעיהו כו, כ) לך עמי בא בהדרוך וסגור דלתך בעדך ואומר (דברים לב, כה) מחוץ תשכל חרב ומחדרים אימה מאי ואומר וכי תימא ה"מ בליליא אבל בימא לא תא שמע לך עמי בא בהדרוך וסגור

Bava Kamma 60b:8-9

The Sages taught: If there is a plague in the city, a person should not walk in the middle of the road, due to the fact that the Angel of Death walks in the middle of the road, as, since in Heaven they have given him permission to kill within the city, he goes openly in the middle of the road. By contrast, if there is peace and quiet in the city, do not walk on the sides of the road, as, since the Angel of Death does not have permission to kill within the city, he hides himself and walks on the side of the road...

ת"ר דבר בעיר אל יהלך אדם באמצע הדרך מפני שמלאך המות מהלך באמצע הדרכים דכיון דיהיבא ליה רשותא מסגי להדיא שלום בעיר אל יהלך בצדי דרכים דכיון דלית ליה רשותא מחבי חבוי ומסגי ת"ר דבר בעיר אל יכנס אדם יחיד לבית הכנסת שמלאך המות מפקיד שם כליו וה"מ היכא דלא קרו ביה דרדקי ולא מצלו ביה עשרה

Mishnah Taanit 3:4

And so too a city which has a plague or [its buildings] collapse that city fasts and they sound a blast, but those [in the places] around it fast but do not sound the alarm. Rabbi Akiva says: they sound the alarm but do not fast. What constitutes a plague? If in a city that can supply five hundred foot-soldiers and three deaths occurred on three consecutive days, behold this constitutes a plague, less than this is not a plague.

וכן עיר שיש בה דָּבָר או מפלת, אותה העיר מתענה ומתרת, וכל סביבותיה מתענות ולא מתריעות. רבי עקיבא אומר, מתריעות ולא מתענות. איזהו דָּבָר, עיר המוציאה תמש מאות רגלי, ונצאו ממנה שלשה מתים בשלשה ימים זה אחר זה, הרי זה דָּבָר. פחות מכאן, אין זה דָּבָר

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 329:1

All cases of saving a life supersede Shabbat, and he who hurries in these matters is praised. Even if there is a fire in a different yard and there is concern that it will move to this yard and cause danger, we put it out to ensure that it does not spread.

על מי מחללין שבת. ובו ט סעיפים כל פיקוח נפש דוחה שבת והזרזו הרי זה משובח אפילו נפלה דליקה בחצר אחרת וירא שתעבור לחצר זו ויבא לידי סכנה מכבין כדי שלא תעבור

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 4:18

The following things require washing the hands in water [after them]: One who rises from bed, goes out of the bathroom, or of the bath house, one who cuts his nails, takes off his shoes, touches his feet, or washes his head, some say: also one who goes among the dead, or touched the dead, one who cleanses his clothes of lice, ..., touches a louse, or touches his body with his hand. Anyone doing any of these and not washing his hands, if he is a scholar, his studies are forgotten, and if he is not a scholar, he goes out of his mind.

אלו דברים צריך נטילה במים. הקם מהמטה והיוצא מבית הכסא. ומבית המרחץ. והנוטל צפורניו. והחולץ מנעליו. והנוגע ברגליו. והחופף ראשו וי"א אף ההולך בין המתים. ומי שנגע במת. ומי שמפליא כליו. והמשמש מטתו. והנוגע בכנה. והנוגע בגופו בידו. ומי שעשה אחת מכל אלו ולא נטל אם ת"ח הוא תלמודו משתכח. ואם אינו ת"ח יוצא מדעתו

6. Could you make a case supporting or against the idea that a face covering is in fact a medical accessory like an artificial limb?

Mishnah Shabbat 6:8: Medical accessories are not subject to impurity and one may not go out with them.

משנה שבת ו'ח פמוכות שלו, טמאין מדרס, ויוצאין בהן בשבת, ונקנסין בהן בעזרה