



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

31 October – 1 November, 2008

3 Cheshvan 5769

Parashat Noach  
(Genesis 6:9–11:32)

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Song Leader Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

It says something about me, something disturbing no doubt, that one of the highlights of my recent trip to Thailand was seeing a particular bird. As I was writing my wedding homily, I was distracted by a tremendous racket coming from somewhere on the hotel grounds. I left my room and followed the sound to its source in the hotel garden. The trees along the garden wall were packed with birds--- crested mynahs (yes, I am that big of a geek---I identified them). There were thousands of birds weighing down the branches. The noise of their chattering and screeching was so loud that had there been anyone else there to talk to (hey, how 'bout those crested mynahs!), I would have had to yell to be heard. It was a spectacular sight.

It is hard to explain to non-birders (muggles), why experiences like this are so meaningful to me. Usually, I don't bother trying. There are only so many uncomprehending looks a person can endure. I will give it another go in the Shabbat Shalom, however, as this really is a spiritual matter.

I am attracted to the particulars of Creation. The Grand Canyon or the Yosemite Valley blow me away as much as the next guy, but God really is in the details. These details capture me--- not just the mountain, but the texture of the rock of which it is made; not just the canyon; but the twisted juniper clawing into the cracks to survive on its edge; not just the expanse of sky, but the concentrated life force of the bird that is at home in its vastness. All these things, but for me birds especially, are microcosmic encounters with the Divine. It may sound strange that religious awe can be experienced by spotting a blue-gray gnatcatcher, but it is true nevertheless. Seeing those mynahs was a glimpse of a few glittering tiles in the mosaic of Creation.

Our tradition provides a means of framing and recognizing such moments. There is a blessing that can be said upon seeing beautiful creatures: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam shekacha lo b'olamo*-- Praised are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has such as this in His world. As awe is not confined to experiences that are "beautiful" by narrow human standards, there is a second blessing that is used upon seeing "strange" creatures. That blessing is *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech haolam, meshaneh hab'riot*-- Praised are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who makes creatures different.

It is up to us, I suppose, to decide which blessing the situation calls for. Is a vulture beautiful? Up close to its naked head and neck most people would not think so, but seeing them float effortlessly in the sky for hours might make one consider "who has such as this in His world" the more appropriate blessing. In any case, having taken the time to watch vultures spiraling in an updraft of hot desert air, it seems to me that some blessing over this small miracle is required.

Scott Weidensaul, in his book, *Of A Feather: A Brief History of American Birding*, says this about the magic of noting the particularity in nature:

"If you are open to wonder, this will be a staggering discovery. What had been a blur begins to resolve itself into myriad distinct shards, each unique, each lovely. Putting a name to a thing may not be, as the old proverb holds, the first step to wisdom-- but it is often the first step to appreciation."

Weidensaul makes an eloquent case in his writing for recognizing "the small, contained miracle that is a bird." In truth, the world is filled with such "small, contained miracles." They approach the infinity of their Creator in number. Even though it would be nice to have a few more people to talk with about crested mynahs and oriental magpie robins, it does not have to be birds for everyone. It does have to be something. Our tradition calls upon us to see the natural world as a continual, renewing miracle. This is best done on the smallest scale. It is a great gift that all the greatness and all the love of HaShem can be experienced in the veins of a leaf, in the ripples on a pond, or in the whirl of tiny wings.

All Blessings  
Rabbi Z

30<sup>th</sup> October, 2008