

Monday, January 30, 2006 - 8 a.m.

Dear Friends:

Monday, January 30 – 8 a.m. on the Mekong River spending two days on a shallow boat floating from Chiang Kong the crossing point from Thailand into Laos, has been an eye opening revelation. I could never have imagined any of this in my wildest dreams. To most of you the names Chaing Mai, Chiang Kong, Pak Bang or Luan Prabang mean absolutely nothing as it did to me, until you meet real people, speak to them, utter a few words, and learn to sound in their language or in sign language.

There is so much to describe and share with you about each stop, each corner or turn, each spot in a marketplace, however, those reflections I will keep for another time, but I must say now that being in a totally different physical and emotional space has penetrated into my soul and my own being.

The last few days away from the jungle of people has been a welcome relief from Bangkok which is a hustling, bustling, noisy city trying to emulate a western tone. Ten million people crammed into an ungodly mixture of humanity. The poorest vender on a street corner trying to survive by selling a few spices or vegetables struggles along side a busy taxi or what they call a tuk-tuk, motor bike, with three wheels. The floating markets, the smell and the anxiety are apparent on their faces.

I haven't talked about the gold and riches – unbelievable Buddhist temples and the profound religiosity of the inhabitants. The biggest impression and memorable experience was the Royal Palace and the stupas, the different dynasties Emperors built long before our culture developed. I try to compare a unique parallel history of another culture to what happened to us, our great sages and Rabbis, and how our teachers developed our mindset which we inherited in comparison to another rich and interesting history of another society. The sacred scene of Buddhist monks collecting food for their daily sustenance struck me as I imagined our Levites and Kohanim living off the goodness of the rest of Israel's tribes.

As we travelled northwards in Thailand, we came across a soft-natured, polite people whose main objective is family happiness before work and money is only a means to achieve tranquility and peaceful existence. Hearing the chants of the monks in Doi Suthep temple in Chiang Mai reminded me of our ancient chant of scriptures. I thought the monks were praying but was corrected to understand they chant the teachings of Buddha and strive only to achieve good deeds and peace.

The trip into rural Laos has increasingly become rugged and intense. Accommodations are primitive and left much to be desired, without electricity or flushing toilets. But the taste of the food (vegetarian of course) is like I have never tasted before. Fresh food in the markets cooked especially for you has brought delight and has added a sense of God's blessings upon the earth.

As I write these lines now we are floating on the Mekong River. How wonderful it is to daven and recite Ashrey or utter in the loudest inner silence "Shma Israel". From your tropical guesthouse room looking down on the Mekong River I must say that putting on t'filin here is a most unprecedented experience. All of the above and more will hopefully make me a better Hazzan and enable me to express my cantorate in a deeper and fuller way, as I gain more insight into God's creation and our place upon this earth.

For hours, in fact, two days floating alongside fishing villages, native communities, stopping at local colourful tribal villages, buying fresh fruit or the most beautiful textile garments, has brought me closer to reality. Reading the recent history of an innocent country having been bombed by US forces with more napalm bombs than were dropped on Europe during all of World War II. How amazing it is to realize there is no anger or hate in these peoples' hearts but the one quest to bring this country out of poverty. With this goes kindness, polite hand gestures and body language, soft speaking accompanied with a soft smile.

Luang Prabang is our next stop and more adventures to experience. How grateful I am for this time of renewal and growth.

*Beny*