



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

9 – 10 September, 2005

6 ELUL, 5765

Parashat Shofetim
(Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

The month of Elul, which commenced at the beginning of this week, is a propitious time for soul-searching. One source declares: "The thirty days before *Rosh HaShana*, the great Judgment Day when we are permitted to turn in *Teshuva*, or 'repentance', are comparable to what? They are comparable to the thirty days of grace which a Court grants a debtor in which to pay off the debt and be freed of the creditor."

"This week's Torah portion, *Shoftim*, is always read during the first week of the month of Elul. It begins: 'Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates' (Deut. 16:18). For, this is the beginning of *Teshuva*, and its essential purpose is that one doing *Teshuva* must station an officer and judge at all his gates, meaning the senses, such as those of the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, which are the gates of the Creator, blessed be His name, opened in us for our use." (Bene Yisakhar, quoted by Agnon).

In other words, at this time we are enjoined to try, more than the usual, to focus our awareness on the things we say and hear, on all that we cast our glance upon, and on our distraction towards all the moral repugnance that drifts our way. This is the time to improve our attitude. This month we are to take note of all of our regrettable actions and thoughts, our unkind words and unjust behaviors, the nonsense on which we waste our precious time and energy. Now is the time to "turn ourselves around", to make *Teshuva*, in preparation for the coming *Rosh HaShana* when we will pray to merit inscription in the Book of Life for yet another year.

How so? There is an echo of an ideal in the very name of the month of Elul. Some say that "Elul" is an abbreviation for *Ani Le-dodi Ve-dodi Li* (it works in the Hebrew, believe me!), meaning "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song of Songs 6:3). During this month of Elul, we aim to make ourselves into the person we want to be, the essential self that we can love for who we are and what we do. When we do, we find that other people, and God, respond and give that love back "in return", in *Teshuva*.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Michael
3 Elul 5765

8th September, 2005