



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

5 - 6 December, 2008

9 Kislev 5769

Parashat Vayetze
(Genesis 28:10–32:3)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

There have been a few times in my Rabbinate when I knew what I needed to write to my congregants, but have been mystified as to how to do it. This is one of those times.

As I am sure is true for you, I cannot get the Mumbai attacks off my mind. The subject is unavoidable, but are there words adequate to address the cries of an orphaned child or the murder of the innocent? Not from me. Still, in a situation where nothing can be done, something must be said.

All I really have to share with you this week is my own struggle over how to respond to the events of the last week. Most of my attention and emotion have been focused on the horrors perpetrated at the Mumbai Chabad House. This is personal for me, as it is for every Jew. My brothers and sisters of the House of Israel were singled out for cruel death merely for being who they were; merely for existing. It is an old story that makes the heart weary with grief.

At times, though, I wonder about the rightness of my preoccupation with Jewish suffering. Is it truly Jewish to be so focused on my own people when the attack on Chabad was one scene of a broader drama of barbarity? Am I not obligated to fight against the natural, but insidious, moral myopia that makes the suffering of those not of my tribe as blurry and indistinct as my own people's pain is crystalline in its sharpness?

I find myself caught between two conflicting claims on my heart: The undeniable, particular, and visceral bond that connects me to the Jewish victims of the attack and the connection that I, as a Jew, am bound to affirm with all those made in the Divine Image; with the entirety of the human family.

When I talked with Martha about this conflict, she reminded me of Hillel's famous teaching: "If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?"

Hillel has described precisely the emotional and moral tightrope we must walk here. "If I am not for myself..." As much pain as we may feel at the death of a friend or distant relative, our tradition requires us to ritually mourn only our closest relations. This is not meant to minimize other losses or the significance of other lives, but to highlight our special duty to those closest to us.

So too here, our particular, acute pain for the Jewish lives stolen from the world is not a statement that somehow the lives of Jews are more precious than the lives of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, or Parsees. It is just that we have a familial bond and corresponding duty to our Jewish brothers and sisters. These souls must have a special place in our hearts. If they do not, we display a callousness toward our own that is not redeemed by any amount of compassion we may show others.

"But if I am only for myself. . ." At the same time a Jew's heart must be sensitive enough to break for all human suffering. What kind of Jews would we be if the life of the fisherman who was viciously murdered when the terrorists hijacked his boat meant little to us? What kind of Jews would we be if we had no tears for the man who gave the terrorists the water they asked for and was repaid by being shot to death? Not the kind of Jews HaShem expects us to be.

To be a Jew in the fullest sense is to be always mindful that we are part of two precious families --- the one that lives with us in the House of Israel and the extended family living in other houses clustered all around us. We sit shiva only in our own house, it is true, but we share in the sorrow visited on all houses. A heart that can only grieve for Jews is not a Jewish heart and heart that does not shatter for one's own is not a heart at all.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z

4th December, 2008