



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

15 – 16 April, 2005    7 NISAN, 5765    Parashat Metzora (Leviticus 14:1–15:33)

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Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

## D'var Torah from Rabbi Michael Schwartz

### Balance

Shalom Chaverim,

Scholars have pointed out the similarities between the customs and literary forms of the Passover *Seder* with the Hellenist banquet, or “symposium.”

At the symposium, Greeks and Romans would gather for a meal, wine-drinking and discussion. Their servants would wash their hands for them (Tosefta Berachot 4:8), they dipped “chazeret” (lettuce) and ate *charoset* (Pesachim 10:3), and reclined to the left while eating (Pesachim 10:1 and 108a). Plutarch (1<sup>st</sup> century CE) described the symposium as “a communion of serious and mirthful entertainment, discourse, and symbolic actions...[furthering] a deeper insight into the points debated at the table. For the memory of the pleasures arising from the food is short-lived, but the subjects of philosophical queries and discussions remain fresh after they have been imparted.”

The ancient rabbis clearly modeled themselves on these customs. The Jewish People have never lived in a complete vacuum. We have always absorbed customs, laws, foods, words, etc. from our surroundings...

...But not indiscriminately.

The rabbis adopted the *form* of the symposium, but they changed its *content* drastically. The Greeks and Romans discussed love and beauty, food and drink. We discuss our Exodus from Egypt, the miracle of redemption, and the challenges and responsibilities of freedom incumbent upon us in our own day.

The symposium was for the well-educated and high-born elite. The *Seder* is designed as an educational experience for the entire Jewish People: young and old, rich and poor, women and men, scholars and the so-called “*am ha'aretz*”, your average Jew.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the *Seder* and the symposium is the afikoman: “One does NOT conclude Pesach with an *epikomion* [=afikoman]” (Pesachim 10:8). The Hellenist *epikomion* was distinguished by the practice of bursting into neighbors' houses and forcing them to join in drinking and sexual revelry. We established the *afikoman* as a totally different kind of ‘dessert’—one imbued with Jewish values. Memories of searching for the *afikoman* - and then receiving a reward for finding it - serve as a model for all of us as we ‘search’ for our Jewish identity throughout our lives. Our *afikoman* recalls the taste of the Passover sacrifice eaten when we were last a free People in our own Land - the taste of freedom, gratitude to God, and fulfillment of a *mitzvah*.

We Jews have never been so “free” to adopt the customs and habits of our surrounding society as we are today. However, like the Rabbis of old, we must balance this freedom with the restraint and wisdom to imbue the forms and patterns of our lives with Jewish content, meaning, and values.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Michael  
7 Nissan 5765

14<sup>th</sup> April, 2005