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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday May 14, 2026 ~ Parshat: Bamidbar

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Jewish Wisdom for the Next Time You're Delayed in Secaucus

This week brought major news about the [Gateway](#) Project, the massive undertaking to modernize and expand the rail infrastructure between New Jersey and Manhattan. For those of us who live in this part of the world, this is hardly an abstract policy discussion. It is deeply personal. It is about children and grandchildren commuting to work, family members sitting on delayed NJ Transit trains, and the familiar frustration of hearing about signal problems, tunnel congestion, or yet another inexplicable delay somewhere between Secaucus and Penn Station.

When completed, the Gateway Project promises something genuinely transformative: increased rail capacity, far greater reliability, and [modernization](#) of one of the most fragile transportation chokepoints in the United States. And yet there is one sobering reality: the full project will take another 20 years to complete. Some reading this Shabbat message that may never see its final completion.

That naturally raises a question. Why undertake something so expensive, disruptive, and time-consuming when many of those paying for it today may not live to enjoy its full benefits?

As it turns out, this is not merely a modern civic question. It is also a profoundly Jewish one.

The Talmud tells the well-known story of Honi HaMa'agel (*Ta'anit* 23a). Walking along the road, Honi sees an old man planting a carob tree. He asks how long it will take before the tree bears fruit. "Seventy years," the man replies. Honi asks, perhaps a bit incredulously, whether he expects to live another seventy years to enjoy its harvest. The man answers simply: "Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I plant for those who come after me."

Honi may well be Judaism's accidental theologian of infrastructure.

The story asks a timeless question: "What do we owe those who will follow us—people we ourselves will never meet?"

The tunnels beneath the Hudson on which so many families in our community depend were built more than a century ago by engineers, workers and civic leaders who could never have imagined our lives, our routines, or our frustrations with NJ Transit alerts arriving at the worst possible moments. They did not know us. They would never meet our children. Yet they built anyway. That is what civilization requires.

Jewish tradition reinforces this idea in another classic teaching. In *Pirkei Avot* (2:21), Rabbi Tarfon teaches: *Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimena* — "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

Those words feel remarkably apt when thinking about a project like Gateway. Most of us will not be present for the final ribbon-cutting. We may never ride the fully completed system. But Jewish tradition does not measure responsibility by whether we personally enjoy the finished product. Responsibility lies in whether we are willing to begin, sustain, and support the work that must be done.

One of the enduring temptations of modern life is short-term thinking. Political leaders often think in election cycles. Markets think in quarters. Taxpayers, understandably, think in annual budgets. Judaism insists on a longer horizon. It asks us to think not merely about immediate cost, but about inherited obligation and future consequence. After all, repairs delayed today will cost more, often exponentially more, tomorrow.

Much of what sustains civilized life is invisible. We do not see the electrical grid, the structural supports in our buildings, the systems that deliver clean water, or the tunnels running beneath the Hudson River. We simply assume they will function—until they do not. Then we are certainly aware of them, or the lack of them. Indeed, on Wednesday, the lower level of the George Washington Bridge was closed for over 16 hours after debris fell from the ceiling of the highway onto a car.

Perhaps that is part of the deeper lesson here. Civilization depends not only on dramatic acts of innovation, but on the far less exciting but no less important task of maintaining what others built. It depends on investing in what future generations will need, and recognizing that some of the most important responsibilities we carry will

never produce benefits we will actually enjoy. That is not simply prudent public policy. It is covenantal thinking.

Honi understood that mature people plant trees whose shade they may never sit beneath. *Pirkei Avot* reminds us that meaningful work is not always ours to complete, but vital nonetheless. Perhaps responsible citizenship, and faithful Jewish living as well, requires exactly that kind of long vision: to inherit gratefully, maintain faithfully, and leave behind something stronger than what we received.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner