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The Perfect Jewish Prayer for Your Vaccination

A way to mark just how important this occasion is.

By [Sarah Flores Shannon](#)

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I recited my first-ever *Shehechyanu* blessing in March 2020 over a Zoom call. I began my conversion journey two months earlier at a local synagogue when I started attending a monthly meeting of people interested in exploring a path toward Judaism. Our conversations ranged in topic and I greatly appreciated the opportunity to have a space to share my questions and curiosity.

As it became clear that all future in-person gatherings would be canceled, I found small ways to feel connected to the Jewish community despite the lockdown. Like many across the United States, I began working from home in mid-March and felt that baking bread was an important quarantine activity that I needed to pick up. I quickly decided that baking challah would be the perfect opportunity to try out a new recipe ahead of Shabbat.

At the start of our first virtual meeting, I was beaming with pride as I shared that I had successfully baked my first challah. As the group eagerly discussed the best challah recipes, one woman suggested that I recite the *Shehechyanu* prayer to celebrate this moment. I had no clue what the *Shehechyanu* was and quickly Googled the words. I learned that the *Shehechyanu* is a common Jewish blessing said whenever something is done for the first time that year.

Admittedly, I was unsure if I could consider baking challah for the first time as reason enough to recite such a blessing. As I began, the words felt clunky and unfamiliar as they left my mouth, and I was thankful that a rabbi was there to lead us.

When I began exploring Judaism, I mostly focused on what I considered to be quintessential Jewish traditions like attending Shabbat services, preparing for the holidays with friends and loved ones, as well as fighting shoulder to shoulder with community members for a more just world. As weeks turned into months, I tried to settle into the reality that my entire conversion would take place from the comfort of my home, having only entered a synagogue a handful of times. Despite this, I found meaningful virtual opportunities to deepen my Jewish practice by lighting Shabbat candles with new friends and attending an online *mikveh* guide training.

While trying to keep myself up-to-date with the latest guidelines on how to protect myself against COVID-19, I was especially interested in reading perspectives on Jewish values and the pandemic. As I read, I came across the Jewish principle of pikuach nefesh — the sacred duty to save a life. As the pandemic raged on, wearing a mask and social distancing became part of my daily routine, not just because of the health benefits or my state mandate, but because I wanted to keep those around me safe. I interpreted this as my personal practice of pikuach nefesh; my efforts to preserve the lives of those around me through the simple act of wearing a mask was the ultimate way to uphold Jewish values.

Almost a year later, I learned that I was eligible for the vaccine and signed up to receive my first dose. As I sat outside my vaccination site, I searched for a Jewish blessing to say before my shot. I wanted a way to mark just how important this occasion was — not just as the moment when I personally would start my path to protection against COVID, but as the culmination of a year when so many of us sacrificed our daily lives for the benefit of others.

I connected deeply with one that was updated by the Greater Pittsburgh Rabbinic Association, that begins with words from the blessing *Asher Yatzar*: “Blessed are You, Source of Life, Breath of the Universe, who heals all flesh, working wondrously through human hands.”

I paused and inhaled deeply before continuing on, thinking of the countless people who helped keep me safe during the pandemic and of those who supported the creation of the vaccines.

Because I was going to receive the first dose of the Moderna shot, I also practiced reciting the Shehechyanu blessing once more:

Baruch Atah, Adonai E-loheinu, Melech ha-olam, shehecheyanu v'ikiy'manu v'higi-anu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Source of Life, Breath of the Universe, who gives us life, sustains us, and has enabled us to reach this moment.

As I finished practicing these blessings, I was immediately overcome with emotion. Once I checked in at the vaccination center and sat down to receive the shot, the only blessing that I could remember was the Shehechyanu. To keep myself calm as the nurse inserted the needle, I closed my eyes and repeated those now familiar words to myself one more time — a true Shehechyanu of Shehechyanus, as Heather Paul wrote in her prayer for *Ritual Well*: a first shot that will lead to countless other firsts. Receiving the vaccine felt like a *mitzvah*, a sacred obligation, and a commitment to upholding pikuach nefesh.

I had never felt more moved by a blessing than I did that day, and I think it was because the words I recited perfectly captured my feelings: my gratitude, both for the hands and minds who made the vaccines, and for being able to reach this moment when millions of people who lost their lives to COVID-19 did not.

Getting vaccinated and continuing to wear a mask when in public are holy acts as we continue to protect ourselves and our community from getting sick. I look forward to the day my synagogue begins welcoming congregants back, and I cannot wait to recite that first Shehechyanu blessing all together.



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