



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

31 March – 1 April, 2006

3 Nissan, 5766

Parashat Vayikra  
(Leviticus 1:1–5:26)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz  
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

## D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Parashat Vayikra:

With the arrival of the new month of Nissan this week, Jewish households the world over are busily preparing for Passover. Noble meditations on the value and meaning of freedom begin to fill our thoughts as we review the *Haggadah* and plan our *seder*. Our stomachs at this season, though, tend to be feasted full of carbohydrates while we clean out our stores of *chametz* and finish off those supersized boxes of cornflakes, consume the cookies at the bottom of the jar, and devour our stocks of pasta and frozen bagels.

The positive act of eating *matzah* on Passover - the bread of affliction and the bread of freedom - is understandable. But why the negative stringency to get rid of *chametz* entirely? Not only are we forbidden to eat *chametz* on Passover, we can not even possess it or leave a crumb of it around our house! We've gone so far as to develop a way to disown the *chametz* that can't quite be gotten rid of by "selling" it for the duration of Pesach. We then go on to declare *Chametz* accidentally overlooked during our cleaning to be null and void, not *chametz* at all but mere 'dust of the earth'. The prohibition of *chametz* within our domain on Passover has no parallel in Judaism except in the prohibition against idolatry.

*Why is chametz so rigidly proscribed?*

A verse in this week's Torah portion, *Vayikra*, may provide a clue. We are given instructions for bringing a gift to God on the sacrificial altar, an offering of grain called the *mincha*. This offering, curiously enough, must not contain either leaven (*chametz*) or honey (*d'vash*, probably from dates) (*Vayikra* 2:11). The Torah offers no explanation as to why *chametz* and honey have no place on God's altar.

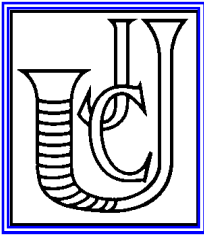
These two substances have nothing in common, except that neither are very clean. Honey is sticky and *chametz* is in essence a sourdough yeast which is also sticky, but smelly and rife with bacteria as well.

Perhaps the Torah is here demanding consistency: The Temple rites must be conducted by the priests in ritual purity, but so too must the sacrifice itself be physically clean. If we want to purify our spirits, we must do so through clean living.

*Sefer HaChinuch*, a 13<sup>th</sup> century book that explains some of the meanings behind the *mitzvot*, notes that honey and *chametz* are two substances with opposing qualities: honey is sweet and instantly gratifies desire; *chametz* is the inevitable and natural result of leaving dough unattended to rise. Together, the two point to the possible sources of human transgression: Honey represents unbridled preoccupation with satisfying our sweet desires without delay; *Chametz* leavening represents laziness, spiritual lethargy, a lack of effort or enthusiasm for perfecting ourselves or our world. Neither is acceptable.

Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann cites the Maharash, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Chasidic master, to explain that *chametz* and honey characterize two of our human traits which, if taken to extremes, can be very harmful. "Leaven" is symbolic of the kind of person who is fermenting within themselves, someone constantly bitter and angry at the world. *Chametz*, "leaven", is of the same root as *chamutz*, sourness.

..../Page 2



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

31 March – 1 April, 2006

3 Nissan, 5766

Parashat Vayikra  
(Leviticus 1:1–5:26)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz  
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

## D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Page 2

Honey on the other hand is symbolic of the person who is overly sweet and affable. Nothing angers them, no one is ever really wrong because the taste of good and evil has been flavored. These people mask with sweetness the true taste of what could be a dangerously bitter morsel. By forbidding both leaven and honey, then, the Torah teaches that the true vision of reality is found in balancing the degree of our concern for ourselves with that of others, tempering both our optimism and our pessimism with just judgment, and in resisting illusion and the artificial.

In related fashion, Sefer HaChinuch goes on to note that leavening dough "puffs itself up" as it rises, becoming an apt symbol of pride, haughtiness and self-aggrandizement. This attitude has no place in serving God.

Finally, Professor Moshe Benovitz of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem argues that we intuitively understand the true reason for the prohibition against *chametz*. We take advantage of the Torah's call to eliminate *chametz* from our borders at this season as an opportunity to renew ourselves, to clean the house thoroughly in every respect. Leaven, with all its symbolism for our spiritual and physical infirmities, is just a particularly stubborn form of dirt chaining us to the past, dirt that must be cleansed and then forgotten through the seven-day *matzah* diet.

As we eliminate our *chametz* this year, may we be blessed with true renewal at the Festival of the month of Aviv – in our souls, in our homes, in our borders, and the world over.

Shabbat shalom  
Rabbi Michael J. Schwartz  
Rosh Chodesh Nissan 5766

30<sup>th</sup> March, 2006