



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

19 - 20 September, 2008

20 Elul 5768

Parashat Ki Tavo
(Deuteronomy 26:1–29:8)

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From the Rabbi's desk

In Ki Tavo, this week's parasha, Moses instructs the Israelites that one of their first duties upon entering Eretz Yisrael is to construct a monument. It would be natural, after such a long struggle, for the people to want to memorialize this new phase of their history. God, however, has something else in mind than the kind of statues celebrating the glorious past that can be found in every city and village around the world. The people are to glorify God, not themselves. So Moses instructs the people to set up twelve enormous stones and "inscribe on them all the words of this Torah."

This episode concludes with a very strange statement. After prescribing the building of this monumental stone Torah (call it *Torah-henge*, if you like) and the accompanying altar, the Torah adds:

"Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Silence! Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of the LORD your God"

You can well imagine the Israelites asking each other: "What are they talking about? Coming out of Egypt, accepting the Torah at Sinai, wandering in the desert-- this was nothing to you? Today we are the people of the Lord!? And what were we yesterday, chopped liver?"

What Moses is telling the people and what the Torah is teaching us is that "Sinai" is not an event of the past, but in fact must be a present reality. The generation Moses is exhorting, after all, did not experience the Exodus and were not present at the first Sinai. This generation, raised in freedom in the wilderness, must have its own Sinai moment when they accept Torah for themselves. The Covenant, at this key moment just before the entry into the promised land, needed to be renewed. In this way the Israelites became "the people of the Lord" in a way they were not a moment before.

The same holds true in every generation and for every Jew. Sinai is not in the truest sense a mountain visited once in the distant past, but a place in the heart that we come to on repeated pilgrimage. The festival of Shavuot is an annual return to the holy mountain as the Torah service is a weekly one. These rituals reclaim Sinai as present, personal experience. At a deeper level, Sinai is a daily or hourly ascent. We return to our holy mountain every time we even in the smallest way choose Torah as our compass to navigate this life. Each day we lose our way. Each day we find the mountain again. Each day we are offered the Torah anew. Each time we accept it we can say, "today we have become the people of the Lord our God."

All Blessings
Rabbi Z

18th September, 2008