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## A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday December 9, 2022 ~ Parsha: Vayislach

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

### Brittney Griner is Free: Now What?

Yesterday morning, Americans woke up to the welcome news that Brittany Griner was returning home after 294 days in Russian captivity. For those who may not recall all the [details](#), Ms. Griner, one of the WNBA's top players and a two-time Olympic gold medalist, was arrested in Russia last February with a small amount of illegal drug paraphernalia, subjected to a show trial designed to demonstrate American weakness and extract maximum concessions from the Biden administration, and ultimately sentenced to 9 years in a Russian prison camp. Her release highlighted the painstaking diplomatic efforts of the State Department, the public campaign for her freedom waged by her family and others, as well as irresponsible statements that blamed her continued incarceration on her race, gender and sexual orientation. Sadly, too much of the coverage of this case ignored the larger geopolitical forces that led to her unlawful imprisonment in the first place.

Let me say clearly and unambiguously: her release is wonderful news. But at the same time, all Americans must acknowledge the high cost paid for her freedom.

As many of you know, I'm a sports fan. Not a sports fanatic -- the first major league baseball strike decades ago changed my attitude about professional sports. But as anyone who has ever attended our evening minyan knows, I am very committed to my NY Jets (who are having a much better season than anyone would have expected this year!) and I keep up with what's going on in professional sports. But professional sports never cease to disappoint. The process that led, for example, to the World Cup being awarded to Qatar was awash with corruption and the willful ignoring of Qatar's history of human rights abuses. The same could be said for the International Olympic

Committee awarding recent Olympic games to China and Russia. Deshaun Watson's return last week to the Cleveland Browns after an 11-game suspension for violations of the NFL's sexual misconduct policies (at least 24 women have come forward in the last two years accusing him of sexual assault) proves that the NFL has learned nothing from recent scandals, and NFL players wearing pink cleats is but a shallow effort at supporting women's causes, or demonstrating a real appreciation of women's innate dignity. So it was actually quite important as well as quite touching to see the WNBA, its owners, players, and community come together as one to advocate for Brittany Griner's release. This is not a moment for second guessing. All Americans should celebrate Ms. Griner's return.

Yet at the same time, every American must consider the bitter cost of Ms. Griner's release. Last July, I [wrote](#) to the congregation about this issue when Russia made clear that among its demands for Ms. Griner's release would be international arms trafficker Viktor Bout, one of the world's most notorious merchants of death who was sentenced to 25 years in federal prison for various crimes. At the time, the American public was led to believe that negotiations for her release also included American businessman Paul Whelan, also detained unlawfully in Russia. Yet yesterday's news made quite clear that the release of this vile criminal would only secure Ms. Griner's release, leading any careful observer to conclude that the State Department is no closer to securing Mr. Whelan's release than it was the day before Ms. Griner herself was unlawfully detained.

Our Jewish tradition places the redemption of captives as among the highest *mitzvot* (commandments). Even in a legal system that frowns on ranking the *mitzvot* in terms of importance -- because they are all important and all equally binding -- the mitzvah of *pidyon shvuyim*, the redemption of captives, takes precedence over just about everything else. It's so important and compelling that even the Talmudic directive to refrain from paying too much for the release of captives, so as not to incentivize kidnapers, has been regularly ignored throughout Jewish history. Indeed, that's what the Biden administration did. We must take the administration at their word as they made the case yesterday that this was the only way to secure her release. What they accomplished was just a larger and more public example of what Jewish communal

leaders have had to do to secure the freedom of unlawfully imprisoned Jews for almost 2000 years.

Today, we join with all who are celebrating Ms. Griner's return to her family and to our country. But at the same time, every American must consider what Russia did, and what our government was forced to accept. So let me conclude with an idea that I shared with the congregation when I last wrote about this issue in July. When considering the lopsided nature of the possible deal for her release, I wrote, "... if it does indeed lead to the release of our citizens held prisoner in Russia, I will nonetheless be elated. Elated, that is until the next time Russia chooses to falsely arrest an American citizen. What will we have to pay next time?"

Brittney Griner is free and that is a blessing. But Paul Whelan and others are still being detained unlawfully. Now what?

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner