



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
Congregation Beth Tikvah
304 E. Midland Avenue ~ Paramus NJ 07652- 201.262.7691

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday February 16, 2024 ~ Parsha: Terumah

A Shabbat Message For Black History Month

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

This Shabbat falls right in the middle of Black History Month. I want to say something about the single most important and influential institution in the Black community: the Black church. And there's a reason why I want to speak to it today, as we prepare for this Shabbat, when the Torah reading is *Parshat [Terumah](#)*.

According to the historian Henry Louis Gates, Black churches were the first [institutions](#) built by Black people and run independent of white society in America. The earliest Black Christian churches were founded around the time of the Declaration of Independence. Professor Gates writes “the black church is an exemplar of what is possible when we, the people, assemble and march in the name of a higher power. For a people systematically brutalized and debased by the inhumane system of human slavery, followed by a century of Jim Crow racism, the church provided a refuge: a place of racial and individual self-affirmation, of teaching and learning, of psychological and spiritual sustenance, of prophetic faith; a symbolic space where Black people, enslaved and free, could nurture the hope for a better today and a much better tomorrow.”

Now back to the Torah reading. In this week's reading, God asked the Jewish people to build a *Mishkan*, a sanctuary, a place where God would symbolically dwell among the people. If during Black history month, we want to truly understand what the Black church means to the Black community, I want to challenge you to imagine what our ancestors must have felt like when after the exodus from Egypt, and after the receiving the revelation at Mount Sinai, God invited them to build something with their own hands, with their own resources, to exalt Him within the community. A nation that only seven weeks earlier had been slaves, following the dictates of an oppressive pharaoh, are now asked, not commanded, but asked to build an edifice where the religious, moral, and yes, even social needs of the people might be met. Just seven weeks earlier, the people knew only miserable days, the kind of days that only one who has been a slave or oppressed could possibly understand. We try to re-create those conditions symbolically on Passover, but we are hundreds and hundreds of generations removed from it. But most of our African-American friends and neighbors are only four generations removed from a relative who was enslaved. The legacy of slavery in Egypt has remained a significant part of our Judaism, a foundation of our religious experience. How much more so for our African-American neighbors, and

their institutions.

Since the original *Mishkan*, our religious institutions have taken on many forms; the portable tabernacle, the Holy Temples, and synagogues. Throughout all of our wanderings, our dispersion, our persecution, our abandonment, in every place and in every space the Jews sought refuge, we built a synagogue. It provided for our ancestors, and even for us a place to live our faith, and to gather together when others were not particularly interested in gathering with us. It was a religious home. It was a cultural home. It was a spiritual home; it was a place of refuge. And like the Black church, it helped to strengthen us in difficult times, even as it allowed us to imagine, and yes, pray for a better tomorrow.

Black history month is dedicated to an understanding of Black achievement and success amidst the violence and obstacles that have been placed in their way from the very moment the first Africans arrived in this country in the 17th century. If you're paying attention, you've read, or heard about artists, scientists, inventors, musicians, athletes, soldiers, politicians, and their contributions to America, not just black America.

But too often, discussions of Black history month, no matter how well intentioned, fail to acknowledge the great institution in Black America, the Black church, first built by slaves. Not unlike our ancestors who answered G-d's call "... to build Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell among them." ([Exodus 25:8](#)) The Jewish people, whose most important institution was also originally built by the faith, devotion, and generosity of slaves need to understand this.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner