THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

SHABBAT SHALOM

24 - 25 April, 2009 | 1 Iyar 5769 | Parashat Tazria-Metzora (Leviticus 12:1–15:33)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

I am just now coming back down to earth after my Ayelet's Bat Mitzvah this past Shabbat. While I thank HaShem for allowing me this incredible experience, I am also relieved that I can stop worrying now. I was not concerned about Ayelet's preparation. She worked very hard on her Torah and Haftarah readings and Shani is an amazing teacher. As was clear last Friday and Saturday, Ayelet also knows the liturgy very well. What I did not know was how Ayelet would feel leading a congregation that is still new to her. It is a lot to ask a 12 (almost 13) year old to stand up and lead a congregation under any circumstances. We asked even more of Ayelet than that. She rose to the occasion, as we knew she would, aided by your warmth and support.

Like every kid, Ayelet loves getting gifts. It was great fun watching her open her Bat Mitzvah presents after the Kiddush. Even here she made me proud. She carefully read each card she received aloud. Ayelet was plainly and deeply touched by the words you wrote to her. She appreciated the sensitivity of the many kind people who acknowledged the tug on her heart from Baton Rouge and she smiled at all the expressions of affection and acceptance by her new friends at the UJC. Our dear friend Bob Krupkin, who came from Baton Rouge to be with us for our simcha, remarked that the Bat Mitzvah felt much like one at Beth Shalom. The haimishness and warmth of the congregation were familiar to him. This is what helped my baby feel at home as she was called to the Torah for the first time. For this I am grateful beyond words.

As most of you know, we broadcast the Shabbat morning service to Baton Rouge. Thanks to iChat and our dear friends' technological savvy, the Runnels' living room was transformed into a temporary UJC satellite shul, complete with siddurim and Ayelet's special kippot. Although Ayelet could not see them during the service, it meant a great deal to her to know that our friends back in Louisiana were "with" her. Ayelet used the link to join her two worlds together. Before the service she schlepped Nancy and Charlene in front of the camera, so the Louisiana crew would know who had made the link happen on this end. Afterwards, there was a transpacific giggle-fest as Ayelet's Carmel classmates and UJC friends crowded around the camera to meet her adopted sisters from the States.

One of the highlights of the evening for me was hearing Shani and Ayelet sing Hashkiveinu together on Friday night. Martha lost it at this point. It was not just the beauty of the singing that made this such a moving experience. The evident rapport between Ayelet and Shani was very sweet. I also felt as if I was seeing the Ayelet of the present and an Ayelet of the future manifested together. It took my breath away.

After officiating at so many B'nai Mitzvah over the years, I knew intellectually how difficult the "parent speech" can be. After all, for years I have been the guy ready with the tissue box, helping Mom and Dad make it through their talk. In this instance my professional experience meant precisely nothing. I was completely unprepared for what it felt like to be the Abba of the Bat Mitzvah.

I thought I had prepared myself to power through the few phrases I assumed would be difficult to say without choking up. When the moment came, however, I was in trouble after just the first few words. My emotions blindsided me. In case you missed it in the midst of my sniffling, I ended my message to Ayelet with these words: "you are at the center of all that is good and blessed in our lives." It was privilege for us to share this blessing with all of you. Thank you for your warm embrace of our daughter and of us all.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z
rabbizamek@ujc.org.hk

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