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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday November 10, 2023 ~ Parshat: Chaya Sarah

No Cease-Fire Without the Return of Our Hostages

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

There has been a great deal of talk in recent days regarding the need for a “humanitarian pause” or a short-term cease-fire in the war between Israel and Hamas. It’s been in the news each night this week, with [accounts](#) of intense negotiations between the United States, Israel, and Qatar (representing Hamas) to achieve some type of temporary cessation of hostilities in exchange for the release of a small number of hostages.

It sounds so reasonable, and so necessary. But it’s a bad idea. It would be a strategic mistake of historic proportions, unless, of course your goal is to prop up Hamas. Israel is both correct and wise to categorically reject such calls at this time.

As I write this Shabbat message, Israel is on the offensive in Gaza. Whatever the military, diplomatic, and intelligence failures that preceded the unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7, Israel is now mobilized for war and achieving its short-term objectives. A pause now would only provide Hamas an opportunity to regroup or retreat. Either would represent a victory for this vile terrorist group. Hamas has violated every cease-fire agreement with Israel since its first military engagement against Israel in 2009, shortly after forcing the Palestinian Authority out of Gaza. (Remember: Israel removed all its military and civilian infrastructure as well as uprooted all Jewish communities in Gaza in 2005). Any type of pause or cease-fire

serves the interests of Hamas, not Israel. Why would anyone believe that Hamas would be any more willing to abide by a new agreement, based on its history?

Right now, international support for Israel's offensive against Hamas is strong. It's strong among the Democrats and Republicans in the United States, among Israel's allies in the free world, and even in Arab capitals. While public support is deteriorating due to the terrible casualties suffered by the civilian population of Gaza, the message conveyed in private to Jerusalem is clear. Decision makers throughout the world understand that the tragically high number of civilian casualties is the cruel byproduct of the cynical, immoral, and illegal placement of Hamas military infrastructure by, near, or under schools, hospitals, and mosques. The suffering in Gaza is real, painful to see, and certainly turning public opinion away from Israel. But Israel has made clear that the return of the hostages must precede any pause in the conflict. We must understand that the role of Qatar in these negotiations, offering the possibility of a handful of hostages in return for a cease-fire is actually an attempt to save Hamas. That is why Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeated clearly "there will be no cease-fire without the release of hostages." For any cessation of hostilities without the return of the hostages strengthen Hamas, while weakening Israel. No Israeli leader could possibly agree to this.

Sadly, the human cost of this war is costly. Yet Israeli casualties, bitter as they are, are far fewer than original projected estimates. In other words, this war is going better than Israeli military planners might have hoped or expected. As I explained, Israel's on the offensive. Hamas infrastructure is being destroyed, and its leadership ranks have been decimated. It is playing defense right now, and will use any pause in the fighting to improve its position, leaving Israeli troops in the field exposed. We must understand that there can be no concessions that will allow Hamas to benefit, whether diplomatically or militarily. The negotiations that Qatar is coordinating are a tactic to help Hamas. Israel and its allies must say, clearly and unambiguously, no!

While not well reported until recently, Israel has opened a humanitarian corridor, allowing people to flee northern Gaza where the bulk of the fighting is taking place. It's not a humanitarian pause. It's simply a way to help Palestinians to move to safer

places in the south, as Israel has implored them to do since the beginning of military operations. Even as Hamas has blocked these humanitarian evacuation routes, Israel has opened them for four hours a day for the past week. As of yesterday, over 50,000 people have taken advantage of this Israeli beneficence. What other army in the world would divert significant resources for this purpose at such a time of danger?

As you know, I like to write about a variety of topics for my weekly Shabbat messages. But since the unprecedented attack on Israel of October 7, I've been able to concentrate on little else. Like you, I'm following the news. Like you, I worry, and I wonder what comes next. But those concerns must not blind us to the reality before our eyes. Sadly, every assumption, every belief, every aspect of our understanding of Israel, and its relationship with its neighbors has been challenged if not obliterated by recent events. Whatever we thought or hoped must be reconsidered in the light of the assault on Israel, the glee with which it was received by so many throughout the world, and the antisemitism it has encouraged even in our own great nation. This is no longer an academic exercise. Real lives are at stake. The government of Israel, which is responsible for the security of its people, has said no to a cease-fire without a return of all the hostages. It deserves our unwavering support.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner