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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

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Lessons from a Hostage Crisis

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

I titled my Shabbat message this week *Lessons from a Hostage Crisis* deliberately. That was the name of a special session for Rabbis and Jewish communal leaders arranged and sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) that took place yesterday afternoon. Hundreds of leaders gathered on Zoom for a meeting that featured Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, the leader of Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, whose heroic actions helped save the lives of his congregants and has been rightly lauded by law enforcement and political leaders throughout the country for his outstanding leadership and level headed thinking during the crisis. The meeting also featured FBI Director Christopher Wray.

So, what are the lessons learned from this crisis, especially for synagogues like ours? There are many possible lessons, and I suspect that we will debate them within our synagogues, Jewish Centers and Day Schools, camps, and organizations for a long time. But some are apparent right now.

1. There is no single source of violence and threats against Jewish institutions. We are threatened by elements on the far right, the far left, as well as Islamic radicalism. What unites these three pathologies is a hatred and fear of Jews that fuels conspiracy theories that may start as rhetorical nonsense, but too often lead to actual violent attacks upon Jews and our communal institutions. Indeed, Malik Faisal Akram, the British national responsible for the attack at the synagogue in Texas last week, targeted the synagogue not only because it was close to the prison where ISIS terrorist Aafia Siddiqui is serving her sentence, but also, as so many reports have indicated, his belief that “... Jews control the world, Jews control the media, Jews control the banks.”

A belief in conspiracy theories alleging Jewish control of leading institutions is also common to the far left and far right as well. Unless addressed head on, these ideas will continue to fester, bringing the threat of future attacks to our doorstep.

2. Instead of going on the offensive against those who would harm Jewish communities, the response of authorities, politicians, and law enforcement seems to prioritize defense instead. In the days since the attack, we have heard a great deal about the great training the leadership of the synagogue in Texas received from local law enforcement. There is no doubt that the training that the rabbi and others in the community received saved lives. We have also received similar training from local law enforcement and we are grateful for the wonderful relationships we enjoy with the Paramus Police Department, the Bergen County Sheriff, and the Bergen County Prosecutors office, as well as with the Paramus Borough Council, the Bergen County Executive and Board of Chosen Freeholders. But we must at the same time insist that our elected officials and law enforcement use every legal tool and tactic available to proactively confront those who target Jews, or any vulnerable minority for abuse, mistreatment or violence. If our elected officials tolerate anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric, how can those who continue to perpetrate them not feel emboldened. We have a big stake in that question, as the Jewish community, while only about 2% of the population, endures 60% of the religious based attacks. And those are not my statistics - that is the FBI's own research. At the same time that we seek resources to help with the enormous difficulty of securing our sacred spaces, we must demand that our elected officials hold the haters accountable—even the ones who share their political views. In this regard, the state of NJ has a long way to go.

3. As I said, there are several lessons for us to consider in the aftermath of the hostage crisis in Texas last week. This Shabbat message does not afford me the space to fully develop all of them. But I would remind those who are kind enough to read my words this week that the last lesson is that we must not be afraid. We must continue to gather in our synagogues and other Jewish communal spaces without fear. Our enemies and those who would do us harm want us to be afraid. They want us to remain indoors. They want to see us weakened. We must not give them the victory or the satisfaction. As you have heard me say so many times since the beginning of

the pandemic, the Jewish people have survived much in our history. We survived the Greeks, the Romans, the Nazis, and so many others who sought to prevent us from living freely and openly as Jews. Yet here we are. And here we will remain.

How many remember the stirring words of the Kennedy inaugural address in 1961?

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

America is the home of the largest, greatest, and most secure Jewish community that has ever existed. It must remain so, for us and our children. The final lesson from last Shabbat's hostage crisis in Texas must be to maintain the same resolve that President Kennedy spoke about to confront those who would do us harm. Only we, in concert with our many allies, can preserve our place in this great nation. We must use every resource we possess to that end. Future generations will judge us by what we do next.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur Weiner