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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, October 8, 2021 – Parsha Noach

A Great Victory for British Jewry

Dear JCCP/CBT Family,

I have long been concerned about Jewish communities in Europe. So it was with great interest as well as pleasure that I learned yesterday about a great victory for British Jewry.

As you know, I don't really travel. I have never been to any of the great cities in Europe unless you count the airports where El Al used to stop on flights from New York to Tel Aviv. For those who remember those days (now they fly direct), passengers of El Al were not allowed to wander through the terminals because of security concerns, and that was in the 1970's and 80's.

With the rise of right-wing extremism throughout eastern and central Europe, and the unexplainable tolerance of Islamic extremism throughout much of western Europe, I have often shared my strong opinion that Jewish tourist dollars should be withheld until authorities take these threats to our fellow Jews more seriously. I know I am in the minority, but I make no excuses for this belief. I know travel is important. It's just not that important.

Yesterday, the city of London rejected plans to build a 48-story office building adjacent to the Bevis Marks Synagogue, one of Europe's oldest synagogues. **It the oldest synagogue in the United Kingdom in continuous use.** This synagogue, a British treasure and historically significant nationally recognized landmark that has received a *Grade 1-listed building* status, is something akin to being listed as a National Historic Site in the United States.

The Bevis Marks synagogue is no ordinary synagogue. Founded in 1701 by Sephardic Jews whose ancestors were expelled from Spain in 1492, this synagogue is the only one in Europe that has been used continuously for 320 years without interruption. There are certainly older, larger, and perhaps more famous synagogues in Europe. But this one tells a unique story of the renewal of London Jewry four centuries after the expulsion of Jews from Britain in 1290.

The proposed office tower would have interfered with the Bevis Marks Synagogue and posed challenges to its both structural integrity as well as the natural light which the synagogue depends upon. It would have placed the building under a constant shadow,

and given the building's status as a British national landmark, plans to ameliorate the effects of this ill-advised project were extremely limited. Still, the city of London pressed ahead with the project.

In response, Jewish organizations throughout England mobilized to fight against the project. This grew into an international effort (one which I must admit I was unaware of until earlier this week) to preserve the integrity of the synagogue and its surrounding courtyard. Jewish leaders, historians and architects from both within England and around the world petitioned against it. And on Tuesday, the plans were scrapped, preserving this 320-year-old Jewish treasure.

As I said, I don't travel. But many of you do and as you might know, London is always among the top foreign travel destinations for American travelers. And who knows, I may change my mind and travel in the future. And if and when I do, my priority will be to see some of the great Jewish sights of Europe.

Thanks to this great effort, perhaps one day I will even see the Bevis Marks Synagogue in all its glory.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner