THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

SHABBAT SHALOM

24 - 25 October, 2008 | 26 Tishrei 5769 | Parashat Bereishit (Genesis 1:1–6:8)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

Next week we leave the month of Tishri behind and enter the very different territory of Cheshvan. While Tishri is crammed with holidays, other than the half holiday of Rosh Chodesh (the first of the month) Cheshvan has none at all. In the midst of the frenzy of moving from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur to Sukkot to Shemini Atzeret to Simchat Torah, this seems like bad planning. But despite the griping of Jewish professionals, it is not difficult to see the wisdom in overflowing Tishri being followed by the calendrical quiet of Cheshvan.

Cheshvan is also known as *"Marcheshvan"*. The Sages said that this is because Cheshvan is *"mar"*--bitter--because it was given no holidays. In fact, the holiday drought extends well into the winter, as Hanukkah, the next festival, only begins near the end of the month of Kislev. This quiet, however, is not deprivation. This silence is not empty. It sings its own song.

Cheshvan's austerity makes sense when we think of it in terms of "God Time" or "Earth Time." Sukkot marks the end of the time of growth. While we celebrate the abundance of the harvest, the festival also points to the period of dormancy that naturally follows. So at the end of Sukkot, we begin to pray that another growth cycle will soon begin and that the rains will come and enliven the earth again.

To ensure that we do not take the giving nature of the world for granted, the calendar gives us a taste of scarcity and becomes wintry and barren. As growth slows and the nights lengthen, the calendar too becomes sparse and quiet, and so provides fertile ground for meditation on our umbilical tie to the earth.

The sparseness of Cheshvan also makes sense from a purely spiritual point of view. This month is the most reflective spot in the entire Jewish year. Reflection, of course, is supposed to be a key part of the Days of Awe, but the nature of Tishri makes contemplation difficult. There is simply too much going on. The High Holidays are more ecstatic than contemplative. Horns are blown, the dead are wept for, sins are cast on the water, and courts convene both in shul and in the heavens. This is all somewhat operatic and emotions run high. It is too much to take in all at once.

There are a few days after the gates close at Neilah before Sukkot begins, but these fly by and are filled with pre-Chag preparations. Five days after Yom Kippur we are off to the races again--shaking the lulav, living in the Sukkah, singing the Hallel, and dancing with the Torah. It makes me dizzy just writing about it.

Our Jewish year does not have another contemplative space like Cheshvan. It is a precious Zen garden in the courtyard of the calendar. We should enter it in gratitude as it offers a still peaceful space to sit and think in an otherwise bustling year. Cheshvan is spare, but rich.

We made many promises to ourselves over the Yamim Noraim. Now is the time to mull them over, to tease out their implications, and to plan how we will actually go about doing what we know we must do. Resolutions are relatively easy to formulate in the heat of Tishri, but to have resolve in the cool reality of Cheshvan is quite a task. Tishri is only the laboratory of teshuva. Cheshvan is the field test.

Cheshvan is not *"mar"* or grim. Its silence is that of a planted seed; alive and waiting. There is new life coiled within this most silent of months. If we attend to this time well, who knows what might blossom by the spring?

All Blessings
Rabbi Z

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Office: Jewish Community Centre, 1 Robinson Place, 70 Robinson Road, Mid-Levels, Hong Kong
Tel: 2523-2985 • Fax: 2523-3961 • Web: www.ujc.org.hk • E-mail: ujc@ujc.org.hk