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## A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, April 8 2022 ~ Parsha: Metzora  
Shabbat HaGadol 5782

### Food Fight

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

This Shabbat, the Shabbat that immediately precedes Passover, is known as *Shabbat Hagadol* - the Great Shabbat. Traditionally, it is an opportunity for the Rabbi of the community to expound, often in great detail and at great length, the laws, meaning, and significance of Passover

We prepare for Passover this year at a time of great polarization. Think of the political divide in our own nation. Think of the “culture wars.” How do we create unity and common purpose when we are unable to even speak with others with whom we disagree? If you have listened to my sermons, or read my writings over the years, you know this has always been a particular concern of mine. I fear its effects on our great nation and its citizens. And I detest seeing it among the Jewish people.

As I write this message to you, the Israeli government is in a political crisis. Without getting into too much detail, the resignation yesterday of a key member of the government has led to the current governing coalition led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to lose its absolute majority in the Knesset. Israel could potentially be looking at another election, its fifth in the past 3 years. Anyone who cares about Israel should be concerned. I certainly am.

What caused this crisis? It’s not a diplomatic dispute with the Biden administration. It’s not the economy. It’s not even the dangerous security situation that the Israeli government is currently dealing with, one that has claimed the lives of 11 Israelis in the past three weeks. The issue is Israel’s version of the culture wars: in this case, Passover in the public square.

The simple issue was the implementation of a decision by Israel’s Supreme Court to allow non-observant Israelis to bring *chametz* (unleavened products, the type that Jewish laws forbids on Passover) into hospitals during Passover. Years ago, there were guards who would make sure that *chametz* did not enter such public spaces on the holiday. But after backlash from secular Israelis and the parties that represent them, Israel’s highest court ruled in their favor. When Israel’s current health minister enforced this rule, Idit Silman, a member from Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s own *Yamina* party, used it as her excuse for quitting the government, thus

precipitating this crisis. In her resignation letter to Bennett, she cited “the damage to our values and standards that are essential and pure.”

I would be the last to make the case for the need or importance of *chametz* on Passover. After all, have I not asked, cajoled, sermonized and pleaded that you should take Passover seriously, observe it as best as possible, rid your homes of *chametz* and sell any remaining *chametz* so we might observe the Biblical injunction to remove all *chametz* from our homes during the holiday? I believed that when I began my career 33 years ago, and I believe that no less today.

Yet what I also know is that the Israeli Jews are a lot like American Jews when it comes to Passover. Many take it seriously, many take it less seriously, and many don't take it too seriously at all. Yet somehow, Passover survives, as do people like me (and as I trust, those who are reading this message) who are disappointed, even saddened that many of our fellow Jews simply do not. We move on, and hope that in time they will come to better appreciate what Passover, and for that matter, Judaism has to offer.

Israel is a divided society when it comes to matters of religion. A recent poll showed near-total support for *chametz* bans among those who identified with religious and right-wing parties, while among those who identified with left-wing and centrist parties, there was near-total opposition to these bans. That same poll found that 54% of Jewish Israelis supported allowing soldiers to bring hametz onto army bases for personal consumption during Passover, while 46% opposed. With such an even split, there is bound to be trouble. After all, the current government may fall as a result.

There is a lesson from the Passover Haggadah that can provide a vision for unity amidst all this divisiveness that often stems from competing religious visions and needs. The lesson can be found in the story of the four sons: the wise son, the wicked son, the simple son, and the one who is unable to even frame the question.

The wise son, we understand. The same for the simple son, and the one who for whatever reason is unable to even ask the question. But the wicked son? Why is there even a place for him at the Seder?

In our time, the wicked son is often identified as one who holds differing beliefs, asserting ideas and values that are often infuriating to those in the community who care, who are active and maintain the community and its institutions. Yet they are there, and they are a part of the Jewish community. And we must challenge them as well as ourselves, so that all can take their place at the Passover Seder. When a Jewish community is divided, how we maintain and even strengthen common bonds says something about us. Will we seek to do so through coercion, and casting aspersions as to the practice and motivations of those with whom we differ, or will we find the courage and faith to find new ways to engage, to welcome, and to include? The four sons represent the different segments of *K'lal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish people. No Passover is complete without a place for all.

*Shabbat Hagadol* is a time to remember that every Jew has the right to participate in the great narrative that is the Passover Seder. Unity is always difficult to achieve, but at least for these two nights, we must make the effort.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner