



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong

SHABBAT SHALOM

18 – 19 December, 2009

2 Tevet 5770

Parashat Miketz
(Genesis 41:1-44:17)

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

In our household, the task of waking people up for school/work falls to me. It is a lousy job at the best of times but even lousier this time of year. Delivering the unwelcome message that “the time has come” while it is still dark is a painful duty. This morning Rachamim thought I had lost my mind: “Why are you waking me up when it is still night?” I can’t blame him. When my alarm went off this morning and I reluctantly returned to consciousness in our darkened flat, I had trouble believing that it was morning as well.

To varying degrees, we are all affected by the progressively shortening days this time of year. Humans seem to be hardwired to respond to the seasonal variations between the length of the day and the length of the night. There is a deep understanding imprinted on the psyche that light is life and growth, while darkness is dormancy and death. No wonder that so many cultures ritually mediate the solar cycle — marking the transit from growing darkness to resurgent light. The winter solstice, the longest night of the year, often has particular significance.

Jewish tradition, unlike many others, has not incorporated the winter solstice in its ritual calendar. We do, however, have a festival that falls very near this fraught moment in the solar year. Hanukkah, our festival of light, is always celebrated as the days grow shorter.

Now as we know, Hanukkah is a historical commemoration. It begins on the 25th of Kislev because this was the day of the cleansing of the Temple after its recapture from the Seleucids. For this reason, the Encyclopedia Judaica will tell you that the proximity of Hanukkah to the winter solstice is “a calendrical coincidence.” Others, myself included, are not so sure.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow notes in his book *Seasons of Our Joy*, that not only is each successive night of Hanukkah longer than the preceding night, but at the same time the “moon has gone into exile.” Hanukkah begins near the end of the lunar month of Kislev, meaning that the moon is waning. The moon disappears entirely from the sky as we approach Rosh Chodesh Tevet near the end of the festival. Hanukkah then is a time of doubled darkness. Waskow thus sees Hanukkah as a festival of the approach of the solstice — A festival that brings light to the darkness when both of the Great Lights, the sun and the moon, are fading away.

A calendrical coincidence? Perhaps, but even if this is the case, the historical meaning of Hanukkah is enhanced by attunement to the rhythm of the cosmos. Lighting candles in defiance of the darkness helps us to internalize some of the spirit of the Maccabees, who at a time when the light of Torah nearly went out, chose action over despair.

We Jews have suffered through many nights of choking darkness. But we are also people who have faith that even the longest night will end. Ultimately, we are people of the Light — a lesson Hanukkah comes to teach us, both through historical memory and sensitivity to the dance of Creation.

Chag Hanukkah Sameach

All Blessings,
Rabbi Z
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17th December, 2009