



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

24–25 February, 2006

27 Shevat, 5766

Parashat Mishpatim
(Exodus 21:1–24:18)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

This week's Torah portion is called *mishpatim*, a long list of rules that we, as part of our covenant with God, are to follow in our lives. Sounds pretty daunting, doesn't it?

Yet the most difficult commandment in the list is not what you would expect, not even something that we think of as a particularly "Jewish" aspect of our lives. But there it is: More difficult than keeping kosher, Shabbat, and holiday observances. More challenging than any of the other ethical commandments of Judaism like 'honoring parents', being honest in business, doing *tzedaka*.

"*Lo Tisa Shaima Shav*— You must not carry false rumors."

Our tradition understands this and other references to mean that Jewish law prohibits three kinds of speech:

1. *Sheker*, "falsehoods" and "spreading a bad name". We say Rachel did that awful thing even though it was actually Leah.
2. *Lashon hara*, literally "evil language", or slander. That is, negative truths about a person communicated to those who have no practical need to know of the person's weakness; any derogatory or damaging (physically, financially, socially) communication. An example would be Shimon telling Levi what an awful thing Reuven did, even if Reuven in fact really did do that awful thing.
3. *R'khilut*, literally "peddling" information that generates animosity between people, such as gossip or rumors. These are truths about a person that are not defamatory but are communicated to those who have no need to know the information. For example, Levi now tells Reuven that Shimon said something bad about him. (*Mishneh Torah Deot 7:1-3, Etz Hayim p. 471*).

The rabbis teach that use of prohibited speech is like killing three people: it destroys the reputation of the victim, damages the perceptions of the listener, and diminishes the standing of the speaker. Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, added a fourth level: it divides community.

Perhaps the most effective way to uphold this most difficult of all our Jewish, ethical, religious, and civil laws rolled into one is to LISTEN: Not to what others are saying about anyone else, of course. Rather, listen to what comes out of your own mouth. You'll be surprised, not at what you find out about others but at what you find out about yourself.

The Torah is the Book of Life. And "Who is it that desires life—*Mi haish hachafetz b'haim?*", asks Psalm 34, "and loves the days to see good in them?" It answers: you who "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile. [who] Depart from evil, and do good. [who] Seek peace, and pursue it."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Michael
25 Shevat 5766

23rd February, 2006