



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

23 - 24 January , 2009

28 Tevet 5769

Parashat Va'eira  
(Exodus 6:2–9:35)

Rabbi Stan Zamek  
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

I owe you all my thanks for reconnecting me with an old and trusted teacher. As part of the UJC Academy of Adult Learning, I am offering a class on Abraham Joshua Heschel's classic, God in Search of Man. Although I have read this book many times, it is not possible to teach a work of this depth without a fresh reading. So thanks to the UJC, I am privileged to peer into the remarkable mind and heart of Abraham Joshua Heschel once again.

I am studying from a 1955 copy of the book that I bought years ago at a used book sale. It has been well loved. Every page bears the signs of my multiple passages through the text — marginal notes, repeatedly underlined sentences, and bracketed paragraphs in pencil and pen. I only mark up books that I care about in this way. Seeing the extent of my defacement of God in Search of Man I have been reminded of how much my religious life has been shaped by Heschel's words.

As he did for so many, Heschel showed me that it is possible to live a religious life that is spiritually rich and authentically Jewish without embracing fundamentalism, to have faith in the living God and, at the same time, to live fully in the modern world. With Heschel we are not forced into the false choice between intellect and intuition. Heschel does not ask us to check our minds at the synagogue door, but at the same time he reminds us that there is an ineffable realm that reason cannot help us reach. Modernity does not mean that there ceases to be mystery at the core of existence.

The magic of the printed word allows certain books to become living teachers. I was twelve years old when Heschel died and he was long gone by the time I found my way to God in Search of Man and yet he taught me and teaches me still. When I was young, this book startled me into new ways of thinking about Jewish life. Now as I read I am comforted to find that the highlighted passages still sing to me and I am delighted at how fresh Heschel's thinking still seems to me.

It has been eight years or so since I last taught a class on God in Search of Man. In that class, one of the people studying with me also used a vintage copy of the text. Her book was in better shape than mine. It had belonged to her father and was part of the large Jewish library she had inherited from him. When she began to read the book she realized that it was filled with her father's marginal notes. As she read she touched two souls — the soul of a great teacher who still lived through the text and the soul of a revered father whose voice she could hear again through the traces of himself he left on the page.

I will leave my children my tattered copy of this book that has meant so much to me. I imagine them reading it and hope that Heschel's words will speak to them as they spoke to me. Along the way, perhaps they will pause to wonder why I starred a particular passage or strain to read my cramped handwriting and wonder what I meant by a note I squeezed into the margins. My old book might create moments of communion between us, between them and one of the greatest of our teachers, and, if Heschel words awaken something within them, between them and the living God.

All Blessings  
Rabbi Z  
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22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2009