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A killer of a character flaw

Shammai Engelmayer

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed a character trait some believe is as American as apple pie—selfishness. It may yet prove to be the one barrier to returning us to some degree of normalcy.

By the time this column appears, the SARS-CoV-2 virus will killed nearly 570,000 people in the United States and has infected nearly 32 million others since January 2020, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. (SARS-CoV-2 is the name of the virus; COVID-19 is shorthand for “coronavirus disease 2019.”) Nearly every infectious disease expert believes the battle against COVID-19 can be won, but only if we overcome the degree of selfishness that apparently is rooted in the American psyche.

In other words, it depends on how many Americans are willing to do several things until “herd immunity” is successfully achieved. That includes getting vaccinated, wearing masks in public and social distancing until the “all clear” is sounded.

According to the Pew Research Center, the good news is that nearly 70 percent of Americans say they will be vaccinated (and nearly 20 percent already have been fully vaccinated).

On the other hand, just about 30 percent of Americans say they have no intention of being vaccinated, and that is critical to getting us beyond COVID-19. Many of them also say they are adamantly opposed to wearing masks.

Achieving “herd immunity” depends as much on that 30 percent as it does on the 70 percent, and perhaps even more so. As Kent Sepkowitz, a physician and infection control expert at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, and a CNN medical analyst, explained it in a recent article:

“The [herd immunity] idea is straightforward: transmission of a virus depends on a non-immune person bumping into an actively infected person. With more and more vaccination, the likelihood that a non-immune person will come in contact with an infected person is progressively reduced until—poof—the risk of catching the infection is almost gone (though never zero).”

It seems so simple, but, says Sepkowitz, “Unfortunately, the simplest ideas are almost never so simple.” In this case, it depends on how many people need to be fully vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity. To this, says Sepkowitz, “there is no answer.”

“This is not a fund-raiser with a fixed universal goal we all are striving to reach,” he says. We all “live in communities. And things vary community to community. For example, in one locality, people may move around a lot—by car or bus or by walking. Each has an impact on risk of transmission, and therefore the number of immune people needed to protect the rest of the ‘herd.’ In another community, the mobility may be lower.”

Then there are the “cultural differences [that] may influence how close people stand when they talk. A famous mumps outbreak in adolescent boys from the Orthodox Jewish community is thought to have been exacerbated by the school practice of promoting close, sustained (15 hours a day) contact with a study partner (“chavrusa”) including “animated” face-to-face discussion resulting in transmission despite the fact that most had been vaccinated years before.”

Apparently, Sepkowitz was referring to over 3,500 cases of mumps that broke out in New York and New Jersey from June 2009 through June 2010, with Orthodox Jewish teenagers (78 percent of whom were boys) being disproportionately affected.

Weather is another factor, Sepkowitz says. “For example, San Diego and Minneapolis offer very different climates for viral growth….[The] herd likely is protected at a very different percent of vaccinated people in an Orthodox Jewish community in San Diego, where people live near the school and walk to most activities, compared to a gated community in a Minneapolis suburb where many prefer to keep to themselves.” (Sepkowitz did not mean that a mumps outbreak occurred in San Diego; he chose it because of its weather.)

All these factors are just the beginning of the problems associated with determining how many people need to be fully vaccinated before “normalcy” (whatever that will mean in the post-COVID world) returns.

So, if all 70 percent of Americans are vaccinated and the other 30 percent continue to refuse, will we be able to achieve herd immunity?

No one really knows. The odds, though, are that a far higher percentage is required, but we will not know what that number is until all the results are in, meaning when the infection rate and the death toll drop down to near zero.

And that is why selfishness is the biggest hurdle that needs to be overcome. A sociology professor, Thomas Henricks, described the problem this way in an August posting on the Psychology Today website:

“The more extreme elements of these resisters claim that the virus is a hoax; that requests for social distancing, testing, and mask-wearing are infringements on their liberty; and that they believe themselves able to withstand the effects of the virus should they contract it. After all, or so they insist, people have the right to do with their own bodies as they wish. Others, presumably more at risk, should fend for themselves. That individualistic spirit—in less noble terms, selfishness—is fundamental to the American experience.”

Two Brookings Institution Senior Fellows, Edward Vargas and Gabriel Sanchez, reached a similar conclusion, as they noted in an August posting on the Brookings website before vaccines were available:

After stating that “a large segment of the American public has been resistant” to mask-wearing, they concluded that the “number one reason” for this is “that it is their right as an American to not have to do so,” a view held by 40 percent of the nearly 6,000 people they surveyed. Another 24 percent refused to wear masks “because it is uncomfortable.”

In other words, “a combined 64 percent of Americans believe that their right to not have to be inconvenienced by wearing a mask or scarf over their face is more important than reducing the probability of getting sick or infecting others,” Vargas and Sanchez wrote.

This “American Individualism,” they said, was “leading to significant health consequences across the country.”

Based solely on observable evidence, the economist and New York Times opinion columnist Paul Krugman put it more bluntly: “What the coronavirus has revealed is the power of America’s cult of selfishness. And this cult is killing us.”

As discussed in some of my previous columns on COVID-19, Jewish law takes a dim view of such behavior. We are all travelling in the same boat. As our Sages of Blessed Memory often stated it, “All Israel is responsible one for the other.” (See, for example, the Babylonian Talmud tractate Shevuot [Oaths] 39a.)

The same holds true for any nation—and certainly this American nation, which was founded on values first espoused by the Torah.

As Maimonides, the Rambam, notes, the Torah offers no sanctuary for a person whose “overly inconsiderate and neglectful actions border on the criminal.” (See Rambam’s Mishneh Torah, The Laws of the Murderer and the Preservation of Life 6:4.) This certainly includes those who have a callous disregard for the health and safety of everyone around them.

The 18th century rabbi and philosopher Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto sharply criticized the “person who goes along in his world without giving thought to whether his actions are good or evil,” and who does not take “proper precautions to guard against potential danger,” to himself and to others. (See his Messilat Yesharim [Path of the Upright] 2:4.)

Jewish law is very specific about what needs to be done during health emergencies. In this week’s double Torah portion, people with seemingly infectious skin diseases must be isolated from the community at large. (See Leviticus 13:4.) Washing our bodies and our clothing is another Torah requirement, as will be seen in next Shabbat’s reading. (See Leviticus 17:13-16.)

More to the point, though, we “must not stand idly by” when another person’s life is in danger (see Leviticus 19:16). That is why concern for life takes precedence over 99.5 percent of the Torah’s 613 commandments and over talmudic decrees. (See the Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin 74a.)

Some months ago, as previously noted here, the leader of Israel’s Karlin-Stolin chasidic sect, Rabbi Baruch Meir Yaakov Shochet, said that people who refuse to follow the rules set down by health professionals showed “contempt for the lives of others.”

“This is not child’s play,” he said; “it’s life and death and the essence of Jewish law.”

Pikuach nefesh, he said, is the basis of Judaism. We “must do it,” he said. “This is the will of God and we should be happy for the opportunity we’ve been given to protect human life.”

That goes for everyone, not just Jews, and not just Americans. Selfishness has no place in the face of a pandemic.