

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

3 – 4 February, 2012

11 Shevat 5772

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

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Education & Programming Director Rabbi Martha Bergadine
Cantorial Soloist/Programming Assistant Diego Edelberg

From the Rabbi's desk

Near the end of the Chinese New Year holiday, my boy and I kicked back for some R&R and re-watched the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* saga. About half way through the second movie, *The Two Towers*, Martha walked in the room, looked at the screen, and said, "Huh. Lord of the Rings. Is this the one where those tree things walk around forever." Martha is not a fan.

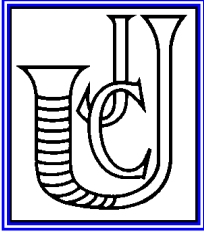
I ignored the snark and said, in the characteristic tone of the aggrieved nerd, "If you mean — are there *Ents* in the *Two Towers*? — then, yes, the *Ents*, the ancient race of sentient, mobile tree creatures are in the second book and film of *The Lord of the Rings*. They are important to the story. They attack and destroy Isengard." "Yeah," she said, "that's what I thought," and she walked out of the room. Her tone of disdain persisted, even after I educated her. Go figure.*

I am partial to the Ents, no matter what certain philistines have to say. I suppose it is because trees, especially old trees, are inherently Entish to me. I look at a giant cottonwood or a sprawling old live oak and I am awed by its patient longevity. I cannot help but feel reverence for living things whose existence long precedes my own and who will go on quietly digging their roots deep into the earth and spreading their branches against the sky long after even the memory my passing has faded away. It is not very difficult for me to imagine that such a being might speak or move of its own volition. I am sure that I project Tolkien's vivid stories onto certain trees. The Lord of the Rings captured my imagination when I was a kid and never let go. I am equally sure that my idle imaginings and Tolkien's masterpiece spring from the same deep, mythic place. Tolkien himself wrote that all stories are merely leaves on "the Tree of Tales."

Great and ancient trees grew in dense thickets in Tolkien's imagination, just as they have been a mysterious and sacred presence rooted in the psyches of people of all cultures and all times. Tolkien's trees, Yggdrasil, the "world tree" of Norse mythology, the Buddha's Bodhi tree, and my Entish imaginings are all leaves on the much greater tree of myth, from which grows the human capacity for wonder and awe.

We have our great tree. It is the Etz Chayim, the Tree of Life. The mystics conceived it as inverted. Its roots are in the heavens, growing out of the unfathomable realm of Pure Divinity. It grows down toward the earth, its branches reaching out to us. The Tree of Life is the circulatory system of blessing. It is the conduit through which God flows into the world, bringing enlightenment and life. In the *Sefer Ha-Bahir*, one of the earliest kabbalistic texts, God reveals:

.../Page 2



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

3 – 4 February, 2012

11 Shevat 5772

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

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Education & Programming Director Rabbi Martha Bergadine
Cantorial Soloist/Programming Assistant Diego Edelberg

From the Rabbi's desk (con't)

Page 2

I am the one who planted this tree for all the world to delight in. With it I spanned the All, calling it All, for all depends on it, all emanates from it, all need it, all gaze upon it and await it. From here souls fly forth in joy.

The Tree of Life is a myth. If you go looking for it to measure it and classify it, to claim it or to cut it, you will be greatly disappointed. This is because it is real, not actual. This is because it is true, not a fact. Myths are stories that point to ultimate reality, not reports, not historical accounts. To borrow Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's terminology, myth provides inspiration, not information.

So the myth of the Tree of Life is true. There is such a tree. In the knowing that lives in the heart we are sure of it. We are sustained by the Divine flow of blessing into this world that courses from its heavenly roots to its earthly branches. We cannot see the Tree, because we live within its foliage, it fills all space. It spans All and is All the *Bahir* tells us. The Tree can be found in no place, and yet is continually present.

The mystics of Tzfat had the Etz Chayim in mind when they transformed the 15th of Shevat into the Tu B'Shevat we celebrate next week. Originally Tu B'Shevat was simply the date that marked the end of one "tax year" and the beginning of another for the tithing of the produce of Israel's orchards. Now it is an intensely spiritual celebration of God's ongoing renewal of Creation. The fruits we eat on Tu B'Shevat are the ordinary fruits of apple, apricot, and pomegranate trees, but they are also the fruits of the Tree of Life, reminding us that all of existence is a gift of the Holy One.

This is the great truth that we will celebrate at our Tu B'Shevat Seder. Join us. It will be a mythic evening. Through the mystic fantasy of the Tree of Life, we will direct our hearts and minds toward ultimate reality — The Blessed One whose love sustains all that lives.

**(Note: Martha read this piece and wants it made clear that she is not anti-tree, just anti-Ent. "I love trees, I just don't want to watch Ents carry hobbits around for two hours." Tolkien fans should feel free to be offended)*

All Blessings

Rabbi Z
rabbizamek@ujc.org.hk

2nd February, 2012