



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

21 – 22 April, 2006

24 Nissan, 5766

Parashat Shemini
(Leviticus 9:1–11:47)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

The first word of the Torah is *bereshit*, “in the beginning”. The last word of the Torah - 304,805 words and 5,845 verses later - is *Yisrael*, “Israel”. The words *darosh darash*, which are in this week's Torah portion of *Sh'mini*, are at the very center of the Torah according the Talmud (Kiddushin 30a).

The Torah thus begins on the level of the universal and all-encompassing with the story of Creation, and concludes with the special role to be played in the world by a particular People, Israel. However, we read the entire Torah continuously, beginning again just as soon as we conclude (on the holiday of *Simchat Torah*). There really is no beginning or end to the Torah. Therefore, we hold at once both a particular sense of ourselves as the unique Jewish People, in a covenant with God giving us a special understanding of ourselves and our task in the world (ISRAEL), while at the same time we live ineluctably as part of the larger family of humanity, at the mercy of and subject to the physical and moral laws of the universe (BERESHIT).

At the heart of this enterprise, then, are the central words of the Torah - *darosh darash* – which mean to “inquire diligently”. This is a major theological premise about the nature of the universe and the expression of what it means to be Jewish: The essence of the Torah is continued and ongoing inquiry and study. “The ideal Jew is not so much the *learned* Jew as the *learning* Jew.” (*Emet v'Emunah*)

Several millenia worth of activity in *darosh darash* are recorded in the classical Rabbinic discussion of the Torah's meaning, the *midrash*; the house of study retains to this day the name *beit midrash*; and another name for the sermons in which we expound the meaning of the Torah each week in the synagogue is *derasha*. The Torah is for us a finely balanced record of what is written in black and white and our efforts to understand with our minds, hearts, and souls the meaning of what those words tell us about how to live our lives today in our given circumstances in our own relationship with God, our fellow Jews, our fellow humans.

A parallel idea is found in the beginning, middle, and end of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *aleph* is the first letter, *tav* is the last. *mem* is the middle: *aleph – mem – tav* spells *emet*, “Truth”.

May learning be at the heart of what it means for us to be Jews, may our studies lead to deeds, and may all be in the service of Truth.

Moadim L'Simcha – Happy Passover Holiday!

Rabbi Michael

20 Nissan 5766

5th day of the Omer

18th April, 2006