



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

28 – 29 April, 2006

1 Iyar, 5766

Parashat Tazria-Metzora
(Leviticus 12:1–15:33)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

Being in Israel is never a neutral experience, never *parve*. Perhaps the ancient Rabbis were right when they said that the very air of the Land of Israel imparts wisdom. Maybe one feels compelled here, changed somehow, by the dizzying swirl of events and – how else to say it? – *meaning*, that you encounter at every turn, that confronts you wherever you go.

To take but one example from the last week: Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, has a feel to it here like the feeling of belonging and comfort and sorrowful understanding expressed by a family hug. The feeling was heightened this year by the extraordinary weather. A winter's wet and cold descended on the nation in the afternoon, and the damp mood of the memorial theme was reflected on the faces of the guests who sat outside through the nationally televised memorial ceremony at the Holocaust Museum at Yad VaShem that night.

My oldest son cuddled with me to stay warm as we watched the ceremony, and I explained to him that the day is a special day to help us remember all the Jews and others who were badly hurt by wicked people. He was silent awhile and then asked me why the people dressed in green were standing there at attention, their eyes staring straight ahead, unfazed by the weather. I told him that they are our soldiers, who will protect us from any more wicked people who might try to hurt us. Had they been around then, I said, they would have stopped the Nazis.

As Israeli President Moshe Katzav spoke about how Yom HaShoah is important this year, especially when Iran seeks nuclear arms, denies the Holocaust, and calls for Israel to be destroyed, the news trailer at the bottom of the TV screen suddenly appeared and announced the bombing in Dahab, Egypt. I recalled the words of Elie Weisel: "What happens to the world happens to the Jews first."

At 10:00 a.m. the next morning, a siren sounded across the country and the entire Jewish People in Israel came to standstill of remembrance and mourning. The siren wails in undulations for two minutes. Cars stop and people stand still and silent in the street, in stores, at home. My son stood beside me, again silent. Birds chirped wildly, which I always notice and always find somehow both fitting and strange. I tried to think of the victims of the Holocaust, but all I could think of was the topic of the seminar I would join later that day and the verses in the Torah that say: "You shall not subvert the rights of your needy in their disputes... You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. (Ex. 23:6-9)

I arrived later at the offices of Rabbis for Human Rights and learned about the grassroots effort to help the unemployed, Jews and Arabs alike, to find dignified work in the Hadera area while government social support for them has been cut.

As with the message of Passover - that we Jews were freed from slavery for a purpose - Yom HaShoah reminds us too that we survived for a purpose, have restored Israel for a purpose, that we remain Jews for a purpose. Our task is to fulfill God's will for us in perfecting His world.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Michael
29 Nisan 5766
14th day of the Omer

27th April, 2006