

Blood Plasma Donations: A Lifesaving Story of Achdus and Dedication

Rabbi Ariel Sadwin, center, together with participants at the Maryland Blood Plasma Drive

On Wednesday, April 23, thousands of Orthodox Jewish people across several states participated in special blood-antibodies screening events. The two things all participants had in common: having recovered from the dreaded COVID-19 virus, and the burning desire to help those currently suffering from it.

With no cure or vaccine yet available, and with all potential breakthrough drugs still in trial stages, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the globe, and many Orthodox Jewish communities. However, ongoing research in leading laboratories has led those who have recovered from the virus to now engage in helping in its very fight. While sick with COVID, patients produce blood-antibodies which enables their bodies to fight the virus. Plasma, a component of blood, contains these antibodies, and can be extracted through a 70-90 minute process. Antibody rich plasma, called "COVID convalescent plasma," can then be transfused into actively ill patients to help them fight the disease. Although not a definitive therapy, early studies that this treatment helps improve outcomes have been promising, and doctors in the field are observing positive changes in their patients, typically within 48 hours.

While COVID-19 tests had limited availability in the earlier stages of the pandemic, making it difficult to know definitively who had the virus, the Mayo Clinic's antibody titer tests screen the blood for antibodies which can prove if one had the virus, even if they had not been tested by the COVID-19 nasal swab test. Researchers from Mayo began partnering with community health organizations in order to help identify those exhibiting the telltale COVID signs, yet not confirmed as potential plasma donors.

Early plasma efforts and actions in the Orthodox Jewish communities in New York were undertaken by a few individuals who partnered with Agudath Israel of America. In short order the group began disseminating information and coordinating with hospitals, blood banks, and donors to facilitate donations. Building on the success in New York, the Agudah harnessed its network of regional directors, and over the next couple of weeks, more communities activated and engaged with their local health facilities and organizations. The Maryland COVID Plasma Initiative was launched last week by a small group of askanim and medical professionals working in close contact with community rabbanim and organizations.

The first step was to find eligible donors. Early on Tuesday, Lakewood Bikur Cholim was notified by the Mayo Clinic that their labs would accept 5,000 blood-antibody test units if testing would take place on Wednesday and delivered to their Rochester, Minnesota labs by Thursday morning. In turn, Lakewood Bikur Cholim reached out to other regional communities to offer a share in the opportunity. The Maryland COVID Plasma Initiative team sprang into action.

After a Tuesday evening robocall went out urging people who

believe they were infected to participate, online registration opened up and nearly 500 people came forward with their information. Barely 12 hours later – late Wednesday morning – Bais Yaakov High School played host for the testing, bringing out approximately 400 likely COVID-19 survivors together with a large group of dedicated volunteers to help make the event happen. Bais Yaakov's large auditorium was the perfect venue, allowing the volunteer medical professionals to spread out, to uphold all social distancing protocols, while they were drawing the blood and preparing it for processing.

After each of the blood-antibodies drives were completed, the blood samples of nearly 5,000 people from the different communities were transported to Brooklyn, New York, where they were gathered before being flown to Mayo.

Over the next couple of days, the Mayo Clinic will identify which samples possess adequate antibodies to potentially fight COVID-19. Next, donors will be notified and plasma donations may begin, with the hopeful outcome of helping those suffering from the virus.

“The sight and knowledge of so many people from so many different communities coming together in an effort to engage in potentially life-saving activities, was a true moment of Mi k'amcha Yisroel, and a Kiddush Hashem,” said Rabbi Ariel Sadwin, executive director of Agudath Israel of Maryland, and one of the plasma committee members. “It is gratifying to see that the sense of chesed in NY is a microcosm of communities' chesed nationwide, as communities and organizations across the country are working tirelessly to give of themselves to help others,” said Avrohom Weinstock, Chief of Staff at Agudah's national headquarters in New York.

The Maryland COVID Plasma Initiative wishes to thank the many organizations and volunteers who gave selflessly of their time and expertise to make the first step of this critical process so effective and successful. As we now move into the initiative's second phase, we reiterate that appreciation, while also offering a tefillah that this effort brings forth refuos and yeshuos to those who need it.