



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

Friday March 31, 2023 ~ Parsha: Tzav
Shabbat HaGadol

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Was This the Most Tumultuous Week In Israel's 75-Year History?

Was this the most tumultuous week in Israel's 75-year history?

Historians will ultimately make that determination, but there can be no doubt that this week Israel faced its greatest domestic crisis and it is not over yet.

As you are likely aware, the current government of Israel is the most right-wing government in Israel's history. I have written to the congregation several times about my concerns about the makeup of this government coalition, especially my concerns about several truly awful people who are key ministers in the government and their potential to undermine Israel's relationship with its key allies, most importantly, the United States.

Yet the crisis that has sent hundreds of thousands of Israelis into the streets over the past several weeks in the attempt by this government to revamp Israel's judicial system. Since Sunday, Israel has seen some of the largest rallies in its history. Earlier this week, Prime Minister Netanyahu, bowing to pressure from a goodly portion of Israel's citizens, members of his coalition, concern from supporters and allies worldwide (including strong criticism from President Biden) announced he would temporarily suspend this issue until after Passover.

This is serious stuff, and should be a great concern to all who care about Israel.

Three weeks ago, I was in Israel for a family wedding. For the most part, we were in the city of Beer Sheva, generally not a hotbed of political activity. The day after we arrived, we heard what sounded like a large festival outside our apartment window.

What we saw were thousands of Israelis, in the middle of the day, marching to a rally near Ben Gurion University to protest the government's plans, and to make their voices heard. What particularly struck me about this rally, and dozens if not, hundreds just like them over the past several weeks, was not just their size, or the diversity of the participants. It was the display of Israeli flags. Not one, not 10, not dozens, but literally thousands of flags at every rally. The only conclusion to draw from this is that this movement is not simply about a large number of people opposing a particular government policy, or series of policies. What we are witnessing in real time is a struggle over the meaning and the future of Zionism. The specific issues with regard to Israel's judicial system are of critical importance to be sure. But what we are witnessing is far more than that. It is a true reckoning with what it means to be a modern state that is both Jewish and democratic.

Will Israel's future be defined by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his band of religious extremists and racists (and it pains me to use that term, a term you know I do not use lightly) with the power to potentially limit the rights and freedoms that Israelis have enjoyed for the past 75 years?

Or will it be a nation under the rule of law that guarantees that the rights and freedoms of both the majority and minority are beyond the reach of any government?

Will Israel be led by leaders and a government committed to limiting Israel's democratic traditions and institutions?

Or will it be a nation led by people who are committed to enhancing, and strengthening those very institutions?

Will Israel be a nation where the ultimate power is held by the executive and legislative branches of government, who can abridge basic liberties by a simple majority vote?

Or will it be a nation with a strong series of checks and balances that are the bedrock of strong civil society?

That is what's at stake as this current crisis evolves.

I want every member of the congregation to understand the gravity of this issue in Israel right now. This is a struggle for Israel's future direction.

While we follow with great concern and sadness this struggle, I want to remind our community that we have one Jewish state. That fact demands we be careful and responsible about the way we discuss Israel and its challenges within our circles. We can't only love Israel when it behaves in ways that we understand, when it makes us proud, and acts in ways that makes sense to us. We must understand that Israel is a vibrant democracy which must include voices with which we agree, as well as with which we vehemently disagree. We must remain engaged, while at the same time recognizing the important but qualitatively different role that we in America play in Israel's future. Israel faces challenges and threats that are unmatched in the free world. The complexity of both its domestic as well as foreign issues, as well as its unique security challenges allow for no errors or mistakes. While this is a period of crisis in Israel, and of deep concern for Israel's friends and allies throughout the world, this is not a time to disengage. This is the time to follow what's going on, and support voices and organizations in Israel that reflect our vision and values.

I want to conclude my message this Shabbat by sharing the official statement of both the Conservative/Masorti Movement in Israel, so you can understand how our sister movement in Israel understands this issue.

Conservative/Masorti Movement Organizations Commend Netanyahu's Decision to Suspend Judicial Reform Proposals

Monday | March 27, 2023

In response to the Israeli government's suspension of legislative consideration of judicial reform measures, Conservative/Masorti movement organizations issued the following statement:

"We commend Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his decision to temporarily suspend his coalition's controversial judicial reform proposals. We are pleased that this policy has been postponed until at least after Passover, giving time for reflection on the potential ramifications of such an extreme overhaul. We salute

the hundreds of thousands who filled the streets of Israel rallying for democracy. We also salute those within the coalition who listened to concerned voices in Israel and abroad and who have pushed for a government responsive to its citizens.

The Conservative/Masorti movement is committed to promoting the values of justice, equality, and democracy in Israel and around the world. We believe that the suspension of this proposal is a step in the right direction, and we call on all parties to work together to ensure that the rights and freedoms of all citizens are protected. This is the time to strengthen the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state as established in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

We believe ardently that the proposed judicial reform is fraught with danger and goes against the principles of democracy. Democracy exists to protect the rights of minority parties against subjugation by a majority, or even a super-majority. The proposed legislation would have undermined the independence of the judiciary and jeopardized the democratic fabric of Israeli society.

The firing of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant following his call to pause this legislative push is also deeply concerning. Gallant's comments about security vulnerabilities raised by these divisions cannot be ignored. We expect the government to prioritize compromise and work towards a more cohesive and united Israel that ensures the safety and security of all citizens.

On the eve of celebrating Israel's 75 years of independence, we aspire to a State of Israel which continues to build a future of stability and prosperity as a Jewish and democratic state.”

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner