

SHAVUOT / CONFIRMATION 5782

Sunday, June 5, 2022

Rabbi Jonathan Blake

TO VAX OR NOT TO VAX?

Confirmation Class of 5782!

Thank you for sharing your words with us this morning. It's now my turn to share a word with you. Literally, one word.

Wait, before you get too excited: my remarks are more than one word.

Let me explain.

Every November, the Oxford English Dictionary selects its "Word of the Year." In 2021, the OED chose the word "Vax," spelled V-A-X (though two x's are acceptable).

Your Confirmation year has seen spikes not only in Covid, but also in words related to vaccines and vaccination: words like *unvaxxed*, *double-vaxxed*, *anti-vaxxer*, and my personal favorite, *vaxinista*.

Given all this, “vax” makes perfect sense for “word of the year.”

As a shorthand for “vaccine” or “vaccinate,” “vax” also comes with a fascinating backstory, one that you’ll be happy to hear on an empty stomach.

The word “vaccine” comes from a Latin word for “cow,” *vacca*, similar to the French *la vache*, as in the immortal line, “*Fetchez la vache!*” from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, meaning, “Fetch the cow!” of course.

But what do vaccines have to do with cows? The unappetizing true story goes like this:

As the 18th century was winding to a close, an English physician named Edward Jenner set about to determine whether there was any truth to an urban legend of his day: milkmaids who got cowpox... didn't get smallpox. This was a

big deal, because a case of cowpox would typically leave a person with a self-contained and localized ulcer or two, usually on a hand, while a case of smallpox would likely cause disfiguring scars at best and full-on death at worst.

In a process that likely would not get FDA approval today, Jenner inoculated an eight-year-old boy (one James Phipps) with material [pus] taken from a milkmaid's cowpox sores. (We warned you.) After the boy contracted and recovered from cowpox, Jenner went on to inoculate him with smallpox. The boy was, to our great relief, immune, and did not contract the disease. Jenner repeated this process with 22 more lucky folks and published his documentation of it all in 1798, in a slender volume called *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae*, using the Latin term that charmingly translates as "cow pustules."

... [The word] "Vaccine" quickly came to be applied in English to the cowpox inoculum, and then broadened semantically to cover other kinds of inocula as well.

"Because of Jenner's work," our lexical researchers conclude, "the horrific scourge that was smallpox was eventually

eradicated. It goes to show that science doesn't have to be pretty to be pretty awesome, and neither does etymology.”¹

Now, I could just end here and let us all go have lunch, but in the interest of providing us with some time to recover from the linguistic shot in the arm I have just administered, I will endeavor to make sense of this, or at least, to make a point.

Since the time of Dr. Jenner to the present day, vaccines work by introducing an agent that prompts the body to recognize and fight specific pathogens. That agent might be a virus, in a weakened, inactive, or modified state, or a piece of a virus, or, in the case of the Pfizer or Moderna mRNA vaccines that most of us have received, a specially configured agent teaches our cells to make a protein that mimics the one on the surface of the coronavirus. Once our body creates this protein, the immune system learns to recognize it as a target and gets ready to fight against the real virus when it comes along.

The science evolves but the basic principle remains the same: introduce an organic agent into the body that makes it harder for unwanted pathogens to harm us or kill us.

¹ From “Vaccine: The Word’s History Ain’t Pretty,”
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/vaccine-the-words-history-aint-pretty>

Of course, Jenner's original hypothesis holds true: people who are infected—and who are lucky enough to recover—often develop some degree of natural immunity.

As concerns Covid, according to most experts who study infectious disease, one likely trajectory seems to be that, over time—between vaccines and boosters and the natural immunity provided by infection and recovery—this no-longer-so-novel coronavirus will become a thing we adapt to live with, most of us coming down with Covid every few years or so. That's a best-case scenario, and one I certainly don't relish, but it also beats a million dead Americans every two years.

The hope is that the thing that used to kill and cause irreparable tissue damage will become something to get through and get over.

What is true of viruses and vaccines is also true of damage to the human psyche, of injuries to the human soul, and how we figure out how to adapt and recover and move on.

Early or late, life will show itself mercilessly indifferent to your feelings. Nature will show itself monumentally indifferent to your

sense of fairness, your own hopes and aspirations. In the wake of the massacres in Buffalo and Uvalde and Tulsa, and in Philadelphia just last night, what further evidence do we need for the prevalence of random violence, evil, and chaos? What greater proof do we need that, so far as human suffering is concerned, there is no upper limit?

The brilliant Austrian physician Viktor Frankl, who was imprisoned in four Nazi death camps in the space of four years, exemplified this axiom. His wife was murdered by the Nazis in Bergen-Belsen, his father in Terezin, and his mother and brother in Auschwitz. Frankl, miraculously, survived.

Following the war, Frankl happily remarried, had a child and a distinguished career in psychiatry, published 39 books, received numerous awards for his contributions to science and the humanities, and lived to the age of 92.

Some people, confronted with ultimates of brutality, develop a kind of “immune response.” Reflexively or by choice, they inoculate themselves against feeling pain. They survive by desensitizing themselves, immunizing themselves against further psychic injury. When they next encounter a harmful agent—in

the form of a loss, a betrayal, or a source of physical or mental agony, they may respond in a number of different ways that expose how their suffering has shaped them.

They may require treatment for PTSD for the rest of their lives. They may shut down emotionally, or retreat into a prison of self-pity. Or, they may self-medicate, soothing themselves and seeking solace in alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, or any number of diversions that can become distractions that can become full-on dependencies.

They may continue to survive, but at a terrible cost: their bodies will live on, but their souls—by which I mean their capacity for empathy—will have died.

Frankl seems to have achieved the opposite. Frankl resisted the tendency to turn inward by intentionally orienting himself outward, toward others in need.

In reflecting on having survived his own unfathomable traumas, Frankl went on to publish his magnum opus, *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he famously wrote: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to

choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

Watching you, our students, grow from childhood to adulthood over the course of years; watching you take your halting first steps into a new age of Jewish maturity at B’nei Mitzvah and, from there, to reflect on, and refine, your Jewish identities in the year of Confirmation; watching you take your Jewish identities and construct lives of meaning and purpose, of empathy and commitment, of hope and possibility through High School graduation and well beyond—these are among the greatest privileges of my rabbinate.

And to have watched many of you grow up here at WRT to arrive at this *bimah*, on this bright and beautiful morning, fills me with the hope that the Jewish tradition is in very good hands, and that the human family will be enriched and blessed by all that you will bring to its betterment in years to come.

And yet, each of us acknowledges how much you have endured this year, these two years, and more: how each new wave of pestilence has stolen from you a share of freedom and human connection; how some of you have witnessed illness ravaging a

loved one; how each mass shooting has piled up another stratum of horror and sadness, of rage and despair; how each advancing year of no real action on climate change brings us closer to a terrifying abyss; how the chaos of all-out war in Ukraine has undermined our confidence in the stable Western democratic order that most of us have long taken for granted; how each new psychic injury that has pummeled you and your entire generation—even here, in the relative peace and prosperity of America, even now, in 2022—has proved profoundly destabilizing.

We would not blame you, Confirmation Class of 5782, if you were to *vax* yourselves against it all, become numb to it all, give up on any hope in your ability to do much more than protect yourself against future injury.

But I hope you won't.

At the risk of making you lose your appetites all over again, I want to conclude with a few words about a favorite verse from the Torah. In Deuteronomy chapter 10, verse 16, Moses adjures the people of Israel to “circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and be stiff-necked no more.”

In this mixed and mangled anatomical metaphor, the Torah speaks with uncanny insight to the challenge of this moment.

The Israelites have wandered for forty years in the wilderness. They have seen disease and bloodshed, idolatry and rebellion, thirst and starvation, plague and poverty. Tens if not hundreds of thousands have turned to dust, their carcasses left as silent witnesses to the ravages which only the lucky have withstood to tell the tale.

And what Moses wants most from his people, before they leave this godforsaken place to enter a land of promise, is that they cut away the accumulated dead tissue around their hearts—that they *un-inoculate* themselves to suffering, that they become people of empathy, word that literally means “to feel alongside,” that they become people of *compassion*, a word that literally means “to be with the suffering of another person.”

Confirmation class of 5782:

Even as we pray that you will become emotionally resilient people, people whose strength of character will prepare you for the wilderness of life, in all its hardness and all its hurt,

please—we beg you—do not vax yourself against the suffering of others. Do not vax yourself from feeling the world’s pain, fully and deeply and intimately.

Allow it, rather, to course through your veins. Let it move you to respond, with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might.

And when you do reach out with empathy for those whose suffering is greater than yours—for there will always be someone who needs your compassion—you will give them God’s own love, God’s own blessing.

Amen.