

Vaccinations save lives

An unintended consequence of the revolution in medical science in the last century has been complacency. Measles, a highly contagious viral disease, was eradicated in this country in 2000 by nearly universal vaccination. But it has been much longer since its widespread appearance among children — along with mumps, rubella, whooping cough and others — to the point that many no longer view these diseases as potential health hazards.

Yet measles, one of the world's most infectious diseases, is making a comeback. "A person with measles can cough in a room, leave, and — if you are unvaccinated — hours later, you could catch the virus from the droplets in the air that they left behind. No other virus can do that," Julia Belluz writes in Vox.

Into the vacuum came the "anti-vaxers." Their chief argument is that the MMR vaccine that protects against measles, mumps and rubella can cause autism. That this view has been scientifically debunked has not stopped a small but growing number of stubborn families across the country from sending

their children to school unvaccinated.

Among Jews, primarily in haredi Orthodox communities, the pseudo-scientific warnings of anti-vaxers, coupled with the exhortations of a very small minority of religious authorities and a belief that their insular communities shield them from the ills of the wider world, have contributed to measles outbreaks in Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Borough Park neighborhoods, and in Rockland County, north of New York City. The 94 measles cases in Rockland County alone is reported to be more than one-third of the cases in the entire United States for 2018.

As Vox reported, "The fearmongers include the Brooklyn group called PTACH — or Parents Teaching and Advocating for Children's Health — which spreads misinformation about vaccine safety, citing rabbis as authorities." Brooklyn Orthodox Rabbi William Handler, another anti-vaxer, told Vox that parents who "placate the gods of vaccination" are engaging in "child sacrifice."

Hogwash.

We have the shaping of a real crisis in the Jewish community — one that is completely preventable. There is no legitimate religious exemption to vaccinating one's children — a truth endorsed by most haredi halachic authorities. Families that choose not to vaccinate are endangering not only their own children but other people's children as well. And since the close quarters of schools are the perfect place to transmit a highly contagious disease, the presence of unvaccinated children in any school creates a clear health hazard.

To be sure, only a fraction of the population is not vaccinating. But that fraction is still a serious threat to everyone else. As Rabbi Avi Greenstein, executive director of the Boro Park Jewish Community Council, put it: "We need to take away the lesson of how important it is for every one of us to avail ourselves of modern medicine and not to trust in herd immunity, but rather to follow the vaccination schedule recommended by medical professionals to protect our families and our entire community."

Amen. ■

Letters

Bush had regret, not so much Baker

The article about the legacy of former President George H.W. Bush mentioned that after leaving office, he said that he regretted saying that he was "one lonely guy" who took a position in opposition to the Israel lobby ("Bush had mixed legacy with Jews, Israel," Dec. 6). It is a shame that the same cannot be said about the late president's lifelong political partner, James A. Baker III.

In the early 1990s, when the Bush administration was debating Middle East policy, the question came up about a possible negative reaction of the American Jewish community to the administration's policies. At the time, Secretary of State Baker blurted out "F--- the Jews. They don't vote for us." Despite numerous witnesses to this outrageous statement, former Secretary of State Baker has never acknowledged saying this and has never apologized for his outburst.

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Bush's record on Israel stands out

While generally not mentioned by the media, George H.W. Bush by his background was definitely a WASP, a term generally considered to be pejorative in this time of political correctness ("Bush had mixed legacy with Jews, Israel," Dec. 6). Did this influence any of his decisions? It does not appear likely, perhaps except for Israel where he adopted the stance of the Episcopal Church in its generally unfavorable attitude toward the Jewish state.

Certainly, most of his actions that could be considered partial to the Jewish state were taken as vice president under Reagan. As president, he is remembered by his chastisement of supporters of Israel, as well as his probable approval of Secretary of State James Baker's siding with the Palestinians in front of an AIPAC conference.

Bush was a patriot, a hero and a devout family man, but as far as Israel was concerned, he appeared to have some notable biases.

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Foolish to write off Ali

It is foolish to ignore the anti-Semitic rantings of Saqib Ali ("Elrich adviser

A Birthright dip?

A few years ago, researchers discovered what they called the Birthright bump — an increase in Jewish identity and participation following a 10-day Birthright trip to Israel. Now, we could be seeing a Birthright dip.

Last week, Haaretz reported a sharp

reported downturn is not correlated to Israel's security situation. So the question is, why?

Trip providers offered a number of conjectures. While everyone loves free offers, price also confers value. Some are positing that perhaps Birthright has

are done, some young progressive Jews are also calling for changes to the Birthright program, such as the addition of encounters with Palestinians on the itinerary. All or none of the above may actually explain the change in Birthright reservations.

There is nothing conclusive yet to determine why Birthright is, at the moment, appearing to slip in popularity. It could simply be a blip rather than a dip. And even with a decline, the organization isn't too worried: Birthright says 2018 is actually going to be another record year, as will 2019.

If the current numbers do reflect a legitimate downward trend, however, that's not inherently a bad thing. Birthright has been phenomenally successful at doing what it set out to do: connect huge numbers of Jews with Israel and with their Jewish heritage. So even if this does prove to be the beginning of movement away from the program, we're confident the North American Jewish community will come up with a robust and meaningful idea to supplement the effort, or even to take its place. ■

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drop in participation in the free trip during the winter season. A half-million Jews have taken a Birthright trip since 1999. This year, however, trip providers are experiencing what is reported to be a 20 to 50 percent drop compared to last year for the December-to-March season.

As with tourism to Israel, Birthright participation has had historic fluctuations, with sharp downturns during wars and other serious violence. But the cur-

devalued itself by being free, in apparent perpetuity, and with an expanded age range to compensate for dropping demand. Another theory is that Israel is becoming less attractive to younger Jews, both because it seems less like a nation in need and because the government's rightward shift may have added some tarnish with largely American Jewish young adults. And in an interactive social media society, where everyone feels the right to have a say in how things