



## THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

### SHABBAT SHALOM

12 - 13 February, 2010

29 Shevat 5770

Parashat Mishptim  
(Exodus 21:1-24:18)

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Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

This Shabbat is the first of the *arba parshiyot*, a series of four special Shabbatot that occur between now and shortly before Pesach. In a time before mass communications, these Shabbatot and the special readings associated with them were used to remind Jewish communities of important themes of the holidays and of duties that needed to be performed.

Shabbat Shekalim, which we welcome this week, was instituted as a gentle reminder of something no one particularly likes to think about — taxes. The message is delivered in the additional Shekalim Torah reading:

*This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight — twenty gerahs to the shekel — a half-shekel as an offering to the LORD. Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall give the LORD's offering: the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel [Ex. 13-15]*

This payment was probably meant as a one-time levy. The Tradition, however, saw it as an annual obligation, and so the half-shekel tax was collected every year to fund the activities of the Temple in Jerusalem. The tax was due by the first of Nisan. In order to give everyone ample time to come up with the half-shekel, an announcement was made on the Shabbat preceding Rosh Chodesh Adar (Shabbat Shekalim). One month is plenty of warning, but I am sure our ancestors complained anyway.

While other Jewish financial obligations, like *tzedakkah*, are based on one's income, the half-shekel was a flat tax. This small, purposely regressive tax was meant to make a particular theological point: All of us have an equal stake in our religious institutions. In the Covenant community there are no distinctions, no degrees of belonging. All are equal before God. This is the message of the restriction that *"the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less."*

As was true in ancient times, we expect that people will support the community at a level commensurate with their means. At the same time we still have our version of the uniform and universal half-shekel levy. It is not an amount of silver weighed by the "sanctuary weight," but is something much simpler and ultimately more precious. Today's half-shekel is participation. This is the duty owed by all, whatever their circumstances and it must be paid in person.

In our communal life, there are many half-shekel moments. It is not a one time duty. Each Shabbat, each festival, each program, each class, each gathering, is an opportunity to step up and be counted.

In the spirit of Shabbat Shekalim, let's make this proclamation: We have reached a half-shekel moment in our Torah campaign. We have been saying for weeks that our goal is that 100% of our members will become sponsors of our new Sefer Torah. This is not fundraising-speak. Being a sponsor is how one fulfills the 613th commandment of writing a Torah in one's lifetime.

So on this Shabbat Shekalim let's challenge ourselves. Let's see how high we can raise our participation percentage by Rosh Chodesh Nisan (March 16<sup>th</sup>), the day on which the ancient half-shekel tax came due. In this way the coming weeks will be a time of community building in the spirit of our ancient ancestors.

I knew that when we began this Year of Torah we would do great things together. I have been moved by the enthusiasm and the generosity of the UJC. But the Sefer Torah is not yet complete and not all our members have yet claimed this Torah as their own. Now is the time— for UJC veterans and new members of our community, for young and old, for our whole congregational mishpacha—now is the time to come and give your half-shekel and build this Sanctuary.

All Blessings,  
Rabbi Z  
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11<sup>th</sup> February 2010