



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

14 – 15 April, 2006

17 Nissan, 5766

Parashat Tzav
(Leviticus 6:1–8:36)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Pesach is called *zman herutenu*, the season of our liberation, but it marks much more than our freedom. The Exodus from Egypt had a purpose and a direction: "Say to the Children of Israel: I am the Eternal. I will bring you out...I will redeem you...I will take you to me as a people. I shall become your God...I will bring you to the land that I promised to give to Avraham, to Yitzhaq and to Yaakov. I shall give it to you as a possession. I am the Eternal. Anee Adonai" (Ex. 6:6-8).

One of the great Jewish tasks of the last century has been the physical redemption of our People from lands and conditions of trial and travail. Collectively, the Jewish people have resettled immigrants from Eastern Europe, redeemed the remnants of the Holocaust, brought Jews out of the lands of the Levant, taken Jews out of Arabia, saved the survivors of Stalin, rescued Jews from Syria, and liberated them from Ethiopia: "Bekhol dor vador - In every generation, one should see oneself as if having personally left Egypt."

A story: Four years after the expulsion of the Jews of Spain, King Manuel I of Portugal married a Spanish princess in 1496. The condition for the marriage was that no Jews would remain in Portugal. Fearing dire economic consequences, Manuel decided to compel conversion for all Jews in Portugal rather than expel them. The Inquisition was established in Portugal. "Trials of faith" took place. Many Jews were burned to death. Others fled.

Many more chose to remain secret Jews. Somehow, their Jewish heritage and some portion of their traditions surreptitiously survived. They would go to their basements to kindle candles on Friday night, avoid bread for a week in April and refrain from eating one day in September. They know only one Hebrew word: Ado-noy. The Eternal.

Until ten years ago, in Belmonte, a city of 2,500 near the border with Spain, there were over 120 *bnei anusim* ("children of those forced"). They were like the *she'eyno yode'a lishol* - they did not even know what questions to ask. Nevertheless, they began to make their way back to the Jewish People. Initially they decided that Pesach would be the night the full moon lands in April, but that was too dangerous so they moved it to two days after the full moon. That was a safer time, when people wouldn't be looking for them. They would go to the river and wade back and forth, waving branches over the water. For them, that was the crossing of the Red Sea, the Exodus from Egypt.

Over the last few years, they have been supported by the Masorti (Conservative) movement and the World Zionist Organization Department of Pluralistic Religious Services, who have sent Hebrew teachers, rabbis, and young adults as sort of 'Jewish Peace Corps volunteers'. Now they have their own synagogue: *Comunidade Judaica Masorti Beit Yisrael*.

Now they describe themselves as survivors of the Inquisition. They consider themselves Jews, but understand that they must go through a conversion process to be officially accepted according to Jewish law and tradition.

Recently, seven people traveled from Lisbon, Portugal to London, England to meet with the European Bet Din (rabbinic court) of the Masorti (Conservative) movement. This was the culmination of their official return to Judaism five hundred years after their ancestors became *anusim*.

The Israelites were not stuck forever in slavery, because there is a spiritual force which gets people unstuck from their circumstances when they open their hearts and minds to courage and hope, and that spiritual force, which we call God, is always present to us. Pesach teaches us, reorients us towards, this hope and the awareness of greater possibilities for ourselves and our world.

When we open the door for Eliyahu the prophet at our seders - the spiritual force who will turn the hearts of children to their parents and the hearts of the parents to their ancestors - we can know that Eliyahu has been busy opening the hearts of our People in Belmonte, reconciling them with their ancestral faith and opening the door for these *bnei anusim* to enter the House of Israel.

Have a Happy and Chametz-free Passover
Chag Kasher v'Sameach,
Rabbi Michael

(based on the words of Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl about the Jews of Belmonte and the Conservative Movement's efforts on their behalf)

11th April, 2006