

Coveting the Covid Vaccine

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Many of my friends have asked: “Have you been vaccinated yet? Shouldn’t clergy have some special status? Or if not, wouldn’t you qualify as a teacher?”

No, I have not yet been vaccinated, although I am very eager to roll up my sleeve and take the shot when it’s my turn. I am thrilled that my parents have been vaccinated, among so many of our congregants in groups 1-A and 1-B.

Some clergy work as chaplains. They have been risking their lives and health by being present in hospitals, with members of our Armed Services, in long term care facilities and hospices, and in prisons for nearly a year. Those clergy deserve priority—and in health care settings, at least, they are getting it. Otherwise, clergy should await their eligibility alongside everybody else, based on age and preexisting conditions.

More broadly, clergy should not be granted vaccination priority. As we at Congregation B’nai Israel have demonstrated, houses of worship are able to provide programs and services from a distance, without endangering anybody’s health. Unlike public, private, and preschool teachers, the fact that we do not offer in-person classes does not place an undue burden on students and parents.

Still, I **am** eager to be vaccinated. I suspect that’s true of everybody worshipping with us tonight—except, of course, for the grateful folks who have already had one or both shots. One could accuse us of **coveting** the vaccine. After all, if we define coveting as wanting something that somebody else has, I’m as guilty as anybody.

However, the more I have thought about coveting, the sin prohibited in the Tenth Commandments, in this week’s Torah portion, I am not so sure.

The least known, and most poorly understood, of the Ten Commandments is that last one: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house: you shall not covet your neighbor’s [spouse], nor servant, nor ox nor ass, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”ⁱ

In a book called *Inscribed: Encounters with the Ten Commandments*, Alan Morinis suggests a three-step process to avoid coveting. We begin with recognizing that we want something we do not have. Then, we are enjoined to conquer that impulse. Finally, we must “rectify the impulse itself, so that the feeling of craving does not even arise in the first place.”ⁱⁱ

First, we must come to terms with the reality that we crave something which is not ours. The Tenth Commandment demands that we acknowledge we are disturbed by unhealthy desires. We have permitted the *yetzer ha-ra*, evil inclination, to get the best of us.ⁱⁱⁱ God would be accused of wishful thinking, if the Holy One were really asking us not to **want** something that isn't ours. Yes, I want the Covid vaccine, and I want it **now**.

No, the Tenth Commandment is not a prohibition against **wanting** something that belongs to somebody else. Still, the first step to avoiding the sin is to recognize that we do want that thing we do not currently possess.

Thus, we come to the second step: we must overcome that covetousness. Alan Morinis explains: "It is an act of will ... to walk a route that avoids that person's house or car, or to choose a different class or frequent a different coffee shop where you will not see that person, and so on."^{iv} Citing Rabbeinu Bachya, Alan is urging us to avoid the stimuli that torture our souls when we do not possess the things we crave. With respect to the Covid vaccine, those of us who do not yet qualify would do well to avoid pestering our doctors and pharmacists, demanding to place our names on lists that do not yet exist.

Finally, Alan writes that the third step involves "rectifying the impulse itself, so that the feeling of craving does not even arise in the first place."^v Alan reminds us that, in *Pirkei Avot*, "Ben Zoma rhetorically asks, 'Who is rich?' and answers that the truly wealthy person is "one who is *samei'ach b'chelko*, [happy with one's portion]."^{vi} This part is harder, but I do find myself able to enjoy some of the benefits of the pandemic. I love my commute—most often, from one part of the house to another. I am thrilled that our out-of-town members and friends enjoy equal access to our programs and services now. I am grateful for the care taken by our congregation's Covid Response Task Force, and I am proud of our members, who wear their masks, keep their distance, and live responsibly in these challenging times. And I am grateful to the scientists who have created the vaccine that I'm tempted to covet—and to God, for creating the world with the possibility for such brilliant minds to harness natural phenomena for healing. Such is my "lot" as I await the vaccine, a contentment which makes me less likely to covet it.

Psychologically, we do well to acknowledge all that the pandemic has taken from us and all of our disappointments. At the same time, we may find peace and contentment in taking this time to recognize all the goodness in our lives, much of it unaffected by the pandemic and more that we look forward to resuming in a now-foreseeable future.

Yes, we all **want** the Coronavirus vaccine, and we want it **now**, unless we are already celebrating that we've had it! God would be foolish to command that we shouldn't **want** that. As guilty as we may be of a panoply of sins, though, I hope that we do not **covet** that vaccine, which would be the case if we were obsessing about how we might maneuver to get vaccinated out of turn—and even more, if we were actually pulling strings to be vaccinated before we are eligible. Such an unhealthy fixation would disturb our equanimity, our peace of mind—and, if we acted on it, be immoral. Instead, commanded not to covet, we wear our masks, stay home, and keep our distance when we go out, and continue to do so until our rightful turn to be vaccinated, with gratitude to God and to all who have made the vaccine possible.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 20:14.

ⁱⁱ Alan Morinis, "Conquering and Transforming the Impulse to Want What Is Not Yours," *Inscribed: Encounters with the Ten Commandments*, Rabbi Oren J. Hayon, Editor, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, 195. The translations in brackets are also Alan's, from the same article, but not the same sentence.

ⁱⁱⁱ My own chapter in *Inscribed* describes the Tenth Commandment as a warning: "beware the *yetzer ha-ra*."

^{iv} Alan Morinis, "Conquering and Transforming the Impulse To Want What Is Not Yours," 196.

^v *Ibid.*, 197.

^{vi} *Ibid.*