



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

16 – 17 September, 2005

13 Elul, 5765

Parashat Ki Tetze
(Deuteronomy 21:10–25:19)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

According to the great 12th century philosopher and scholar Moses Maimonides, this week's torah portion, *Ki Tetze*, contains 72 *mitzvot*, commandments -- more than any other portion of the Torah. Yet now during the month of *Elul* when this portion is always read, we tend not to focus on the minutia of the law as we busily prepare ourselves for the new year by making *Teshuva*: considering the 'bigger picture', taking account of our life and our ways, turning our lives around and trying to repair the damage we've caused by the mistakes we've made in the past. So, why read all these myriad laws now?

A *Midrash* (Midrash Rabba 17:7 – a collection of sermons and comments by the ancient Rabbis) points out that there is “not a thing in the world in connection with which God did not charge Israel with some commandment”. Indeed, the *Midrash* goes on to point out that the Torah commands everything from how we dress and harvest our fields and build our houses to the way in which we treat our neighbors, make war, offer loans and pay wages. The way to collect eggs is covered, as is the delicate subject of toilet hygiene.

Nehama Leibowitz, the genius Jewish educator, notes that this Midrash “considers the commandments not to be mere ornaments adding grace and beauty to our life as we walk through the garden of the Holy One blessed be He, in pursuit of our own personal aims. We [sic] are compared to a drowning swimmer, struggling against the stormy seas of our own selfish passions. The *mitzvot* are the lifeline thrown out by the Captain, i.e. God”...”The *mitzvot* then are not merely an embellishment for our lives, investing our lives with something extra, contributing some spiritual uplift. Rather, they constitute the difference between life and death, between swimming on an even keel through the sea of life or sinking and succumbing to evil desires.” “Take fast hold of instruction, let her not go; keep her, for she is thy life” (Proverbs 4:13).

As we prepare ourselves for how we will live our lives in the new year, may we meditate on the meaning of all our actions, large and small. May we pull ourselves above the waves of distress and confusion that threaten to overwhelm us and see the distant shore of calm, of purpose, of value, of meaning. We are taught to swim for a reason.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Michael
11 Elul 5765

15th September, 2005