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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday January 27, 2023 ~ Parshat: Bo

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

The Negotiation

I tend to follow current events with more than just a fleeting curiosity. Those who read my Shabbat messages regularly know that my observations of both local and national issues often form the core of these messages. I try to use the issues that we read about and think about to teach Jewish values, and prioritize Jewish concerns. My goal is to encourage you to understand the wisdom that our Judaism offers in these situations.

Lately, I have been thinking about the often acrimonious debates that characterize the political culture of our great nation, and how they influence the tenor of negotiations about some of the critical issues of our time. These negotiations might help us understand a significant part of this week's Torah reading of *Parshat Bo*.

Moses and Pharaoh are locked in conflict. It's not just a battle of wits or personality (although there is plenty of that), but rather of world view. Pharaoh represents death, hierarchy and the elevation of the Pharaoh above all else. Moses stands for life, rule of law and the equality of all people before God. At stake in this clash of worldviews was the future of the Jewish people. Who would ultimately prevail? A negotiation takes place in this section of the Torah. Pharaoh understands how much suffering his people have endured by as a result of the first seven plagues. He knows he needs to give a little. Moses wants to take all the people out of Egypt. Pharaoh makes a counteroffer: Let the men go worship God but women and children would be held as a surety to ensure their return.

There is nothing difficult to understand. Pharaoh makes a concession in hopes of maintaining the institution of slavery, hoping that Moses would grab at it. Moses could claim a great victory: that he forced the Pharaoh to accept at least some of his

demands. Think of the types of negotiations that regularly take place between Democrats and Republicans in Congress. Think of the negotiations to end the strike by nurses at some of New York's most well-known hospitals last month. Think of the negotiations that you engage in. Each side offers compromises so that they may realize some of their ultimate goals. Each knows what it wants. But will the compromise that will make the deal work be reasonable?

Compromise is an important value. Our Rabbis praised the virtue of compromise. But they recognized that there can't always be a reasonable compromise. The difference between a good politician and a great one is the ability to know when compromise is not an option. And Moses knew that he could never entertain a compromise that would limit the ability of the Jewish people to worship God in freedom.

Who are the ones that would go" asked Pharaoh. Moses replied "we will all go, the young and the old, our sons and our daughters with our flocks and our herds to observe the Lord's festival. ([Exodus 10:8-9](#))

There could be no compromise on this essential aspect of Torah. All were equal in the eyes of God and that no one would be excluded from God's service without cause. This must be our challenge as well, seeing all segments of the Jewish people as capable of cooperating together to make the presence of God known to all. Our mission must be to share the message that a Judaism that can't make room for all Jews is no Judaism at all. And as citizens of a great nation, to proclaim by extension that an America that can't make room for all Americans is not America. Even as we must strive for compromise on many, if not most issues, on some issues there can be no compromise. This principle can serve as a moral and ethical compass, leading us through the divisions in our public life.

With our young and our old we will go forward. With this principle as a guide, we are capable of building a world worthy of God's presence.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner