



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

23 – 24 December, 2005

23 Kislev, 5766

Parashat Vayeshev
(Genesis 37:1–40:23)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

The opening words of this week's Torah portion are *Vayeishev Ya'akov b'erez migurei aviv*, that is, "and Jacob was settled in the land where his father had lived..."

This could be understood to say that, after all the struggle and hardship he had gone through in his life to that point, Jacob thought he was finally going to settle down for a nice quiet retired life back in his hometown. He thought he could disengage from the problems of living.

Many of us also dream of settling down to a life free from challenges and worries. Some of us identify milestones for ourselves that, once reached, will afford us the time (and means) to do what we *really* want to do.

Among the most popular versions of this "carrot-on-a-stick" approach to life is convincing ourselves that our future happiness will be guaranteed once we have a certain number of dollars saved up in the bank. Rarely do the years necessary to achieve our goals pass like those first seven years passed for Jacob: they seemed but a day because of his love for Rachel whom he was promised to marry afterward. More often than not, what subsequently happened to Jacob happens to us too: the unexpected occurs and the direct route that was on our map leads to detours and roundabouts and circumvents; seven years becomes twenty years; we start out playing the game, but we *become* the game...

Jacob finally extricates himself from the entanglements of life as an expatriate and returns to settle in the Land. What does he discover? That to be disengaged from the challenges and struggles and concerns and issues of life is to abandon life. Jacob learns that to be a Jew is to be a caring human striving for righteousness. He cannot "settle down" and ignore the people and events around him. To be Jewish is to be sensitive, engaged in the world, involved, responsible.

The ancient Rabbis knew that whatever it is in life you want – wisdom, power, wealth, honor – it is achieved *as you go along*, in how you live your life day to day. You cannot make compromises with your ideals, your family, with yourself...and remain uncompromised. Don't expect to change yourself when your bank statement reads some magical number: live now how, and who, you want to become:

"Who is wise? He who learns from everyone along the way. Who is mighty? The one who controls his passions all the time. Who is rich? She who rejoices in her portion each day, as it is said, 'When you eat the labor of your hands, happy are you, and it shall be well with you'. Who is honored? One who honors others." (Pirke Avot 4:1)

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah,
Rabbi Michael
21 Kislev 5766

22nd December, 2005