



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

5 – 6 May, 2006

8 Iyar, 5766

Parashat Acharel-Kedoshim
(Leviticus 16:1–20:27)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

One of the most beautiful, yet most difficult to understand, statements made by God in the entire Torah is contained in the opening verses of Parashat Kedoshim: *Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Ani Adonai Eloheihem*, "You shall be holy, for I, The Lord your God, am holy." In a sense, this is one of the things that we as humans expect God to demand from us. To read the opening words of Parashat Kedoshim produces no great shock or crisis in faith; on the contrary, it immediately makes us proud to know that God expects more from us than what we usually expect from ourselves.

What does it really mean to attain holiness? Beyond the clichés, beyond the obvious, what is it that God really expects from us?

The great 12th century sage Maimonides cites a beautiful *midrash* in trying to answer. The Rabbis in the Talmud want to know "What does it mean to follow The Lord your God?" The conclusion is that one can never possibly be able to follow God in the physical sense. Rather, every single one of us must always strive to follow God's attributes - *Ela la'alach achar midotav shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. Thus, "just like God clothes the naked so should you cloth the naked. Just like God visited the sick, so should you visit the sick. Just like God comforted those who mourned, so should you comfort the mourners. Just like God buried the dead so should you bury the dead" (Sotah 14a).

That midrash exemplifies what holiness means.

To us today, this midrash means that one should always strive to imitate God in our personal behavior, in the caring and compassion and kindness we show to others. It also means that we should never lose sight of what the past has been so that we know how to behave in the present and the future.

Last week we observed Yom haShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. This week there was a major Jewish presence in organizing and participating in a Washington, D.C. protest march about the crisis in Darfur. (Someone estimated that 90% of the marchers were Jews!) Widely quoted in the international press, Rabbi Or N. Rose from "Jewish Seminars for Justice", one of the protest organizers, said: "The personal motivation for a lot of us is the Holocaust. Given our history and experience, we feel an obligation to stand up and speak out." The U.S. has pressured the groups involved in Sudan to extend their negotiations to resolve the crisis and stop the killing.

Whatever shape or form oppression takes, we as Jews cannot turn a deaf ear to their plight.

This week we celebrated Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. We rightly celebrate the extraordinary accomplishments of Israel, take pride in the worldwide Jewish effort to reestablish and maintain our homeland, and recognize the profundity and vitality of Israel's thriving democracy and social freedoms despite its security challenges.

Next week we in Hong Kong will be visited by Rabbi Arik Ascherman, Executive Director of Israel's "Rabbis for Human Rights". The work of this organization is to remind us that the Torah commands us – multiple times - to have concern for the widow and the orphan and those reduced to poverty, to treat the stranger with dignity and compassion because we ourselves were strangers in a strange land. The *Jewish* dimension of the Jewish State forbids us to ignore the fact that we are not perfect, that the redemption enterprise is not yet completed, that we face the ongoing task of making our nation a *holy* nation: *Kedoshim tihyu*.

If you would like to learn with Rabbi Ascherman on Monday 8th May, please contact Rabbi Michael.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Michael

(Thanks to Rabbi Felipe Goodman for the inspiration for these words.)

4th May, 2006