THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

SHABBAT SHALOM

7- 8 November, 2008 | 10 Cheshvan 5769 | Parashat Lech Lecha (Genesis 12:1–17:27)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

A few years ago, my family's travels found us in Selma, Alabama. We visited the National Voting Rights Museum there and took a walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. It was both moving and chilling to stand on this seemingly unremarkable old bridge and recall the blood shed and the courage shown just where I was standing. Today this is a quiet spot. I could hear the water of the Alabama river flowing under the bridge. The calm was unsettling. If you know its history, this is a haunted place.

What surprised me was how difficult it was to explain to my very bright daughter what had happened on this spot and why. She could not fathom that people would be denied something so basic as the right to vote because of their race. I was describing a world to her that she had never experienced and which was as alien as another planet.

In much the same way, it is difficult for both Ayelet and Rachamim to grasp the historical earthquake that occurred this week. For them, there is nothing that unusual about the election of an African-American as the President of the United States. Rachamim is more impressed with the fact that President-Elect Obama promised his kids a puppy before millions of witnesses.

In my lifetime, American citizens were beaten bloody for simply insisting upon the rights the United States Constitution guaranteed them. This is not the world my children will inherit. For this I am profoundly grateful. Politics aside, this election is one of the most important events I have ever witnessed; perhaps the most important. I find myself filled with awe, with wonder, and with hope.

On that trip to Selma I showed Ayelet a photograph of Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Martin Luther King. I wanted her to know that Jews had been part of this struggle. She needed to know that Jews felt so clearly called by HaShem to demand justice for all people that they were willing to put their bodies on the line. When Rav Heschel was asked what it was like to march with Dr. King he famously said, "When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying." I have to believe that what we witnessed this week is in part the fulfillment of Heschel's prayers.

As it happened, I was in an Indian restaurant in Kowloon when President-Elect Obama gave his victory speech. I looked up at the television on the wall of the tiny restaurant and noticed that the usual Bollywood production number was not on the screen. It was Obama live in Grant Park. The sound was turned down. Ayelet, Martha, and I were the only non-Indian diners in the place, but I still desperately wanted to hear the speech.

Before I even thought about asking a waiter to turn up the set, an Indian man noticed Obama on the television and motioned to the owner to turn up the volume. We all watched the speech as we enjoyed our lassis and dhosas. Even writing about this brings tears to my eyes.

My fellow diners at Branto House were neither Republicans nor Democrats. What happened there was not political. We all experienced a moment of shared humanity— a sense that something good had happened in the world that transcended politics and nation.

I am not an apolitical person. Far from it. But the blessing that comes to my mind has nothing to do with policies or polls. I have the sense that this wounded world, while still far from perfect, is somehow better for everyone today than it was a few days ago. And for this I say: Praised are You O God, the One who is good and who does good.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z

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