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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday July 14, 2023 ~ Parsha: Matot-Massei

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

We Must Not Ignore This Message From Israel

One of Israel's most talented observers is David Horovitz, the editor of *timesofisrael.com*. He was the speaker at the first event of our *Harold Lerman Fund for Israel Education and Engagement* in 2016.

One of the things that I like about David Horovitz is that he is hard to pin down. He is not a man of the left or the right, nor do his politics fit neatly into the conservative or liberal boxes that dominate American politics. He is a moderate, and an independent thinker. Remember those commercials from a generation ago, "when [EF Hutton](#) talks, people listen?" The same can be said of David Horovitz. When he speaks, people throughout the world, including influential policy makers in Israel and among Israel's allies, listen.

When he is worried, I worry. And right now, David Horovitz is letting his concerns be known. In a recent column *When Israel's National Politics Divide its People's Army*, he wrote about a reserve officer in Israel's air force reserves who informed his commander that he was ending his volunteer reserve service. The basis of his concern was that the authority to order the use of Israel's military power "is now in the hands of a group that is acting to demolish the foundations of democracy" and "it appears that the contract has been broken and we are marching into the abyss."

Unless you have lived in Israel, I'm not sure that you can fully understand the relationship between Israel's military, its government and the public. By comparison most Americans are quite removed from the military. Only a small percentage of Americans serve, and most people reading this column couldn't name two people who are currently serving on active duty. I

point this out not to criticize but rather to make a point. With the exception of the ultra-orthodox community, and the Israeli-Arab community, most Israelis -- men and women -- will serve compulsory service after high school and many will remain in the reserves for decades afterwards. The relationship is based on the belief that the actions that the military is asked to conduct are not only legal and moral, but carried out in the service of a democratic nation. That is the “contract” the reserve officer spoke of.

For close to six months now, we have seen two inescapable facts emerge that those who love Israel cannot ignore. The current government of Israel, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the most extreme in Israel's history. It includes (and I have [written](#) about this before so I won't go into great detail now) several members of the government who are simply unfit to serve, including Itamar ben Gvir, who was considered too dangerous to conscript in his youth, but now controls a part of the armed forces in his expanded post of national security minister. The conduct and rhetoric of this government has caused tremendous concern among Israel's friends and allies, including the Biden administration which has been signaling loudly its concern and frustration. Prime Minister Netanyahu has tried to convince -- again, we are not talking about Israel's enemies and detractors of which there are no shortage, but rather its friends and allies -- that he is the adult in the room and that he can control the crazies. But what is clear is that either he cannot, or he will not.

The second fact is that the extraordinary judicial reform that Israel's current government is proposing is dividing the nation. More and more, it seems less an opportunity to make some structural changes that many observers of Israel's judiciary acknowledge need to be addressed, and more and more a power grab by those very extremists in the government and their allies, potentially undermining Israel's democracy in the process. That is why for six months now, there have been large weekly demonstrations, some of the largest in Israel's history, protesting the proposed judicial reforms. These protests though are more than just a difference of opinion. As many have noted, these protests are evidence of a struggle for the heart and soul of Zionism and the future of the State of Israel.

David Horovitz points out that military veterans are at the forefront of the protest movement. Many of them are concerned about what is going on in their beloved country right now, and

making their concerns public. Perhaps most emblematic of this tension was a recent meeting between General Tomer Bar, the commander of Israel's air force and the representatives of a group of several hundred reserve pilots warning of potential mass refusals to volunteer for service. According to sources, the general was told in no uncertain terms that "we swore to serve the kingdom, not the king."

For 34 years in the rabbinate, I have been among an ever-diminishing number of Rabbis and leaders who believe that our responsibility is to support the government of Israel, full stop. That was certainly easier years ago when there was a greater consensus among the American Jewish community regarding Israel. That was the message I preached in my sermons, and wrote about in my messages and articles. Yet when Israel is behaving in a way that is bewildering to its allies and friends, then even Rabbis like me get nervous.

What does it mean for American Jewry and the pro-Israel community to go public with their concerns while Israel has so many detractors ready to pounce on each mistake, however real or imagined?

Yet we must not ignore this message from Israel. When responsible thinkers that we look up to are expressing their concerns, and even more importantly, when the men and women who are called upon to defend Israel against its enemies are making their concerns known, how can I or anyone who is concerned about the future of Israel stay on the sidelines?

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner