

# **NYS Eliminates Religious Exemption for Vaccinations: Agudath Israel Statement**

Agudath Israel of America has previously described that, with a measles vaccination rate in NY Orthodox Jewish schools of 96%, vaccination is our “clear societal norm” and that “it is imperative to build on the Orthodox Jewish community’s already high vaccination rate.” It has also decried an anti-vaccination rally held amidst the outbreak, and the inflammatory and senseless musings shared therein.

Agudath Israel has proactively organized multiple, free vaccination clinics in Borough Park, Flatbush, and Williamsburg; placed full page educational advertisements in community magazines and newspapers; and partnered with the NYS and NYC Departments of Health to disseminate critical information to schools and parents describing best steps to prevent this disease. Our stance and actions on this issue have been clear.

That said, Agudath Israel views with concern the recent passage of a bill to eliminate the ability to file a religious exemption for vaccination to allow attendance in a New York State K-12 school. When Agudath Israel expressed this concern to the legislature, it emphasized that the First Amendment, and the sacrosanct constitutional principle of governmental aversion toward impinging on the free exercise of religion, is a cornerstone of our country. It is a principle that our constituents routinely rely upon to function as Orthodox Jews in America. Erosion of that – irrespective of whether it affects our immediate religious practice – sets a dangerous precedent.

This is particularly true given that existing law already

allowed religious exemptions to be revoked by the authorities in a time of outbreak; that this measure does nothing to address vaccination in preschool children, where the greatest vaccination lapses, and vast majority of cases, occurred; and neglects to add protective measures for overseas travel, the source of such non-native diseases. Moreover, the "anti-vax" movement, is a non-denominational, international phenomenon. Enhanced public vaccine and contagion education would have been a more comprehensive, long-term approach.

In short, with rates already high in most yeshivos, it is unclear if this reactive measure, if enacted last year, would have mitigated the current outbreak. With other less intrusive, and arguably more impactful measures available, it is our hope that lawmakers use their power in the future to negotiate the sometimes thorny terrain of balancing enhancing public health while preserving the integrity of free exercise.