

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

27 - 28 February, 2009

4 Adar 5769

Parashat Terumah
(Exodus 25:1–27:19)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

This is the story of two taxi rides.

A few weeks ago the four of us hopped into a cab at Times Square. One of my children (he/she will not allow me to reveal which one) hit his or her head on the doorframe as we were getting in. The driver gave the kids candy to calm the situation. Then we got talking.

The driver wanted to know what I did for a living. I tried to explain. He did not understand. Although I know from experience that this causes confusion, in desperation I said, "I'm a Rabbi. It's like a priest or a minister for Jewish people."

"You are Catholic!"

"No."

"Jerusalem! You are Catholic!"

"No, but Jerusalem is a Jewish city."

"Christ was from Jerusalem."

"Yes, but we were from Jerusalem before that."

"If you are a priest, how come you are married?"

"I'm not a priest, like a priest, a Rabbi, for Jewish people."

"Rabbi, Rabbi." He was trying this word out.

"Yes a Rabbi. I work at a synagogue."

"What?"

"It's like a church."

"Oh, a church, yes!"

"No, like a church."

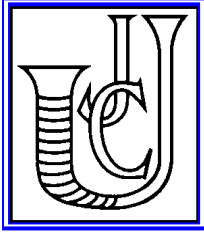
There was more to this conversation, but this was the general drift. We also talked about President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton's visit to Asia. Just as we are getting out of the cab, the driver had a revelation.

"Yes, Jewish! Jewish! Control the financial of the world!"

He was beaming. World financial domination was obviously a plus as far as he was concerned. It was an awkward moment, because we were home and half of us were already out of the cab. So I said good-night and left our driver with the impression that he had just given a ride to a Master of the Universe.

I went for a second interesting ride when I took a taxi to a Meet-the-Rabbi gig at Kellett School this week. I was enjoying the view on Pok Fu Lam Road when the driver asked me a question:

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From the Rabbi's desk (con't)

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"You are izlee?"
"Excuse me? I don't understand."
"Izlee, izlee."
"I'm sorry, I still don't understand."
"Izlee. Todah Rabbah! Todah Rabbah!"
Then I got it. "Izlee" = Israeli.
"Yes, Israeli."

I am, in fact, not an Israeli. I hope my Israeli friends will forgive me for fraudulently claiming citizenship. It seemed like the best option. I am a big fan, of course.

"Todah Rabbah," the driver continued, "English—Thank You."
"Yes that's right. Where did you learn that?"

I did not get an answer. Just more "Todah Rabbah" and laughter. He was delighted with this bit of Hebrew knowledge and we were both laughing and Todah Rabbah-ing when we pulled up in front of the school.

The first taxi ride was a good experience of the bubble-bursting variety. We Jews have this habit of thinking of ourselves as the center of the world. Here was a reminder that most people in the world, including most people in Hong Kong, don't have a clue who we are. How refreshing. Usually I have to go to Kowloon or walk around the Gage Street Market to remind myself that I live as a guest among millions who are not like me. Given this reality, I have a much greater duty to learn about them than they have to learn about me. So while this encounter did make me laugh, it also made me wonder how foolish my ignorance and misperceptions must seem.

On the other hand, despite being a minority within a minority here, we Jews can make lasting impressions. My Todah Rabbah ride was proof of that. Obviously, this driver had a previous interaction with some Member of the Tribe. It had to have been a pleasant one. Why else the giggle inducing Hebrew thank-yous? I had this unexpectedly delightful ride because of how someone else had behaved. Small moments of connection and understanding matter. I wonder what impression I left behind me as I paid my fare.

If I hadn't been so surprised by Ivrit in a Hong Kong taxi, I might have tried to expand the driver's vocabulary a bit. "Beseder" would have been good. It doesn't matter. A great deal of good will can be packed into just "Todah Rabbah."

All Blessings
Rabbi Z
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26th February, 2009