

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

3 - 4 April, 2009

10 Nisan 5769

Shabbat Hagadol
Parashat Tzav
(Leviticus 6:1–8:36)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

Part of the role of the modern Rabbi is to be a pitchman — to urge people to come to events and to try new things. We all have our different styles. Some favor guilt. I am more likely to try a kind of peer pressure — to create the impression that this is what the cool kids are doing and so you should too. My basic message then is: If you miss this you will be sorry.

On one level this is true. If you missed this year's Purim schpiel, for example, you missed it forever. You will never see Bob Cooper in a dress in quite the same way. But of course, Purim will come again next year and the year after that. God willing, you will have many opportunities to see a UJC Purim schpiel. So it goes with most things in Jewish life. No one Shabbat is quite like the next, no one Seder is quite like the next, but the wheel will come around again.

But this is not true about an event that will occur on April 8th. If you miss this one you will not get another go until the year 2037. So when I say don't miss this, I am not just whistling *hava nagilah*. The observance I am talking about is called *Birkat HaChamah*, the Blessing of the Sun.

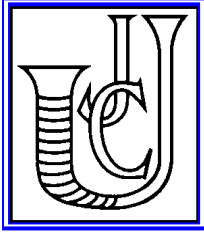
The roots of this very unusual ritual are in the Talmud. In tractate *Berachot* 59b it says this:
Our Rabbis taught: He who sees the sun at its turning point, the moon in its power, the planets in their orbits, and the signs of the zodiac in their orderly progress, should say: Blessed be He who has wrought the work of creation. And when [does this happen]? -- Abaye said: Every twenty-eight years when the cycle begins again and the Nisan [Spring] equinox falls in Saturn on the evening of Tuesday, going into Wednesday.

The significance of all this discussion of equinoxes and ecliptics is this. Every 28 years the sun is considered to be in the exact position it was when the sun was created. *Birkat HaChamah* is a celebration of the mythic fourth day of Creation, when the "great lights" came into being.

This does not mean that we have to be literal in our approach to Genesis for the Blessing of the Sun to be meaningful. Genesis is, after all, more of poem than a story. *Bereishit* is a song about the God-given goodness and beauty of the world. For Jews creation is not a one time event, but an everrenewing present reality. We see *HaShem* within the so-called ordinary natural processes that sustain all that lives. So we note the shifts between day and night in our prayers, we celebrate the new moon each time it arrives, and once ever 28 years say a blessing over the sun, the ultimate source of life on earth.

In keeping with this tradition, we will gather at the Podium Garden outside One Robinson Place at 9:00am, look east, and say the blessing: Praised are You O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who does the work of Creation. We will read the passage from the Talmud that is the source of *Birkat HaChamah* and a few Psalms. The ritual is simple. The timing is everything. Either April 8th, 2009 or not again until 2037.

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Birkat HaChamah provides an opportunity for a good hard think about the future. For many of us 2037 is likely to be the last time we will be able to fulfill this particular Mitzvah. By that time some of our children will have children. It is a good moment to ask ourselves what we want out of this next phase of our lives. There are many things we could do, but what is worth our precious time? What choices need to be made? What changes?

Choices and changes need to be made on a global scale as well. Rabbi Arthur Waskow makes a powerful argument that Birkat HaChamah is an opportunity to focus the mind on the global climate crisis. Will we look back on the years between this Birkat HaChamah and the next as a time of vision and action in aid of the earth? Or will we remember these years with bitter regret, as the time when we might have acted but did not? In 2037, will we bless the sun as an ally, having fully harnessed its power to sustain us? Or will we have made the sun into our enemy? On April 8th, I will echo Rav Waskow's hope and prayer: "May we bring blessing on the sun, May we let the sun bring blessing on us."

Let's come together on April 8th for a few moments of reflection and prayer — over where we have been and over where we are going. And may HaShem graciously strengthen and preserve us so that we can gather again 28 years from then and once again bless the sun in hope and in joy.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z
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2nd April, 2009