



December 23, 2021

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor of New York City
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Hon. Dave A. Chokshi, MD, MSc, FACP
Commissioner
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
42-09 28th Street
Long Island City, NY 11101

Dear Mr. Mayor and Commissioner Chokshi,

We write as rabbis and cantors, clergy members and spiritual leaders of Jewish communities across New York City and the United States. We are experts and lifelong students of Judaism and Jewish texts; we practice and engage with our faith every day, and we work constantly with members of our communities to help them live meaningful lives in line with and guided by Jewish values and principles.

We are writing to thank you for your decision to mandate COVID-19 vaccines for employees at private and religious schools, including yeshivas and Jewish schools. **While this policy has its critics, we believe it is the kind of bold step New York City needs to keep our children, our educators, and our school staff safe while keeping schools open and allowing children to continue their education. We urge you to implement and enforce it fully, in close coordination with the affected communities.**

Our position is rooted in our dedication to Jewish values and principles and in our connection to the Jewish people. We are part of *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people, and as members in this community, we are committed to supporting, protecting, and fighting for all of our fellow Jews in New York and around the world.

Also at the core of our message is *pikuach nefesh*, the Jewish value of saving a life. *Pikuach nefesh* is so fundamental to Judaism that it can supersede other *mitzvot*, or commandments; it explains why Reb Yisroel Salanter broke the fast and ate in shul on Yom Kippur in the 1840s, encouraging his congregants to eat and protect their own health amidst the cholera epidemic.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a) teaches, "Whoever saves a single life is considered by scripture to have saved the whole world." Protecting yourself against COVID-19 can save not only your life

but also the lives of anyone who might get the virus from you. **Getting vaccinated is *pikuach nefesh*, and policies like vaccine mandates, which encourage more people to get vaccinated and have been shown to [successfully increase vaccination rates](#), are *mitzvot* in their own right.**

We understand that some members of the New York Jewish community have criticized the policy and its introduction. We would like to address some of those criticisms and outline our reasons for supporting it despite those concerns.

Some argue against vaccine mandates on the grounds that vaccination is a personal choice. We are sympathetic to concerns about personal autonomy over one's body. At the same time, one person's decision to get vaccinated against COVID-19, or not to get vaccinated, can have repercussions for that person's family, friends, casual contacts, and community. We have lived in a pandemic, a public health crisis, for nearly two years; we continue to live with the virus because of its ability to spread from one person to another. The only way to defeat the virus is to stop spreading it, and our best tool for stopping the spread of COVID is vaccination. *Pikuach nefesh* reminds us that we are responsible not only for our own lives but also for the lives of all the members of our community.

We have heard concerns raised about the prospect of schools losing good teachers who are unwilling to get vaccinated. As we noted, vaccine mandates are effective tools for increasing vaccination rates and protecting people and communities against COVID-19; we certainly hope to see the same outcome in private and religious schools in New York City. We hope and expect city government will deal responsibly with those who have legitimate reasons for declining the vaccine, but we also hope that everyone else covered by this mandate will come to see the broad communal benefits of their individual decision and choose to get vaccinated. We cannot compromise the entire community's right to health and safety because of a small group of individuals.

We have also heard suggestions from critics of the mandate that the policy is part of an effort to target Jews, particularly with enforcement of COVID-related policies. We don't think that criticism withstands scrutiny. On its face, the mandate covers all private and religious schools; it is not targeted specifically at any single group and will cover schools that serve a wide range of racial, ethnic, and religious communities.

In fact, this mandate creates a level playing field among all of our city's schools. COVID doesn't differentiate between public and private schools, so we must treat all educational institutions fairly and give every child the educational opportunities they deserve while protecting their health. This policy does that.

Let us be absolutely clear: we are deeply committed to Jewish institutions, including Jewish educational institutions. We support the right of families to access a Jewish education. **We firmly believe that mandating vaccination doesn't undermine the right to a Jewish education; it upholds it.** Lower vaccination rates mean higher COVID rates, and higher COVID

rates mean more closed schools and sick people. The more schools can be open and school staff can be healthy, the more our children can be fully immersed in their education.

The science and the data are clear that COVID can and does spread in school environments – but it doesn't have to. According to [the CDC](#), "The association between COVID-19 incidence, the transmission of the virus in school settings, and levels of community transmission underscores the importance of controlling disease spread in the community to protect teachers, staff, and students in schools." Yes, ensuring that everyone in a school is vaccinated limits the spread of COVID within the walls of that particular school, and even more importantly, it also helps keep the entire community safe.

The science is clear: vaccines are the best tool we have to protect ourselves from a virus that has already killed far too many in our New York City Jewish community. Extending the mandate will help us protect more of our community. The emergence and spread of the Omicron variant underscores the urgency of getting vaccinated.

Leviticus 19:16 instructs us, "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed." We cannot watch silently as COVID-19 continues to devastate our city and take the lives of our fellow Jews and New Yorkers. Instead, we are speaking loudly and clearly with one voice to say that a vaccine mandate in private and religious schools is the right policy, we urge you to implement and enforce it fully in close coordination with the affected communities, and we are prepared to support that effort however we can.

