A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday January 9, 2026
~ Parshat: Sh'mot

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Remembering Joseph, Remembering January 6

This week we begin the book of *Shemot*, the story of our people's descent into slavery and, ultimately, their redemption. And the Torah opens with a single, chilling verse:

"Vayakam melech chadash al Mitzrayim, asher lo yada et Yosef."

"A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

It is one of the most consequential sentences in the Torah — and one of the most disturbing.

How could Egypt not know Joseph? Joseph was not a minor figure lost to history. He saved Egypt from famine. He reorganized its economy. He was, in effect, the architect of Egypt's prosperity. And yet, suddenly, the Torah tells us that a new king arose who "did not know" him.

Our traditional commentators are almost unanimous in their understanding that this was not ignorance. It was willful forgetting. It was a conscious decision to erase an inconvenient past in order to justify a new and dangerous present. That act of historical distortion is what sets slavery in motion.

Oppression doesn't begin with chains.

It begins with lies about the past.

That dynamic — the rewriting of the past to justify the present — is not limited to the ancient world. It reappears whenever a society chooses comfort over truth. And as an American who loves this country and believes deeply in its democratic institutions, I find myself troubled when I see that process unfolding in our own time, most recently earlier this week, on the fifth anniversary of January 6, 2021.

What has troubled me most since January 6 is not only what happened that terrible day, but what has happened *since*, and the growing effort to recast it. Official

narratives now circulating, including on a White House [webpage](#), describe January 6 primarily as a peaceful protest, portray many participants as unfairly persecuted "patriots," and place responsibility for the violence largely on political opponents or security failures rather than on the actions, often violent actions of those who breached the Capitol. In that telling, the events of that day are framed less as an assault on democratic process than as a misunderstanding, exaggerated for partisan purposes.

But the historical record, preserved in contemporaneous reporting, sworn testimony, video evidence, court proceedings, and bipartisan investigations tells a very different story. On January 6, 2021, a violent mob breached the United States Capitol, assaulted law-enforcement officers, vandalized public property, threatened the lives and safety of elected officials of both parties, and forced the suspension of the constitutional certification of a presidential election. Dozens of police officers were injured, lives were lost in connection with the attack, and the peaceful transfer of power — itself a cornerstone of American democracy — was directly threatened. These facts are not matters of opinion. They are matters of public record. The attempt to blur, minimize, or rewrite them is not merely a political act; it is an assault on truth itself.

Long before there were whips and bricks and forced labor and cruelty, there was a rewritten story. There was a refusal to acknowledge what came before, and what it required morally in the present.

I have been thinking about that verse a great deal in recent days as an American citizen who loves this country deeply and believes in its democratic institutions. Not as a Democrat or a Republican, but as someone who believes that certain principles are sacred to a free society, among them, the peaceful transfer of power from one election to the next.

January 6 was, by any honest measure, a very dark day in American history. It was an assault not only on a building, but on the idea that political disputes are resolved by ballots rather than force. That principle is not partisan. It is foundational.

What has troubled me deeply since then is not only what happened that day, but the growing effort, blessed by the Trump Administration, to rewrite it, to minimize it,

sanitize it, and turn it into something it was not. The website I linked earlier offers a version of events that bears little resemblance to what the nation witnessed in real time.

This is not about relitigating politics. It is about something more fundamental: whether a society is willing to tell the truth about itself.

Judaism has a great deal to say about that.

We are a people who understand that memory is not optional. The Torah commands us again and again: *Zachor* — remember. *Lo tishkach* — do not forget. We remember Egypt not to wallow in victimhood, but to preserve moral clarity. Because forgetting is never neutral. Forgetting creates permission.

Egypt did not enslave the Israelites because it suddenly needed labor. It enslaved them because it no longer remembered Joseph, or more accurately, actively chose not to. Once history was erased, gratitude vanished, and fear took its place. And fear, untethered from truth, becomes cruelty.

Democracies, like moral systems, are more fragile than we like to think. They do not collapse only through coups or violence. Sometimes they erode quietly, when lies are repeated often enough that truth begins to feel negotiable.

As Jews, we have a particular responsibility here — not because we are better than others, but because our tradition has trained us to be suspicious of historical amnesia. We know where it leads. We have seen what happens when societies decide not to "know Joseph."

To say that January 6 was wrong is not radical. To claim that those who breached the Capitol that day are criminals is not partisan. To insist on telling the truth about it is not divisive. It is an act of civic responsibility.

Slavery begins when memory is erased.

Freedom survives only when truth is protected.

That is not only a lesson from ancient Egypt. It remains a warning worth heeding today.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner