

Choosing Life

Shabbat Nitzavim 5785

September 19, 2025

Rabbi Barry H. Block

“Choose life, that you and your children may live,”ⁱ Moses begs the Israelites, as they stand on the banks of the Jordan River, prepared to enter the Promised Land. “Choose life,” the Torah calls out to us, in the last portion read each year before Rosh Hashanah.

In context, the choice Moses places before the Israelites is whether they and their descendants will live in keeping with Torah. A decision to live as God commands is defined as choosing life—a life of meaning, a life of purpose, a life in service to God and humankind.

The medieval commentator Rashi, though, compares the choice to a matter of real estate inheritance. Rashi likens Moses to parents who offer the very best of their property to their child, urging their offspring to accept it,ⁱⁱ a choice that any reasonable person would make. For Rashi, Torah is the ultimate inheritance. Only a fool would spurn that most valuable legacy.

Choosing life is not exclusively a spiritual matter, though. Maimonides was as much a physician as he was a rabbi and scholar. He taught: “Any danger to life must be removed as a positive מצוה, a religious obligation and extremely necessary caution.”ⁱⁱⁱ We have a sacred duty to do what we can to protect our lives and the lives of our children. Rashi rightly wonders who would be so foolish as to spurn the most valuable inheritance available.

My father describes idyllic childhood summers. He grew up in Houston, but summers were spent in Kosciusko, Mississippi, with his grandmother, aunt, and uncles there, joined by cousins his age from New Orleans. A dark reality lies behind those happy summers, though: My grandparents and my great aunt and uncle in New Orleans sent their children to family in that small town the day that school let out each year, and the kids returned only when it was time to go back to school. Why? Polio spread like wildfire in hot city summers, and the best way to keep children safe from that deadly and debilitating disease was to get them out of the big city in the summer. My grandparents, alongside Aunt Polly and Uncle Mike, were choosing life for their children, the best way they could at the time.

My father turned eighteen in 1955, the year the polio vaccine was introduced in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control describes the vaccine’s dramatic impact: “During 1951-1954, an average of 16,316 paralytic polio cases and 1879 deaths from polio were reported each year. Polio incidence declined

sharply following the introduction of vaccine to less than 1000 cases in 1962 and remained below 100 cases after that year... As of 1991, polio caused by wild-type viruses has been eliminated from the Western Hemisphere. Enhanced use of the inactivated polio vaccine is expected to reduce the number of vaccine-associated cases, which averaged eight cases per year during 1980-1994.”^{iv}

I read you the fine print, because there’s so much vaccine disinformation these days. I did not want to be the source of more. A vaccine skeptic might focus on the few polio cases caused by the vaccine itself. A vaccine promoter might disregard the risk entirely. The facts remain clear: The polio vaccine saves thousands of lives annually, and it prevents many more from suffering crippling paralysis and other complications of the disease, and that’s only in the U.S. To put it in Rashi’s terms, we are offered the polio vaccine, which works extremely well, just like the parents’ real estate in Rashi’s analogy produces outstanding and plentiful crops. Like the child in Rashi’s commentary, the choice is obvious. Any reasonable person would choose life for themselves and for their children.

We know, though, that an increasing number of Americans are eager to make the opposite choice these days. The CDC reports: “During the 2024-2025 school year, vaccination coverage among kindergartners in the U.S. decreased for all reported vaccines from the year before.”^v Rates are around 92%, numbers that sound good, but the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health is concerned, citing a “95% threshold needed to prevent transmission of measles virus.”^{vi} That matters, because the CDC documents: “Measles vaccine was licensed in the United States in 1963. During 1958-1962, an average of 503,282 measles cases and 432 measles-associated deaths were reported each year. Measles incidence and deaths began to decline in 1965 and continued a 33-year downward trend...In 1998, measles reached a provisional record low number of 89 cases with no measles-associated deaths.”^{vii} Already in 2025, the CDC reports nearly fifteen hundred cases of measles in the U.S., twelve percent of which resulted in hospitalization. Three deaths from measles have been confirmed so far this year.^{viii}

Some may be tempted to say that those who became ill or hospitalized, even the three who died, must have been unvaccinated—that is, they or their parents decided not to “choose life.” Perhaps that’s the case for many, but there’s a reason that Johns Hopkins tells us that we need 95% vaccination rates for measles prevention. Not everyone can be vaccinated. The most vulnerable among us, people who are immunocompromised, cannot be vaccinated, and they are endangered when vaccination rates fall.

Earlier this month, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced a plan to end vaccine mandates for school attendance in his state. We aren't in Florida, but Anindya Kundu, a sociologist who studies "how education policy shapes democracy, social cohesion and inequality," sees the move as one likely to spread to other states. He names three, Arkansas among them.^{ix}

You and I have not been charged with making policy for Arkansas, let alone Florida. None of us is in the General Assembly, and only a few of us live in districts represented by legislators whose views on the matter may be swayed. Still, we can continue to choose life.

Each of us can, and we must, choose life for ourselves and for our children by being vaccinated and by vaccinated young people in our care. Our Temple policy requires parents who register their children for Religious School to certify that their children are vaccinated in compliance with Arkansas public school requirements. Should those mandates end in our public schools, I don't doubt that a committee will be convened to craft our own vaccination policy. We will assure that no immunocompromised person contracts measles at Temple.

As the new year approaches, let each of us do our part to care for our own health and the health of our community. Let us steadfastly hold to our values and commitments, and act upon them, whether the law requires it or not. Our law, a higher obligation, requires us to choose life, including by vaccination. Let us pray, too, that America comes to it senses, returning to near-100% vaccination rates, choosing life.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 30:19.

ⁱⁱ Rashi to Deuteronomy 30:19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Murderer and the Prevention of Life 11:4.

^{iv} “Achievements in Public Health, 1900-1999 Impact of Vaccines Universally Recommended for Children—United States, 1900-1998,” U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00056803.htm>.

^v “Vaccination Coverage and Exemptions among Kindergarteners,” U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/schoolvaxview/data/index.html#cdc_data_surveillance_section_2-new-findings-on-vaccination-coverage-and-exemptions-among-kindergartners-2024-2025-school-year.

^{vi} “Across the U.S., Childhood Vaccination Rates Continue to Decline,” Johns Hopkins University, Bloomberg School of Public Health, International Vaccine Access Center, August 20, 2025, <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/ivac/2025/across-the-us-childhood-vaccination-rates-continue-to-decline>.

^{vii} “Achievements in Public Health.”

^{viii} Measles Cases and Outbreaks, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated September 17, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/data-research/index.html>.

^{ix} Anindya Kundu, “Why Florida’s plan to end vaccine mandates will likely spread to other conservative states,” *The Conversation*, September 18, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/why-floridas-plan-to-end-vaccine-mandates-will-likely-spread-to-other-conservative-states-264734>.