



## THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

### SHABBAT SHALOM

16– 17 April, 2010

3 Iyar 5770

Parashat Tazria-Metzora  
(Leviticus 12:1-15:33)

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek  
Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

This past week I had a break from my usual routine, thanks to an invitation from Rev. John LeMond to speak to his class at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Shatin. The Lutheran Theological Seminary attracts students from all over Asia who come to study to be pastors and religious educators in many different Protestant denominations. John's students are a very diverse group of bright and enthusiastic scholars. I spent a very stimulating afternoon answering their questions.

A few of the students had done some serious study of Judaism. I was asked by one seminarian whether Maimonides' Thirteen Principles were widely accepted as a Jewish creed (they aren't, by the way). Most of the students, however, had almost no knowledge of Judaism beyond what they have gleaned from the Hebrew Scriptures. One fellow asked me whether "there are any rites that Jews still practice," by which he meant, "do Jews today practice the same rituals as did ancient Israelites." As was true of most of the questions I was asked, this was a complicated one. Answering it required me to explain that all forms of Judaism today are rooted in the Rabbis' interpretation of the Bible. So the answer is that there are enormous differences between the Rabbinic Judaism we practice and Israelite religion, but that there are many continuities as well. In other words, I gave him a very Jewish answer: Yes and no.

One of the issues John LeMond asked me to address with his class was the confounding question: Who are the Jews? We are often a puzzle to religious Christians because Judaism does not fit into their accustomed theological categories. I tried to give the students a new conceptual framework by introducing them to Mordechai Kaplan's argument that Judaism is a "religious civilization" — an admixture of religion, language, folklore, music, cuisine, etc. To drive the point home I said, "there is no such thing as Methodist folk music, no one speaks Presbyterian, there is no Lutheran cuisine, but Jewish life has all these elements and more." At this point John said, "actually there is Methodist folk music, it's just really boring."

We were joking around a bit, but the point is an important one. Once it is understood that Judaism is a civilization, it becomes immediately clear why the recital of a creed does not make one Jewish. We are a tribe, a peoplehood, and while we have a religious tradition that is particular to us, we define ourselves more by shared history than by precise statements of shared belief. This is a difficult concept for anyone to grasp, particularly if one views the world through a Christian theological lens.

This gives you a taste of the depth of the discussion I had with these very earnest and curious seminarians. I fielded questions about the Shoah, Israel, the Messiah, interfaith dialog, and the history of the Reform movement. The time flew by. What a hoot.

Afterwards, John and I indulged in a little of what Rabbi Yitz Greenberg calls "sacred envy" — the appreciation of traits another religious tradition possesses that one wishes were more developed within one's own. John said, "when you spoke about how the Talmud preserves minority opinions, I know many of us Christians were thinking that we wished we had this. We present everything in such a categorical way." "Yes," I said, "but we often wish that our theology could be as systematic as yours." John said "we aren't as coherent as we seem," but I think he was just being polite.

I also have to admit that I envy the serene environment where John and his students pursue their studies. After visiting many monasteries and retreat centers over the years, I marvel at how talented Christians are at creating places of spiritual quiet. Years ago, the UJC held a retreat at Tao Fong Shan. Perhaps after our 20th anniversary celebration comes to a close we should return. Whenever we are ready, I know we will be welcome.

All Blessings  
Rabbi Z ([rabbizamek@ujc.org.hk](mailto:rabbizamek@ujc.org.hk))



15<sup>th</sup> April 2010