

London Haredim roll up sleeves to fight COVID

by [Danica Kirka](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



Rabbi Michael Biberfeld is administered a dose of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine at an event to encourage vaccine uptake in Britain's Haredi Jewish community, also known as the ultra-Orthodox, on February 13. (AP Photo / Frank Augstein)

As people across England huddled indoors amid freezing temperatures and a national lockdown, nearly 300 elderly adults from the Haredi Jewish community, often called the ultra-Orthodox, lined up outside a health center in northeast London to be vaccinated against COVID-19 on February 13.

In hopes of breaking down barriers that sometimes isolate the Haredim from wider society, community leaders organized the pop-up vaccination event for Saturday night to coincide with the end of the sabbath. They believed this was the best time

to attract the faithful because it would fit perfectly into post-service schedules—and people would be more relaxed since no one was working.

Many Haredim shun the internet and were slow to realize the dangers of COVID-19. Their community has experienced some of London's highest infection rates. Many fell ill last March after the Jewish festival of Purim, a day of feasting and merriment.

An analysis of blood samples from 1,242 people found an infection rate of 64 percent among the Haredim in London—one of the highest recorded anywhere in the world. In contrast, the Office for National Statistics estimates that about 16 percent of England's general population has had COVID-19.

Community leaders now believe one way to prevent a recurrence is to ensure that as many people as possible get vaccinated. So they eliminated excuses not to attend. Along with convenient timing, the message to come get vaccinated went out through community channels, so people heard about it. In light of cultural sensitivities, the event was staffed by both male and female vaccinators.

"It's just about people feeling comfortable, people feeling at ease," said Joel Friedman, public affairs director for the Interlink Foundation, an umbrella group for Orthodox volunteer organizations.

Jewish leaders also hope the vaccination drive will help dispel the misconception that Haredim are ignoring the danger posed by COVID-19.

Police raided a Haredi wedding at a local school in January because it was attended by 100 people, a violation of lockdown rules. An investigation by the *Jewish News* suggested this was not an isolated event. Ugly headlines about the event were seen as tarring the whole community rather than just the rule breakers.

The vaccine is a "big step forward" for the Orthodox community and British society as a whole, Rabbi Michael Biberfeld said as he sat down to get his shot. He said Orthodox Jews have an obligation to "take the vaccine as soon as possible to make sure" they stay healthy and don't infect other people. —Associated Press