



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

23 – 24 June, 2005

17 SIVAN, 5765

Parashat Shelach
(Numbers 13:1 - 15:41)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah from Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Trying For Justice after Forty Years

This week, forty years to the day after Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman were murdered by a Ku Klux Klan mob while working for civil rights in the segregated South of the United States, a Mississippi court finally convicted Edgar Ray Killen for his role in the killings.

Forty years. The same number of years it took our People to become a nation in the desert. The same number of years it took the Israelite ancestors of Schwerner and Goodman – who were both Jewish - to learn the whole of Torah so that they could put it into practice when they arrived in the Promised Land.

Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman were two of thousands of Jews who were activists in the Civil Rights Movement. It was a golden age of cooperation between blacks and Jews in the United States. The "Freedom Summer" was a massive and decisive effort in the struggle. Over half of the young people to make the pilgrimage to Mississippi in 1964 to help local blacks register voters and build community organizations were Jews.

Chaney was killed because he was black. Schwerner and Goodman were killed because they were activists for blacks *and* because they were Jews. Klan speeches and hate literature of that era often mention a Jewish "conspiracy" to destroy white Christian America by supporting civil rights for blacks. Synagogues as well as black churches in the South were bombed. "It was the first time Christians had planned and carried out the execution of a Jew," a Klansman quoted Klan Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers boasting after the murders.

What drew so many Jews to the "Freedom Summer" at the risk of their lives? Perhaps the experience of going, personally, from slavery to freedom each year at the Passover *seder*. Perhaps what motivated them was a consciousness of Torah, and particularly of the Torah's concern for justice.

It took forty years for the Mississippi court to apply the law to all its citizens, to try for justice. The idea of Justice, of equality under the law, is central to democracy. It is raised to a level of spiritual passion in the Torah. So many people - young Jews like Schwerner and Goodman among them – felt and still feel that passion. This week's Torah portion, forty years later, offers a fitting memorial to these Jewish heroes:

"There shall be one law for you and for the stranger that resides with you; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. As you are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord. The same Torah and the same code shall there be for you and the stranger who resides among you." (Numbers 15:15-16)

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Michael
16 Sivan 5765

23rd June, 2005