



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

11 – 12 November, 2005

10 Cheshvan, 5766

Parashat Lech Lecha  
(Genesis 12:1–17:27)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz  
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

## D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

*This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. Every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days.*  
(Genesis 17:10)

To say that the *brit milah*, circumcision of Jewish males on the eight day, is one of our tradition's most unusual and enigmatic practices, would be an understatement. Many have tried to explain and justify circumcision as a health measure, a guarantee of "Jewish identity" or as a "Jewish male bonding thing", or even on grounds that it is esthetically or sexually more pleasing. Throughout history too, there have been those who condemn the Jewish People by claiming just the opposite about this practice: that it is dangerous and painful, unnecessary, exclusionary and haughty, damaging, unpleasing, an insult to the 'perfect' body, etc.

The upcoming Hong Kong Film Festival features a movie, *Europa Europa*, which shows how dangerous the indelible mark of Jewish identity could be during the Holocaust.

The fact is, though, that with or without these arguments, because of them, despite them or regardless of them, Jewish parents have performed *brit mila* ever since the days of Abraham some 4,000 years ago, and we will continue to circumcise our newborns.

When you get right down to it, all those reasons, either for or against this elemental Jewish rite, are totally beside the point. As Rabbi Daniel Gordis puts it in his book God Was Not in the Fire, even the most estranged of Jews feel compelled to circumcise their children. These new parents, even if they have no other Jewish content in their lives, suddenly feel that they don't want to be the one "to break the tradition." Yet the mysterious, irrational, and primeval character of the *brit*, in particular, raises unsettling questions. For many Jews, it is precisely these aspects of Judaism in general that have estranged them from Judaism in the first place. Ultimately, the question about a *brit* becomes a question about Judaism. "Why have a *brit*?" really asks a deeper question, one that modern Jews struggle to answer. That question is simply, "Why be Jewish at all?"

As with all of Judaism, the answer can only be discovered through the doing: *Na'aseh v'Nishma*, "we will do and [then] we will understand". Living a Jewish life is a satisfying way of life in and of itself. Living a Jewish life has its own quality, charm, and richness. Living a Jewish life provides its own dynamic of meaning and purpose. Living a Jewish life, maintaining the *brit*, the covenant with God, is the experience of our own lives and the experience we share with the entirety of the Jewish People in our own time, with the generations to come, and with the generations from Abraham to us.

Something to think about the next time you notice yourself/partner: Our covenant with God is inscribed in our bodies. We must mark it in our souls by the way we live our lives.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Michael  
8 Cheshvan 5766

10<sup>th</sup> November, 2005