



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong

SHABBAT SHALOM

5 – 6 February, 2010

22 Shevat 5770

Parashat Yitro
(Exodus 18:1-20:23)

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Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

This past Sunday I went on the Tu B'Shevat Family Outing to the Hong Kong Wetland Park. Despite the heat, it was a marvelous day. Many thanks to Jenny Selevan for organizing the event. I am sure that taking care of that many Jews off the reservation was a chore, but it was well worth the effort.

I was very excited about this trip as this would be my first chance to visit one of Hong Kong's prime birding areas (I prefer "birder" and "birding" to "birdwatcher" and "birdwatching," but anything is better than the British term "twitcher". As I would be birding in unfamiliar territory, I did a bit of preparation. I flipped through my copy of the Birds of Hong Kong and South China and tried to learn the identifying marks of the species I was likely to see. Birder and author, Lyanda Lynn Haupt, writes that such preparation enhances our perception. "The more we prepare," she says, "the more we are 'allowed' to see." In my experience this is true and so I studied for the trip the night before. More than this, I also reviewed the blessing that is said for the privilege of seeing beautiful creatures:

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-Olam sh'kacha lo b'olamo
Praised are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe who has such as these in His world

So I went to the Hong Kong Wetland Park with the hope of being permitted to see some of the birds I had studied. More than this, I hoped to see something that would move me to offer thanks to HaShem. I was not disappointed on either count.

When we got to the park, I skipped the interpretive displays and headed straight for the birding hides. At the Mudflat Hide I saw what I had been most hoping to see. There on the mudbank, amidst the grey herons, common sandpipers, and ring-necked plovers (good birds in themselves), I saw some black-faced spoonbills. And I said my b'racha.

According to The Avifauna of Hong Kong, a massive tome I bought at the Wetland Park gift shop, there are only 660 of these birds in the world. A large part of this population winters in Hong Kong. 660 in the entire world and I saw seven of them. If that was not an experience worthy of a blessing, I don't know what is.

I was elated at seeing these birds, at seeing something not only so beautiful, but so rare. But I felt sadness also. The population of black-faced spoonbills is perilously small. Disease or some natural or man-made disaster could decimate them. Is this one of those species environmentalists have dubbed "the living dead"— a species whose small numbers make extinction inevitable? I hope not. In addition to saying a blessing over the privilege of seeing them, I should have offered a prayer for them. I do this now. Ribbono shel Olam, Master of the Universe, may we not let this reflection of You be blotted out from the world, further defacing the Seder Bereishit, the Order of Creation.

In the mundane sense, we can do without black-faced spoonbills. If tomorrow the nesting grounds of these birds were destroyed by development or avian influenza wiped out this small, vulnerable population, few would notice and life in the material world would go on as before. But of course, one can be materially rich and spiritually destitute. If these birds perish our spiritual GNP will certainly suffer.

The Hong Kong Wetland Park is only a hint of the wild. It is surrounded by high-rise development. It is an oasis in an urban desert. And yet nature needs only the smallest opening to entrance us. We do not need to travel far to see sights that make the soul take flight like a great bird stretching its wings to catch the wind.

All Blessings,
Rabbi Z
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