



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

8 – 9 April, 2005 29 ADAR II, 5765 Parashat Tazria (Leviticus 12:1–13:59)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah from Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Saul Bellow and the Pope

Shalom Chaverim,

The great Jewish writer Saul Bellow, who died this week at age 89, was asked some time ago about what happens to us after death. Bellow offered two scenarios: oblivion or immortality. "My intuition is immortality," said Bellow, who was ambivalent about whether he believed in God. "No argument can be made for it, but it's just as likely as oblivion."

The books that Bellow wrote, at least, will live on long after him. When he won the Noble Prize for literature, he was cited for his "human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture." Bellow's ambivalence about God, in particular, is representative of many Jews of his generation in North America.

"There is something terribly nervous-making about a modern existence," Bellow said, "For one thing, it's all the thinking we have to do and all the judgments we have to make. It's the price of freedom: make the judgments, make the mental calls."

Pope John Paul II, who also died this week, was of the same generation as Bellow though far from Bellow's experience as the American son of a Russian immigrant bootlegger. The Pope's view on what happens after death was, I'm sure, much more doctrinaire than Bellow's. The Pope was, after all, a man of full faith.

John Paul II's leadership of the Catholic Church in regard to contemporary culture was not without controversy. A true leader is obligated to make decisions and bear responsibility for their consequences. At least concerning the Catholic Church's relationship with the Jews, for John Paul, judgement was not so much the price of freedom as it was the dues owed and the accounts being called.

"Pope John Paul II made his own personal position regarding the Jews the official position of the Church, in a way which guarantees its continuity," said a Polish bishop this week. "The biography of the Polish Pope, the fact that he was born not far from Auschwitz, witnessed the horrors of the destruction of European Jewry, and counted Jews among his closest friends, undoubtedly exercised a deep influence on his personal and theological worldview. The late pontiff called for 'a new and profound understanding between the Church and Judaism everywhere, in every country, for the benefit of all.' He stated unequivocally that the idea that the Church has replaced the Jewish people in a covenant with God was wrong, and even questioned the attempt to proselytize among Jews."

We can pray that the efforts of Pope John Paul II to reconcile the Church with Jewish existence will attain immortality and not oblivion.

Shabbat Shalom.
Rabbi Michael
27 Adar II 5765

7th April, 2005