



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

20 – 21 January, 2006

21 Tevet, 5766

Parashat Shemot
(Exodus 1:1–6:1)

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Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Shoshana Kaminsky

“Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5)

In this well-known passage in the Torah, which we will study this week, God speaks to Moses in a place we know to be sacred ground because God says it is so. But are some places truly more sacred than others, or do all places in the world contain the potential for holiness? Where Moses stands is described as “Horeb, the mountain of God.” Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, is where the Israelites will soon receive the Torah, so it is a very special place indeed.

Horeb is a surprising place to be chosen as the site for not one but two key episodes in our people's history. The Sinai Desert, where this story is set, would seem at first glance to be mainly hot, dry, and desolate, with little life and less water. But the desert is also a place without outside intrusions, influences, or temptations. This wilderness, at first perceived as lifeless and barren, is a tranquil refuge for Moses the shepherd and for the newly-freed Israelites.

But is there holiness to be found elsewhere in the world as well? In Genesis 28:16, Jacob awakens from an extraordinary dream in which God has appeared to him. He exclaims, “Indeed, Adonai is in the this place, and I did not know it!” The rabbis insist the place where he has slept is Mount Moriah, where Abraham stood ready to sacrifice his son and where Solomon will build the Temple in the distant future. In midrash, the sun sets precipitously as Jacob nears this place, and the very ground pushes up to halt his journey. It is here, and nowhere else in the world, that Jacob is destined to sleep and dream.

I believe this text can be read with a completely opposite interpretation. When Jacob announces that God is in that place, he is really declaring that God is to be found in all places. What changes is not the holiness of the place, but our awareness of it. If our hearts are open to receive the experience and stand in the moment, we will find God exactly where we are standing. Horeb comes to be known as the mountain of God precisely because the exchange between Moses and God unfolds there. Their encounter transforms that bare patch of land into holy ground. And if a mountain in the middle of the desert can become holy ground, so can anywhere we find ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom

19th January, 2006