

**THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG**

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

## **SHABBAT SHALOM**

25 - 26 December, 2009

9 Tevet 5770

Parashat Vayigash  
(Genesis 44:18-47:27)

**Rabbi** Stanton M. Zamek  
**Cantorial Soloist** Shani Ben Or

### **From the Rabbi's desk**

I would like to recommend a book to you. Before I do, you have to promise that you will keep reading this column after you have read the book's title and description in the next paragraph. Do I have your word? All right then... we can proceed.

I just finished a little gem of a book called *Crow Planet*, by Lyanda Lynn Haupt. Yes, this is another book about birds. To be more precise, it is a book about crows, but not just about crows. This is a book about the fate of the earth, the conservation ethic, the kinship of all living things, parenthood in this time of global crisis, and, well yes — crows: crows in folklore, crow behavior, crow ecology, etc. Still with me? I hope so, because *Crow Planet* is also a very Jewish book.

The author, as far as I know, is not Jewish. There is only one specifically Jewish reference in the whole book — a story from the Midrash about how a crow (or a raven) taught Adam how to bury the dead, a regrettable necessity after the murder of Abel. What makes the book feel Jewish to me is Haupt's insistence on going about life with the proper *kavanah*. This is not the word she uses, of course, but it does describe the awareness/attention/intention/mindfulness that she calls for in our relationship with the natural world. Haupt's *kavanah* "is about a habit of being, a way of knowing, a way of dwelling. It is about attentive recognition of our constant, inevitable continuity with life on earth, and the gorgeous knowledge this entails."

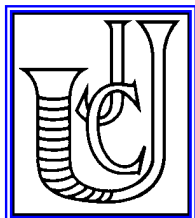
Haupt studied crows, common, urban, and much maligned birds, as an exercise in seeing the wild and the miraculous in the everyday world. This effort is itself quite Jewish. A similar ethic is behind the Jewish duty to say one hundred blessings a day. These blessings, recited over the sights, sounds, events, and tastes we are privileged to experience on any given day, elevate our most mundane interactions with the material world to a meeting with the Divine. Haupt uses different language and a different means of achieving awareness, but when she says, "without the overtly magnificent to stop us in our tracks we must seek out the more subversively magnificent," I know I have found a kindred spirit.

Haupt's writing immediately brought the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel to mind. Like Heschel, Haupt sees wonder as a fundamental human need. Also like Heschel she knows that talk of wonder is apt to elicit a sneer in this spiritually impoverished world:

"It is difficult to say 'sense of wonder' in this millennial moment, when sleek, cynical, pop-nihilistic writing seems to be a sign of intellectual rigor and rightness. Wonder, as a quality of intellect, has fallen from favor."

In the face of cynicism and a massive, planet-wide case of Attention Deficit Disorder that allow us to overlook the worlds of meaning that perpetually surround us, wonder can only be cultivated with great effort. Haupt says it better than I can:

.../Page 2



**THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG**

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

## **SHABBAT SHALOM**

25 - 26 December, 2009

9 Tevet 5770

Parashat Vayigash  
(Genesis 44:18-47:27)

**Rabbi** Stanton M. Zamek  
**Cantorial Soloist** Shani Ben Or

### **From the Rabbi's desk (con't)**

Page 2

"Surely there is the certainty of the wondrous in all places. But wonder is a response, an attitude of mind and heart, a graced completion of a circle between observer and observed, Wonder is not a given; it is contingent on the habit of being that allows it to arise in the face of the wondrous. This habit is not an accessory for the naturalist, but an essential."

Wonder, this "habit of being", is not only needed by the naturalist. As Heschel teaches, it is the core character trait of the religious personality, which is to say that it is the key to fully realizing our humanity. When the world holds no wonder, it can be destroyed without a thought. When the wonder of the human soul cannot be perceived, a life can be discarded as refuse. We all are suffering terribly from a world-wide shortage of wonder. How worthy then to read a book like Crow Planet, which points out the wondrous waiting to be discovered close to home and eloquently reinvigorates our kavanah so that we are able to perceive it.

So perhaps you don't like crows all that much. No problem. Even the birdy author of Crow Planet admits that they are not her favorite birds. Take a look at Crow Planet anyway. We can use all the wise, humane guides to the miraculous we can get.

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

*24<sup>th</sup> December, 2009*