

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner - March 20, 2020

Dear JCCP/CBT Family,

The sheer amount of information and the dizzying speed with which the COVID-19 virus has spread has been challenging to all. Indeed, this has moved so fast that a list of resources for the congregation that I prepared earlier this week for possible distribution is now obsolete only days later. Less than two weeks ago, Coronavirus was an abstraction. Now it is as real as real can be. May God bless our leaders, our scientists and health professionals with wisdom to confront the crisis at hand.

For many years, I have prepared an email message for Shabbat each week. But this Shabbat is different. For the second week in a row the synagogue is closed, and that represents a great loss. Our schools, our businesses, and practically all non-essential services are closed. We are all in the same boat, as perhaps never before in our lives. So I want to share with you a lesson that I hope will give you some comfort, and offer a perspective that is different from what you are reading in the news, or experiencing in conversations with your family and friends.

About 25 years ago, there was a major archaeological discovery just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Archaeologists discovered two silver amulets in the Valley of *Gehinom*. Now this was no ordinary discovery. What these amulets contained were the oldest fragments of the Torah that we have. They date to approximately to the time of the destruction of the First Temple, 586 BCE.

Let me tell you something about the Valley of *Gehinom* where these amulets were found. The Valley of *Gehinom* literally means hell, or in Rabbinic Hebrew, the destination of the wicked. Why was this valley named so? Our ancestors called this valley literally the Valley of Hell for it was there that the Canaanites would sacrifice children. And our ancestors, being so utterly opposed to the idea of human sacrifice, gave it that name.

Now back to those amulets. What were the sections of the Torah that they contained? They found a section from the Book of BaMidbar (Numbers 6:24-26), which is known as the Priestly Blessing, the blessings with which God would bless the people through the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

And may the Lord lift up His countenance to you and grant you peace.

In other words, the oldest surviving piece of Torah that we have is literally a blessing rescued from hell.

During this frightening and difficult time, I hope we will draw inspiration from this story and understand what our tradition is teaching us. When we are faced with difficulty, we must nonetheless look to maximize the blessing. We have not ever experienced anything quite like this. So maximizing the blessing is more necessary than ever before.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner