



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday August 12, 2022 ~ Parsha: Vaetchanan

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Save Russian Jews Now!

We need to encourage the Jews of Russia to leave now, while they still have the chance. Israel, and every major Jewish organization needs to prioritize the movement of Jews to Israel and Western nations on a scale comparable to the Soviet Jewry movement of the 1970's. There is no time to waste. Allow me to explain why this is necessary

When Russia began its invasion of Ukraine in February, I wrote to the congregation of my concerns for the Jewish communities in both Russia and the Ukraine. I also (correctly, as it turns out) predicted the pressure the invasion would place on Israel to both adopt Western sanctions against Russia (which it did) but at the same time maintain its delicate relationship with Russia. As the Obama and Trump Administrations withdrew from America's leadership role in the Middle East, Russia filled the void. As a result, Israel must take into account Russia's strategic interests in the region even as it seeks to thwart Iran's goal of establishing another client state in Syria, as it has accomplished, for all intents and purposes in Lebanon and to some degree in Gaza. That is why Israel has conducted so many military operations in Syria over the past 3 years and why almost every one of them is coordinated (to some degree) with Russia. If you doubt what I am saying, please ask yourselves why the past two Israel Prime Ministers spent far more time in Moscow than they had in Washington.

Israel's precarious position is a reminder that the withdrawal of US influence in the Middle East is Israel's second greatest strategic challenge on a daily basis. (Iran is number 1) Please remember that when someone tells you that President Obama or President Trump was the greatest/worst president for Israel. They both had their successes and failures. Yet both administrations left Israel vulnerable to Russia's nefarious meddling. And Russia is meddling. It has a variety of ways to retaliate against any government which opposes it. Consider the following:

1. Earlier this week Russia announced the launch of an Iranian satellite that will erode the qualitative military edge (QME) that Israel and the US rely upon for national security. It will similarly boost cooperation between the nations at the same time complex negotiations over the Iranian nuclear deal are being conducted. It also

works against Israel's goal of thwarting Iranian influence on its borders by limiting its range of military options against them.

2. What I failed to consider earlier back in February was the danger that the invasion on Ukraine would present to Russian Jews. Just as Russia is able to pressure Germany because it is so dependent upon Russian oil, Russia has found a new way to pressure Israel. In July, the Russian Ministry of Justice announced a legal bid to shutter the Jewish Agency, which assists Jews wishing to emigrate to Israel. The ministry claimed that the agency violated Russian law by allegedly maintaining a database of Russian Jews planning to make Aliyah. A preliminary court hearing in Moscow where the Jewish Agency will have an opportunity to present its case is scheduled for August 19th.

Why close the Jewish Agency now, after many years of service to the Russian Jewish community? As reported in the Israeli press, Russia was incensed at the public statements made by then Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who last April described the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a "serious violation of the international order," and accused Russian forces of committing war crimes in the town of Bucha. As most of you know, Mr. Lapid is now the interim prime minister of Israel, pending new elections this fall. This nonsense over the Jewish Agency is a warning that Russia is unhappy with Israel's public advocacy for Ukraine. And Israel is concerned. A high-profile meeting between Vladimir Putin and Israel's president Isaac Herzog earlier this week received a great deal of attention and press coverage, an indication that Russia's warnings and threats are obviously being taken seriously. This is a dangerous situation.

A review of Russian Jewish history over the past century should remind us of the many ways Russia can harass and threaten its Jewish community. And a review of world history should similarly remind us of the many ways Russia can harass and threaten Israel. (Remember Russia's role in fomenting the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, or its weapons sales to Israel's enemies as well as the negative force it continues to play in the international arena?) The entire situation is reminiscent of that famous scene in the first season of *Game of Thrones*, in which Ned Stark, the Lord of Winterfell and the Hand of the King (chief advisor) warns Cersei Lannister, the conspiring Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, that he is aware of her plotting and scheming, to which she responds:

When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground

Or in other words, there are very well-defined consequences to winning and losing the game of thrones. Only *Game of Thrones* was entertainment and fantasy. This is real.

While all this international intrigue takes place, the Jews of Russia are in danger. There are more there than you may realize. There are between 150,000 - 200,000 Jews in Russia, (and a similar number in Ukraine, who of course face different dangers). Some 31,000 have left for Israel since the war began. They too know something is awry. The numbers don't lie.

I have never been optimistic about rebuilding Jewish life in eastern Europe. I may have been wrong with regard to Poland, and Ukraine. Time will tell. But I'm not wrong about Russia. We need to divert every resource possible to help as many Jews who wish to leave as soon as possible, before it is too late.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner