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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday December 8, 2023 – Parsha Vayeshev

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Celebrating Chanukah in the Shadow of War

There was a good article in [yesterday's](#) edition of *The Record* about how Jews are celebrating Chanukah this year in the shadow of Israel's war with Hamas. I deliberately point out that this was a good article because most of the reporting about the war in *The Record* has been terrible. It relies on wire services and news agencies that faithfully report the information provided by Hamas controlled news services and institutions, while simultaneously challenging Israel's narratives and claims. *The Record* originally reported that the attack on the Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza was Israel's fault without evidence, and was still making this claim almost a week later, even after Israel, President Biden, our Defense Department and even international observers hostile to Israel proved that it was the fault of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terror organization. *The Record* has consistently undercounted the number of participants in last month's National Rally for Israel, claiming that "tens of thousands" attended, as opposed to the almost 300,000 that actually participated. It has simultaneously exaggerated the number of American Jews who oppose Israel and espouse anti-Zionism. So, it was especially refreshing to read a well written, honest assessment of how a cross section of the community is feeling right now, and how the war with Hamas is influencing their celebration and observance of Chanukah this year.

I hope many of you will read the article. I am sure you will see yourself in some of the stories. Given the level of tension, there are members of the community who never thought twice of placing their *Chanukiah* in the window where their neighbors might see it. But this year, they wonder if it is safe. Yet there are others who are ramping up

their public observance of Chanukah this year, even as others are toning it down due to their own concerns.

Chanukah is a happy holiday, among our happiest and certainly among the most widely observed. But the article is correct. It is hard to celebrate while the people of Israel are traumatized, and still mourning those who have died; while 137 Israeli and foreign hostages are still being held by Hamas; while Israel must take aggressive actions which have sadly claimed the lives of many innocent Palestinians, and the end of this war is not yet in sight. So let me tell you a secret. I too am torn.

As some of you know, Shira and I welcomed a grandson into the family four days after Hamas' brutal assault on Israel. Of course, we were happy, and thrilled beyond words. The birth of a grandchild is, as they say in Hebrew, *a big deal*. But at the same time, I didn't know how to acknowledge and celebrate this event amidst such a tragic moment for the Jewish people. For 35 years, I have rendered all kinds of advice on all kinds of situations, to the members of the community. But I was at a loss for words when my son and daughter in law asked me about planning for the bris. The question that I asked myself is the same one that the article in The Record asks: How do we celebrate in the midst of such a difficult moment? We found the right balance. But it wasn't easy.

As long as I'm telling secrets, let me share another. For months, the synagogue planned a wonderful event on November 5th to honor Debbie and Wayne Zeiler for their years of service and commitment to the JCCP/CBT. A tremendous amount of work and effort went into this amazingly successful event. But about a week after the October 7th attack, I seriously considered going to the board and suggesting that we postpone this event. Once again, how do we celebrate in the midst of tragedy? Do we have a right to celebrate at such a difficult time? I was close to doing it, when I met with a group of like-minded Rabbis who gathered to talk about leading our congregations during this crisis. I told these friends and colleagues of my concerns and they all said "you must not cancel the event." And one of them said "Arthur, you are the one who has always told us not to let our enemies determine our agenda and

priorities." They were right. The event on November 5th was a huge success and it was the right thing to do.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Joel Pitkowsky made a similar point in the article. "It will be difficult to celebrate with a whole heart because of what is going on in Israel Celebrating now seems a bit tone-deaf to the current situation, and yet should we allow our enemies or those who wish to do us harm dictate how we are going to mark time as Jews? We cannot give them that victory."

This is the spirit of Chanukah. To observe Chanukah is to assert pride in our identity amidst the constant struggle for the right to determine our own future as Jews. Whether under the oppressive conditions of the ancient Syrian Greeks, or even in 21st century America, we determine the quality and content of our Judaism. The Jews quoted in this article are just like us. We are struggling. We are challenged. But just like our ancestors, we will not give up

Chanukah arrives this year at difficult moment for world Jewry. The article in *The Record* is a reminder that we are going to be just fine.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner