



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

29 – 30 April, 2005 21 NISAN, 5765 Parashat Shevi'i shel Pesach (Exodus 13:17-15:26)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah from Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Counting the Omer

Shalom Chaverim,

From the second night of Passover we count the days until Shavuot, seven days for seven weeks. Unlike any other Jewish holiday, the arrival of the Feast of Weeks (i.e., Shavuot) depends on counting the days which precede it. One reason why this is so, it has been suggested, is that when we received the glad tidings of our liberation from Egypt on Passover Eve, we were also informed that we would receive the Torah fifty days later. This news was so thrilling that we started counting the days.

“Counting the Omer” forms a bridge connecting Passover to Shavuot. Not only do we want freedom *from* slavery, but we want freedom *for* a purpose. On Shavuot we celebrate the gift of the Torah given on Mount Sinai. As wonderful as our redemption from slavery was, we could not appreciate its meaning and value for us if we did not have the Torah to challenge us to use our freedom to live our lives with moral and spiritual worth. We continue counting even today because we remain with the challenge of how to use our gift of freedom to make our lives ultimately meaningful.

It may be that, in those days between the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah, we could not tolerate our sense of freedom with no purpose, no goal, no structure. Perhaps we began “counting the days” because we didn’t know what else to do with ourselves! Perhaps we “counted on” freedom being its only reward until we realized that freedom without obligations and responsibilities, just and moral means and ends, was no freedom at all. Without the Torah, we would be free to wander lost in the desert, free to dream of a Promised Land, but we would have no practical hope of ever reaching it.

The “Counting of the Omer” takes place each night after sundown. This past Sunday night was the first night counted, Monday was the second, Tuesday the third, and onward. If you’d like to learn more about this unique and somewhat esoteric Jewish practice, you can begin with this website or ask me for more information: <http://www.ou.org/chagim/sefira>.

Happy counting!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Michael
19 Nissan 5765
4th Day of the Omer

28th April, 2005