



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

1 – 2 April, 2005    21 ADAR II, 5765    Parashat Shemini (Leviticus 9:1–11:47)

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## D'var Torah from Rabbi Michael Schwartz

### This is what it's all about...

Shalom Chaverim,

Let's face it: Most of us want easy answers to our tough questions about life, quick fixes to our problems, aphorisms rather than treatises.

This week's Torah portion, *Shemini*, is for us! It tells us "what it's all about" in a single word; uses three words to say how to achieve that; and one verse alone to explain our tradition's entire theology.

Other religions can sum up their message in single words like "Love", "Emptiness", or "Submission". The essence of Judaism is *kiddusha*, "Holiness".

Holiness can be achieved, and the recipe for its attainment is quite simple: "v'hitkadashtem v'hayitem kdoshim" (Lev. 11:44), "Make yourselves holy and you will become holy." Or, as Hermann Cohen translated it: "strive after holiness and ye shall be holy; *i.e.* the mere striving after holiness in itself sanctifies." "Your fundamental need for significance, for the assurance that your life has meaning, will be met thereby" (Chatam Sofer).

Moreover, "this summons is phrased in the plural, implying that the capacity for holiness is not restricted to spiritually gifted people; **anyone** may attain holiness. God does not demand the impossible. The plural phrasing suggests further that holiness is most easily achieved in the context of a community. It is difficult for a person to live a life of holiness without others...When a community dedicates itself to the pursuit of holiness, its 'ordinary' members can achieve an extraordinary measure of holiness in their daily lives (Etz Hayim).

*"For I am the Lord your God: make yourselves holy and you will become holy, for I am Holy; neither shall you defile yourselves with any manner of swarming thing that moves upon the earth" (Lev. 11:44).*

Heschel notes that, "Judaism is an attempt to prove that in order to be a human you have to be more than a human; that in order to be a People, you have to be more than a People. Israel was made to be a holy People."

So, the Torah bids us to be holy. This demand has two aspects—one positive and one negative. The positive aspect is that we must imitate God. The negative aspect means withdrawing from things impure and abominable. Even as nothing tainted can be associated with God, so it is our duty to avoid whatever will taint us, physically, materially, spiritually, in our thoughts, words, and deeds. (Rabbi J.H. Hertz).

That God is holy "constitutes the basis for our duty to sanctify ourselves as well as the guarantee of our capacity to attain sanctification of life: 'Because I am Holy,' says God, 'you shall be holy and you *can* be holy!" (S.R. Hirsch)

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Michael  
20 Adar II 5765

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