



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

Friday November 6, 2025 ~ Parshat: VaYera

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

The Responsibility of Speech in an Age of Division

When I was in Rabbinical school, *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar* by the late Rabbi Jack Bloom was required reading. In it, Rabbi Bloom, himself an extraordinary Rabbi and a leading psychologist, argued that a Rabbi is never perceived as merely a private individual, but rather, a living symbol of Judaism, the Jewish people and even God's covenant with Israel. In other words, congregants don't see me, Arthur Weiner the individual, but rather, "The Rabbi." As a result of that, everything a Rabbi does; how they pray, teach, dress, eat, spend money, respond to conflict, as well as a million other everyday activities, are interpreted symbolically, as representing what Judaism itself values or expects. It's a heavy burden. After all, I'm not sure that screaming at the television while watching my beloved NY Jets is the best example of behavior, but to do so in public might lend itself to all kinds of judgement not only about me, but Judaism itself.

I didn't fully understand this while still a student. But 36 years in the Rabbinate has confirmed Rabbi Bloom's thesis. Jews often project onto their Rabbis their own hopes and fears about Jewish life. When we see religious leaders behaving properly and ethically, people feel that Judaism itself is affirmed. But when religious leaders stumble, people may feel that not only the Rabbi, but Judaism itself has failed them. Rabbi Bloom challenged Rabbis and all religious leaders to develop self-awareness in order to understand what others project onto them and to navigate that sacred role with humility, care, and compassion.

These lessons, however, are not limited to Rabbis and other religious leaders. All leaders, especially public leaders, function symbolically. Their words have impact far

beyond their intent because they represent not only themselves, but the institutions and the ideals those institutions exist to serve.

I thought about this after [reading](#) about a talk that Vice President J.D. Vance gave at a recent meeting with 10,000 students at an event sponsored by Turning Point USA, the organization founded by Charlie Kirk whose murder at a college campus two months ago triggered a national debate on political violence and responsibility. In response to a question about how the Vice President and his wife navigate their interfaith marriage, (he is a Catholic, and she is of Hindu background) he made the statement that he "hoped his wife might one day embrace Christianity." I have no doubt, having watched the actual video footage, that in the moment, it was a reasonable expression of his personal faith. I certainly understand how that question could be interesting to a broad audience. But symbolically, because he is the Vice President, his remarks, however earnest, conveyed something larger and even problematic.

It potentially positions one faith as spiritually superior to another. Did the Vice President mean to imply that Hinduism, a faith practiced by 1.2 billion people, is somehow incomplete until somehow it is subsumed by Christianity? I'm not in a position to judge, but even newspapers in India have weighed in on these comments.

It blurred the line between personal conviction and public ethos. Could the Vice President's personal hope for his wife's conversion be interpreted as an official preference? I'm not in a position to judge, but given the enthusiastic response of the crowd, I think it's fair to say that that is how they understood it.

It unintentionally cast doubt on American religious pluralism. Did his comments undermine the ideal that all faiths are equal under the law?

From Rabbi Bloom, I learned a lesson that I have tried to practice throughout my career. A Rabbi, or any leader, must always be concerned about the words we use in public and how they might be understood by those who hear or read them. A private citizen's voice belongs to them. The Vice President, fairly or unfairly, will be judged by a different set of standards. In short, whether in a church or the synagogue, the Congress or the White House, leaders must be guided by not only their beliefs, but by what they symbolize. When speaking in this public forum last week, he may have been speaking as a devout Christian. But at the same time, he spoke in a way that potentially diminished the spiritual path of others and failed to embody the civic virtue, itself under attack in America today, that personal piety and public inclusion

can coexist. He may have scored a few points for the faithful. But he forgot his words and actions have ramifications beyond his immediate audience.

Rabbi Bloom's insight still echoes: a leader's words are never only personal. They are acts of creation — shaping the moral world in which we all must live. Whether standing at a pulpit or a podium, leaders must remember that their task is not to win applause from the faithful, but to widen the circle of human dignity. Faith, rightly understood, should never be a boundary; it should be a bridge. The responsibility of speech is, in the end, the responsibility of leadership itself: to ensure that every word we speak brings not division, but light.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner