



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

17 – 18 March, 2006

18 Adar, 5766

Parashat Ki Tissa
(Exodus 30:11–34:35)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

All too often we have felt ourselves reduced to nothing more than “a number” for a bureaucrat, an institution, or even for someone from whom we would have expected some real human connection, understanding, or compassion. This week's Torah portion, *Ki Tissa*, reminds us of the importance of treating each human we encounter in our lives with the dignity that being a creature imaged in the Divine Image demands.

The portion begins with the need for a census among the Israelites in the desert. A census is almost unavoidably demeaning in that it reduces an entire nation of individuals – thousands if not millions of individual souls – into numbers and data. Yet, the process for this census among the Israelites strived to avoid just this impersonality.

Each person had to give a “*kofer*”, a “ransom” to represent themselves in the census, that is, a standard coin to represent them in the abstract. The coins, rather than people, were then counted.

What do we learn from this? The commentary in *Etz Chaim* offers a number of perspectives. Some people say that this process deters the evil eye. (If you take pride in how many people are in your family, some disaster will inevitably befall one or more of them. In fact, it is customary to indirectly count a *minyan* by reciting a ten-word verse instead of by numbering the people by counting one, two, three, etc. This also happens regularly in choosing sides for Israeli pick-up basketball games!)

More likely, we are meant to learn that coins are interchangeable, while people are not. Every human being is unique and cannot be reduced to a number. Yet, the coin paid was a half-shekel, to remind us that each of us is incomplete, becoming whole only when joining with others.

The ‘ransom’ coin we pay is to remind us that life is a gift and we “owe” something merely for being alive. Life cannot be taken for granted. Service and responsibility are the price we pay for being in the world. After the counting, the donations for the census were used for services in the Tent of Meeting, so that God's Presence could dwell among us. Today, when we have no Temple services “we show our gratitude for being alive by giving to the poor” (*Mid. Lekach Tov*).

Please join us this Sunday as we visit Crossroads International as part of our community *tzedaka* project, sending donated goods to new immigrants and those in need in Israel.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Michael
16 Adar 5766

16th March, 2006