

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

12 - 13 June, 2009

21 Sivan 5769

Parashat Beha'alotecha
(Numbers 8:1–12:16)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

It's all the same thing to me, reading and writing, twins of the one conversation.

Thomas Lynch, Bodies in Motion and at Rest

In the remaining weeks before I head out to the US I want to try to honor some requests that I have recently received. Some of you have suggested that from time to time I write about what I am reading and make some book recommendations. Others of a more practical nature asked if I would publish a list of my favorite vegetarian Chinese restaurants. It is hard to know where to begin, as it says in Pirkei Avot, "if there is no sustenance, there is no Torah, but if there is no Torah there is no sustenance."

I will do books first. I just had lunch and I write better about food when I am hungry.

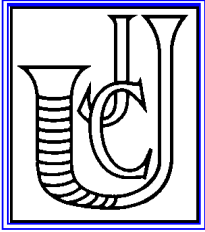
I just made my second pass through Jon Krakauer's Into Thin Air, an account of the disastrous 1996 Everest climbing season. Krakauer was a witness to these events and knew all the guides and commercial expedition clients who died on the mountain. Although the book is gripping as a true adventure tale, it is also troubling and thought provoking. The 1996 Everest disaster was an extreme test of the value, "do not stand by while your neighbor bleeds." Some, at great personal risk, came to the aid of other climbers in distress. Others refused to pause in their drive for the Everest summit to offer even the most meager aid to climbers who were plainly dying. Krakauer honestly assesses everything that happened while he was on the mountain, both the admirable and the appalling, and does not exempt himself from his commitment to tell the truth.

I have been recommending Arthur Green's books to anyone who will listen lately and am taking my own advice. I am reading Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow. This is Rabbi Green's attempt to construct a mystical Jewish theology that is both modern and rooted in the Kabbalistic and Hasidic sources. Arthur Green is uniquely qualified for this endeavor in that he is both a serious and exacting academic scholar of Jewish mystical texts and someone who unabashedly acknowledges that in his life and in his work he is "seeking God's face." It has taken me a while to get to this book. I bought it when Arthur Green came down to teach at my shul just after Hurricane Katrina. I know firsthand what a powerful teacher Green is and I can tell you that everything he has written is well worth reading. Ehyeh is no exception.

Since I arrived in Hong Kong I have read a number of books on birds and bird-watching. I don't expect many of you to follow me down this path, except you should read Jonathan Rosen's meditative The Life of the Skies, which has spiritual and specifically Jewish dimensions. I also must tell you that The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw, by Bruce Barcott was one of the best pieces of environmental reporting I have ever read.

I suppose that if the New Yorker staff writer John McPhee wrote a book on toilet plungers I would read it. He is that good. I am in the middle of his Uncommon Carriers, in which McPhee follows the lives of long-haul truckers, river barge pilots, and freight train engineers. These are people we might never meet and that, not coincidentally, we might have certain prejudices about. Without sentimentality, McPhee shows us that these skippers and drivers have extremely complicated and demanding jobs. All of them have interesting stories to tell. Reading this book continually reminds me of this teaching from the Talmud:

.../Page 2



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

12 - 13 June, 2009

21 Sivan 5769

Parashat Beha'alotecha
(Numbers 8:1–12:16)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk (con't)

Page 2

"I am God's creature and my fellow is God's creature. My work is in the town and his work is in the country. I rise early for my work and he rises early for his work. Just as he does not presume to do my work, so I do not presume to do his work. Will you say, I do much and he does little?"

Just before I left Baton Rouge, a student of mine gave me a copy of Yitzchak Buxbaum's The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov. I have been dipping into this book quite a bit in the last few months. Buxbaum combed the various hasidic texts that contain the stories and teachings of the founder of Hasidism and edited them together into a delightful anthology. There are stunning teachings in this book, but also some unusual tales. I particularly liked the account of how the Baal Shem Tov took out a werewolf.

That is enough for now, I suppose, except to say that you should do yourself a favor and read Bodies in Motion and at Rest, by Thomas Lynch (see epigraph above). Lynch is a working undertaker, a poet, and a great essayist. It has been years since I read this book, but picking it up to find the quote made me want to read it again. Turn it over and over again.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z
rabbizamek@ujc.org.hk

11th June, 2009