Signed,

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, NYJA Co-Founder & Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, Manhattan*
Rabbi Rachel Timoner, NYJA Co-Founder & Congregation Beth Elohim, Brooklyn

New York Rabbis and Other Jewish Religious Leaders:

Rabbi Ronald L. Androphy, East Meadow Beth-El Jewish Center (East Meadow)
Cantor Dana Anesi, Temple of Universal Judaism (White Plains)
Rabbi Sharon Ballan, Temple Beth Sholom of Flushing (Queens)
Cantor Chanin Becker, Scarsdale Synagogue (Tarrytown)
Rabbi Dana Bogatz, First Hebrew (Peekskill)
Cantor Alan J. Brava, Free Synagogue of Flushing (Queens)
Rabbi Deborah Bravo, MakomNY (Woodbury)
Cantor Josh Breitzer, Congregation Beth Elohim (Brooklyn)
Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor, Congregation Shirat HaYam (Brooklyn)
Rabbi Suzanne Brody, Temple Beth El (Ithaca)
Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom Synagogue (White Plains)
Rabbi Yechiel Buchband, Valley Stream Jewish Center (Valley Stream)

Rabbi Howard Buechler, Dix Hills Jewish Center (Dix Hills)
Rabbi Don Cashman, B'nai Sholom Reform Congregation (Albany)
Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (Manhattan)
Rabbi Emily Cohen, West End Synagogue (Manhattan)
Rabbi Brian Denker, International Federation of Rabbis (Brooklyn)
Rabbi Andy Dubin (Manhattan)
Rabbi Moshe Edelman, Conservaztive Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale (Bronx)
Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson (Manhattan)
Rabbi David Ellenson (Manhattan)
Rabbi Rachel Esserman, Temple Concord (Endwell)
Rabbi Susan Falk, The Shul of New York (Manhattan)
Rabbi Marla J. Feldman, Women of Reform Judaism (Manhattan)
Rabbi Michael Fessler, Temple Beth-El (Poughkeepsie)
Rabbi Sarah Freidson, Temple Beth Shalom (Mahopac)
Rabbi Jonathan Freirich, Open Door Judaism, Inc. (Buffalo)
Rabbi Stephen Garfinkel, Jewish Theological Seminary (Manhattan)
Rabbi Kim Geringer, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion (Manhattan)
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Rabbi Ilene Haigh (Mamaroneck)
Rabbi Eytan Hammerman, Jewish Community Center of Harrison (Harrison)
Rabbi Yael Hammerman, Ansche Chesed (Manhattan)
Rabbi Robert A. Harris, Jewish Theological Seminary (Manhattan)
Rabbi Michael D. Howald, Temple Israel Reform Congregation of Staten Island (Staten Island)
Rabbi Glenn Jacob, New York Interfaith Power & Light (Lincolndale)
Rabbi Jill Jacobs, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights (Manhattan)
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Rabbi Neal Kaunfer, Romemu (Manhattan)
Rabbi Barry A. Kenter (New Rochelle)
Rabbi Michael Klayman, Lake Success Jewish Center (Great Neck)
Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, Congregation Beth Elohim (Brooklyn)
Rabbi Gabriel Kretzmer-Seed (Bronx)
Rabbi Neil Kurshan (Manhattan)
Rabbi Marion Lev-Cohen, Hebrew Union College/JIR (Manhattan)

Rabbi Samuel Levine, East Midwood Jewish Center (Brooklyn)
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Rabbi Miriam Midlarsky Lichtenfeld (Orangeburg)
Rabbi Valerie Lieber, Kane Street Synagogue (Brooklyn)
Rabbi Ellen Lippmann (Brooklyn)
Rabbi Marc J. Margolius, Institute for Jewish Spirituality (Manhattan)
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Rabbi Sara Rich, Hillel of Buffalo (Buffalo)
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Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action (Manhattan)
Rabbi Joel Roth, Jewish Theological Seminary (Manhattan)
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Rabbi Josh Weinberg, URJ/ARZA (Manhattan)
Rabbi Jay Weinstein, Congregation Simchat HaLev (Woodbury)
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Rabbi Sara Zacharia (Manhattan)
Rabbi Simcha Zamir, Temple Sholom of Westbury (Westbury)

Jewish Religious Leaders from Outside New York

Rabbi Susan Abramson, Temple Shalom Emeth (MA)
Rabbi Allison Berry, Temple Shalom (MA)
Rabbi Cecelia Beyer, Temple Shalom (NJ)
Rabbi Jillian Cameron, Beth Chayim Chadashim (CA)
Rabbi David J. Cooper, Kehilla Community Synagogue (CA)
Rabbi Heidi Coretz, Hillel at SMU (TX)
Rabbi Meryl Crean, RRA (PA)
Rabbi Renee Goldberg Edelman, Temple Shaarey Shalom (NJ)
Rabbi Laurence Edwards, Congregation Or Chadash (Emeritus) (IL)
Rabbi Lisa A. Edwards, Beth Chayim Chadashim (CA)
Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer (CA)
Rabbi Dara Frimmer, Temple Isaiah (CA)
Rabbi Gary S. Gerson, Oak Park Temple B'nai Abraham Zion (IL)
Rabbi James Gibson, Temple Sinai (PA)
Rabbi Rosalind Gold (VA)
Rabbi Jodie Gordon, Hevreh of Southern Berkshire (MA)
Rabbi David Greenstein
Rabbi Linda Holtzman, Tikkun Olam Chavurah (PA)
Rabbi Yaacov Kravitz, Center for Spiritual Intelligence (PA)
Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff, Past President, Central Conference of American Rabbis (NJ)
Rabbi Dr. Michele Lenke, Providence Cedars Sinai Tarzana Medical Center (CA)
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Rabbi Steven Peskind (IL)
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Rabbi Dalia Samansky (CA)
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Rabbi Naomi Steinberg, Temple Beth El (CA)
Rabbi Shira Stern (MA)
Rabbi David A. Teutsch, Reconstructing Judaism (PA)
Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, Retired Rabbinic Director, Jewish Board (NYC) (PA)
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Rabbi Elaine Zecher, Temple Israel of Boston (MA)
Cantor Chaplain Michael J. Zoosman, L'chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty (MD)

**Affiliations are provided for identification purposes only*

cc: Hon. Eric Adams, Mayor-Elect
Office of the Mayor-Elect