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## A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday , 2023 ~ Parsha: Re'eh

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

### **Making Distinctions is Jewish!**

Several years ago, I wrote to the congregation about a particular pet peeve of mine: the tendency of news organizations, especially Jewish news organizations, to attribute Jewish status to individuals who are certainly of Jewish origin and background, but are not Jewish, nor claim to be. This is especially common with sports heroes and political figures. Four years ago, when Tom Steyer announced a failed bid for the presidency, he was routinely referred to as an "American Jewish billionaire" when in fact he is an Episcopalian. And don't even get me started on baseball superstar (now retired) Ryan Braun!

Words matter. Definitions and boundaries are important. We are the people who taught the world the religious significance of *Havdalah*, the importance of making distinctions.

It is with this idea in mind that I consider the proper approach to a recent letter, highly [critical](#) of Israel, signed by 163 American Jewish leaders. This letter was organized by *Americans For Peace Now*, an organization of the left side of the American Jewish political spectrum. I should add that I am not a member or a fan of this organization. Historically, I believe they have been wrong and often irresponsible in their criticisms of Israel, too often highlighting Israel's alleged mistakes and offenses while failing to provide context. On the other hand, I do recognize the great concern and love for Israel that motivates their activism. To be fair, at least 30% of Israelis affirm some or all of their views.

I have been thinking about the term *American Jewish leaders* as used in the letter. What does the term really mean? Are we talking about leaders who happen to be Jewish, but whose source of power, fame, legitimacy or significance is derived from outside the organized American Jewish community? Or are we talking about actual leaders of synagogues, institutions of Jewish learning or Jewish organizations, men and women who have devoted their entire adult lives to building community, strengthening Israel, and working for the collective good of the Jewish people? I believe it is a fair question to ask now, especially as pressure on American Jews, and especially American Jewish leaders and organizations to speak out on Israel's serious internal divisions grows stronger each day.

I have written and spoken about the issues in Israel several times in recent weeks. Though difficult, I wanted to talk with you about tough choices that responsible Jewish leaders must consider now. We must work to preserve Israel's democratic institutions, even speaking out in ways that have traditionally made many of us uncomfortable. Yet at the same time, we must maintain our robust defense of Israel in the face serious external threats which will continue to exist no matter how the judicial reform plays out. We must make our concerns known, but not in a way that undermines support for Israel from the Biden Administration and among our allies in Congress. And we must find a way to express our concerns, frustrations, bewilderment, and even anger, but at the same time, continue to build broad support and interest for Israel in our communities. It is a difficult task, even in the best of times.

So when I see a letter criticizing Israel at a vulnerable time, advocating for a tough love approach, encouraging the Biden administration to take aggressive steps that make me nervous, including the threat to re-evaluate the military assistance Israel receives, and encouraging a possible change to US commitment to Israel's military superiority (the second to last bullet point in the letter) then I want to know a little about the people signing that letter.

I know some of the Rabbis who signed this letter. I went to school with a few of them. As I said, I do not agree with the contents of this letter, though I do share many of the

concerns of its authors. But I do believe that their hearts are in the right place. The colleagues who signed this letter care deeply about Israel, and are rightfully concerned about its short and long-term future. Ultimately this is what we call a *Machloket L'Shem Shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven, one who's ultimate goal is not to establish who is right and who is wrong, but rather, how do best strengthen Israel at this difficult moment.

But I do not know the others who signed this letter, people like Mandy Patinkin or Joshua Malina, other than that are terrific actors who, unlike so many in Hollywood, are actually proud of their Jewish identity and heritage. They are certainly prominent Jews. But can they be considered Jewish leaders in any meaningful sense? I do not think so. I think it is a crime that Mandy Patinkin did not win any awards for his brilliant portrayal of Jewish CIA counterterrorism operative [Saul Berenson](#) on *Homeland*. But I have never been one to attribute greater wisdom or moral authority to artists or activists. So it is reasonable to ask: why are they speaking out now? Why were they solicited for this public expression of concern? Why should I trust their judgement at such a critical time? I picked these two signatories, because I suspect many of the readers of this message will have heard of them. What about the others? They are certainly leaders who are Jews. But they are not Jewish leaders.

That is not a distinction without a difference. And with so much at stake, we have a right to know about those would seek to guide us at his dangerous moment.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner