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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday February 3, 2023 ~ Parsha: Beshallach

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

With great power comes great responsibility. This quote, popularized by [Uncle Ben](#) in *Spider-Man* is one of my favorite quotes.

I have been thinking a lot about this quote since America learned about the death of Tyre Nichols and viewed the graphic and brutal video of his encounter with the Memphis Police officers who killed him.

All Americans deserve answers for Tyre Nichols' death. Was it a rogue unit that killed him? Was it insufficient training? Was it the result of poor supervision and a lack of oversight? Was it police culture? What role, if any, did race play in the event? What about dashboard mounted cameras in police cars and body cameras? Is not their purpose to reduce, if not prevent these types of violent interactions? Why did do many systems fail?

I have written to the congregation many times over the years about the issue of policing in America. I am no expert, nor can I claim any greater knowledge than anyone reading my Shabbat message this week. But let me offer this perspective. Our synagogue, and our Jewish community have what can only be described as excellent relationships with law enforcement. We have cultivated strong ties with the Paramus Police Department, the New Jersey State Police, the Bergen County Sheriff's Department, and the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office. When we face threats, and sadly we do, we do not face them alone.

None of you fear a violent and deadly encounter when you are stopped by the police.

Now imagine that you identify as a member of a community of color. Are the institutions that represent such communities and give expression to their voices, concerns and fears able to say the same of their relationships with law enforcement? The answer, as we all know, is often a resounding no.

We can avoid the problems in American law enforcement. Other communities cannot. That is power. And with such power comes great responsibility.

Our cozy relationships with law enforcement are a relatively recent development. A survey of Jewish history tells a different story. So much of the violence experienced by Jews of Eastern Europe throughout the 19th and early 20th century was not only the expression of popular antisemitism but so often aided, abetted, and perpetrated by... law enforcement. Remember that scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* where the police captain warns Tevye about some "trouble" that was coming in the future"? He knew about it because he would be involved in carrying it out. Sholom Aleichem, the Yiddish author whose writings were the basis for that charming Broadway show and wonderful movie, gave fictional expression to the ugly reality that faced so many Jews throughout Eastern Europe during that time. He himself survived the Kiev pogrom in the fall of 1905, in which 41 Jews were murdered. He wrote about what he saw, and experienced. The anger, fear, mistrust and even hatred for the police that our grandparents and great grandparents experienced was a direct result of their mistreatment and the role of the authorities in that very mistreatment. That alone should give us perspective when Black and Latino communities protest their mistreatment.

We have strong relations with the police, and we are living at a time when our Jewish institutions are more dependent on police protection than at any other time in our lifetimes. As a result, the concerns of other minority communities who have complained about policing may not be our top communal priority. And then sadly, we hear the reports of the brutal death of Tyre Nichols, or George Floyd, or Eric Gardner, or dozens of other black men killed unnecessarily and unjustly, and we know that we can no longer avert our gaze. In a great nation, no one is safe unless all are safe.

We are going to learn a lot over the next few weeks about Tyre Nichols, about the Memphis Police Department, the Scorpion anti-crime task force, and the level of oversight and supervision (or lack thereof) of that unit. There will be discussions of police reform, just like we have conducted when America has confronted such tragedies in the past. We can only hope that we will yet see meaningful reform that will be responsive to the needs and concerns of minority communities as well as effective in addressing the epidemic of violent crime throughout the country. It's not either/or. We need both.

Yet as America grapples with this all too frequent problem, let's remember: with great power comes great responsibility.

And as a minority community who enjoys a close working relationship with law enforcement, we have the responsibility to demonstrate that we understand the plight of those communities who lack a similar confidence in society's protection. They must know that they can count on our support in the difficult road that lies ahead.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner