

Face Masks: Liberty or Duty?

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A close friend of mine is a Dallas veterinarian. I admire the successful small business that Brian has built from the ground up over the last two decades. He has, of course, remained open throughout the pandemic; medical care is essential, for any of God's creatures. At the same time, Brian has enacted some careful restrictions. Only clinic staff may enter the building. Employees take the animals from their owners' cars and return them there after the service is complete.

This week, a person whom Brian describes as "a good client for over a decade...refused to wait in his car...[H]e told my employee that she did not need to be wearing a mask and that Covid 19 fear was a 'bunch of [expletive deleted].'"

Sadly, this story is not surprising. Many of our neighbors have cast doubt on the seriousness of a pandemic that has killed over 100,000 Americans and scoffed at precautions necessary to slow the rate of viral transmission. My friend Eric tells of putting on his mask as he walked into a Dallas Kroger. He saw a man nearby "shake his head and mutter something. Then, as [they] were both getting [their] carts, and [Eric was] looking for the wipes, [the man] turn[ed] to [him] and sarcastically [said,] 'oooh, that's right. Need to sanitize everything so that we don't get cooties!'"

Rudeness has been the least of it. Armed protestors "stormed Michigan's Capitol" in late May, protesting coronavirus restrictions. The President called them "very good people" and urged the Governor to negotiate with them.ⁱ The purported political theory is that restrictions on individual behavior—even a private business, requiring face masks on its own premises—is a restriction of individual liberty.

Judaism, with its springtime calendar in particular, offers a very clear message about freedom and duty. Today, our Jewish people completed a cycle of holidays, beginning with our festival of freedom on Passover and culminating at Mount Sinai, as we receive the Ten Commandments on Shavuot. Traditional Jews count forty-nine days, a week of weeks, a sign of fulfillment—from exodus to revelation. The message could not be clearer: Liberation from Egyptian bondage does not grant complete freedom. Only when yoked to new duties, Torah's requirements to serve God instead of Pharaoh, are we truly free.

Many of us, when we were children, would tell our parents, "You can't make me do that! It's a free country!" Some parents responded, "Not in my house, it's not." All jokes aside, a free country, like a home where children can grow up to

be healthy and independent, requires restriction of individual liberty. When any of us exercises excessive freedom, we limit the liberty and well-being of other individuals and of our society as a whole.

The Torah portion that we begin to read tonight, *Parashat Naso*, illustrates the point. It begins by describing the responsibilities of Gershonites, Merarites, and Kohathites, clans of the tribe of Levi. You see, the Tent of Meeting, the traveling sanctuary, had to be dismantled, carried, and reassembled each time that the Israelites moved from one place to the next during their forty years of wandering. Gershonites dealt with fabrics and leather; Merarites, the hardware; and Kohathites, the most precious objects that had to be carried by hand.ⁱⁱ I imagine that there was a day when a Gershonite wanted to hold the priests' jars, covered in crimson cloth, rather than the more prosaic task of handling tarps. And perhaps came a time when a Kohathites wanted to deal with sockets instead of worrying about the most precious items. However, each had a duty, which none was free to shirk, for the welfare of the whole community. And trust me: The Israelites understood all of these clans to be "essential workers." If the Tent of Meeting were not properly moved, and the Sanctuary not ready for the sacred service at the next encampment, with each of its parts in perfect condition, God would not be served and the people would have no confidence in their safety.

Face masks are not the first safety feature that some Americans have fought on the basis of individual liberty. *Business Insider* explains: As traffic deaths rose early in the second half of the 20th century, "Congress...required all vehicles (except buses) to be fitted with seat belts in 1968. But using them was strictly voluntary. And many Americans didn't want to. As late as 1983, fewer than 15% of Americans said that they used seat belts consistently. New York became the first state to pass a mandatory seat-belt law, in 1984...A Gallup poll from July 1984 showed that 65% of Americans opposed mandatory belt laws...Some argued—incorrectly—that it was safer to be thrown clear from a wreck than trapped inside one. 'In this country, saving freedom is more important than trying to regulate lives through legislation,' wrote one staunch opponent in a 1987 Chicago Tribune Editorial."ⁱⁱⁱ The National Highway Transportation Administration reports that, "Seat belt use in passenger vehicles saved an estimated 14,955 lives in 2017."^{iv}

Like research on seat belts a half century ago, we know less about the effectiveness of face masks than we will in the months and years to come. Still, Mayo Clinic states plainly: "[F]ace masks, combined with other preventive measures, such as frequent hand washing and social distancing, help slow the spread of the virus."^v

A recently-released Reform Movement “Guidelines on Values-Based Decision Making: Returning to In-Person Gatherings during the COVID-19 Pandemic” interprets a beloved line from *Pirkei Avot, Aseh l’cha Rav*, “Find yourself a rabbi:” “Though often translated as ‘teacher,’ the term ‘rabbi’ in this phrase, in fact, suggests expertise. In our Jewish lives, we rely upon the knowledge and guidance of our rabbis, cantors, and educators. As we confront a public health crisis, though, it is the expertise of public health authorities, specialists in infectious disease, and epidemiologists to which we must look for guidance concerning the best decisions...”^{vi}

Public health experts tell us to wear a mask whenever we are in a public place. Therefore, doing so is a *mitzvah*, a religious obligation, a duty, in spring, 2020, and likely for many months to come. Like the Merarites or Gershonites in the wilderness, we are not at liberty to abandon our duty, lest catastrophe befall the entire community.

Our Torah portion also includes the words of the Priestly Benediction, which Confirmation parents and I were privileged to bestow upon our confirmands last night. Rashi interprets the second verb in its first line, *Yivarechecha Adonai v’yishmerecha*, “May God bless you and **guard** you,”^{vii} as a blessing for physical safety and security. Let us pray that God is our partner, blessing us with safety.^{viii} And let us be God’s partners, exercising our duty to wear our face masks, guarding our neighbors’ health.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://nypost.com/2020/05/01trump-calls-michigan-lockdown-protestors-are-good-people/>.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 4. The description of the Kohathites duties is in the early part of this chapter, in *Parashat Bemidbar*. *Parashat Naso* begins at Numbers 4:21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Ackerman, “Before face masks, Americans went to war against seat belts,” *Business Insider*, May 26, 2020, accessed May 29, 2020 at <https://www.businessinsider.com/when-americans-went-to-war-against-seat-belts-2020-5>.

^{iv} “Seat Belts,” NHTSA, United States Department of Transportation, accessed May 29, 2020 at <https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/seat-belts/>.

^v Mayo Clinic Staff, “COVID-19: How much protection do face masks offer? Accessed May 29, 2020 at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/coronavirus-mask/art-2085449>.

^{vi} CCAR/URJ Guidelines on Values-Based Decision Making: Returning to In-Person Gatherings during the COVID-19 Pandemic, accessed on May 29, 2020 at <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-urj-guidelines-on-values-based-decision-making-returning-to-in-person-gatherings-covid-19/>.

^{vii} Numbers 6:24.

^{viii} Rashi to Numbers 6:24.