



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

13 - 14 February, 2009

20 Shevat 5769

Parashat Yitro
(Exodus 18:1–20:23)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

During Chinese New Year, I accepted an invitation from Rev. John LeMond to visit him at the Tao Fong Shan Christian Center in Shatin. It was an altogether delightful and enriching day. The setting is beautiful and the conversation was stimulating. Rev. John is an engaging and warm person and we are interested in many of the same things -- meditation, interfaith dialog, and traditional Chinese religion, to name just a few.

As John was showing me around the Chinese-style gardens and courtyards at the mountain-top Center, he pointed out a red-roofed pagoda on the next hill. It was the Ten-thousand Buddhas Monastery. I mentioned to him that I had been meaning to visit there, but had not had the chance. "Well then," he said "we will walk over there after lunch." And so a Minister and a Rabbi walk into a Buddhist monastery. . . This sounds like the set up of an obscure joke, but it was in fact the highlight of a great day.



We stood in the bustling plaza of the Monastery watching worshippers at their devotions and talked about the image of the thousand-handed Kwan Yin, the Buddha of Compassion, that stands there. Rev. John knows a great deal about both Buddhism and Chinese folk religion. He often brings his Lutheran seminary students to the Monastery to teach them that the same religious impulses that motivate them, also inspire the people who come to this place to pray to its Daoist, Chinese, and Buddhist deities.

Given that fundamentalism and extremism so often capture the headlines these days, it is easy to forget that the kind of fellowship Rev. John and I shared is just as prominent a feature of the religious landscape in much of the world. Although it is chic at the moment to claim otherwise, deep religious commitment does not necessarily, or even usually, lead to suspicion and animosity between faith traditions. When faith is coupled with humility, with the understanding that, as my Methodist nephew says, that God is bigger than religion, then our religious commitments lead us toward rather than away from one another.

If we care about our religious traditions, then we must prevent them from becoming stagnant pools, as they will if we surround ourselves with levees of insularity. Rav Heschel was trying to teach us this using a different metaphor when he said, "no religion is an island."

At the p'shat level, from surface appearances, two men schlepped up a small mountain on an unexpectedly warm day to see a Monastery. Nothing to see here except a spry Lutheran and an out-of-breath Jew. Hidden within this experience and within every attempt to know and appreciate the Other, however small, is an ascent up a holy mountain in search of revelation.

In a diverse and intricately interconnected world, dialog between the great faith traditions of the world is a religious imperative. So many holy mountains are before us. Let us climb them.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z
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