



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

6 – 7 January, 2006

7 Teves, 5766

Parashat Vayigash
(Genesis 44:18–47:27)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

I write to you from the holy city of Jerusalem. Although I have lived in this 'holy city' for a quarter of my life, I've never quite gotten used to the fact that our tradition, Judaism, has a concept of 'a holy city'. Aren't we a tradition that sanctifies time, not space, the transcendent and not the material? Of course, our holy city of Jerusalem is not just any 'holy city', it is THE holy city, *par excellence*, holy also to the Christians and Muslims as well!

What makes Jerusalem holy? When I ask myself this question I immediately think of my wedding ceremony here overlooking the Old-City walls. I think of the moments my two children were born here. I think of my years of study here, Shabbat songs embracing a dinner table surrounded by the souls of friends I love, echoing into the star-filled sky above; I picture the colors of sunset on the Jerusalem stone buildings and the almond trees blossoming on the hillsides. I imagine the thick fog that blows in fast through the valleys of the Jerusalem Forest leading into the western edge of the city. Is the holiness of Jerusalem spiritual or material?

The holiness of this city draws you, entraps you somehow. It is hard to leave Jerusalem to go discover the more relaxed beauty of the Land and People in the rest of the Land of Israel.

Jerusalem's holiness is enwrapped, entwined in the opposite of holiness. Here you live on the earth, not in heaven. Here, too, everyone needs to make a living. There are pubs and drunks, filth and fraud. Traffic, pollution, noise. People get sick here. You play musical chairs with Peace and Violence here, and you don't know whether you'll be on the ground or a chair when the music stops. You can be given a blessing here, but perhaps also a curse.

All this helps make Jerusalem the holy city: The Rabbis spoke of a Jerusalem *shel malla* and Jerusalem *shel mata*, a heavenly ethereal Jerusalem and a profoundly worldly Jerusalem. They meant that it is both at once, which is what Holiness is in this world: it depends on you to choose every moment whither you enter.

Jerusalem is the place I call home...even when I am living in Hong Kong. I believe that the soul of every Jew is somehow connected to this place, that it is somehow a dimension of 'home' for each of us. There are parts of who you are that only come to be when you breathe Jerusalem's air, when you feel its light.

You are incomplete until you visit here. Jerusalem is an invitation: Do your soul work, come to the holy city of Jerusalem.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Michael
5 Tevet 5766

5th January, 2006