



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong

SHABBAT SHALOM

29 – 30 January, 2010

15 Shevat 5770

Parashat Beshalach
(Exodus 13:17-17:16)

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

On this Shabbat a confluence of holiness occurs. On Friday night the holy day of rest begins, of course, but at the same time, it will be the 15th of the month of Shevat, the New Year of the Trees. Tu B'Shevat began its existence as a kind of tax year, but over the centuries has become a celebration of the animating power of HaShem in nature, a celebration of Creation as a continual, ever-renewing gift of God. Shabbat is always a meditation on the Maasei Bereishit, the acts of Divine making of the six days of Creation, but this week it will be much deeper.

The Jewish mystical tradition, the creative engine that gave us Kabbalat Shabbat and the all-night vigil of Shavuot, also set to work on Tu B'Shevat. The result was a mystical Tu B'Shevat Seder, modeled on the Pesach seder, but rich in kabbalistic allusions. The UJC will hold such a Seder late Shabbat afternoon, just before we say good-bye to Shabbes (See this issue of Shabbat Shalom for details). This Seder has a Haggadah, four cups of wine, and ceremonial foods, all as re-envisioned through the lens of the mystical tradition.

The Four Questions should be part of our Tu B'Shevat observance as well, just as they are an essential element of the Pesach Seder. The questions of Pesach focus on the symbols of the Seder and trigger the elaborate exploration of the meaning of the Exodus that is the bulk of the Haggadah. Tu B'Shevat, as a minor holiday with no obligatory rituals, is much more fluid and sensitive to the times. This time — a time of global peril, a time when human actions threaten to nullify the flow of Divine energy into the world, a time, to use Rabbi Arthur Waskow's apt phrase, of global scorching — This time calls for searing questions of our actions as a species.

So here are my Arba Kushiot for Tu B'Shevat in a time of environmental crisis:

Ma nishtanah haleila ha zel!
How different is this night!

On all other nights we live heedless that our existence is itself a miracle and fail to understand that each form of life on earth is holy simply for being, as all is rooted in the Divine. On this night we reclaim our sense of wonder for the fullness of Creation.

On all other nights, we act as if we are somehow apart from nature. On this night we acknowledge that we are inseparable from the web of Creation and that our fate and the fate of the earth constitute one destiny.

On all other nights, we consume the earth's resources without appreciation and with deep ignorance of where our food and material goods come from. On this night we eat with gratitude, reflect on all the labor and all the costs of bringing food to our tables, of clothing us, and of sheltering us.

On all other nights, we behave as if we have the license to live and consume however we please and are not obliged to consider the consequences for others. On this night we acknowledge that our choices matter and that our own desires are not the proper measure of what is good and right.

As is the case for Pesach, these four kushiot are not so much questions as truths. May we reflect on them on this Shabbat of Tu B'Shevat and carry them with us as we endeavor to preserve this beautiful, precious, and imperiled planet that HaShem has entrusted to us.

All Blessings,
Rabbi Z
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28th January 2010