



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

20 - 21 February, 2009

27 Shevat 5769

Parashat Mishpatim  
(Exodus 21:1–24:18)

Rabbi Stan Zamek  
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

I had a bit of shock this week when I realized that this coming Shabbat is Shabbat Shekalim. This is the first of a series of special additional Torah readings called the *arba parshiot*, "the four portions," that fall between Rosh Chodesh Adar and Pesach. Shabbat Shekalim is a sign that Purim is almost upon us and that Pesach is not far behind. This year is truly flying by.

On Shabbat Shekalim, in addition to the regular Torah portion, we also read these words from Exodus 30:  
*"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"*

The Torah views this *machatzit hashekel* as a one time levy. The practice evolved, however, into an annual payment that went to fund the upkeep of the Temple. The purpose of this special Torah reading, which falls on or just before Rosh Chodesh Adar, was to serve as a helpful reminder that Jews had just one month to pay the half-shekel. It was the ancient equivalent of receiving your tax forms in the mail.

While the Temple stood, Jews from Eretz Yisrael and from the diaspora sent their half-shekels to the Temple Administration. Later, with no Temple to sustain, the half-shekel "tax" persisted as an extra contribution to the Jewish charitable societies that used Shabbat Shekalim as a handy method of solicitation. The additional Torah reading and the special haftarah that was assigned to it were retained as a remembrance of the Temple.

But Torah is never merely of antiquarian interest. It always speaks to our own time. That is what makes it Torah.

The Torah says that "the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel." If we think of this only in terms of taxation, it is a regressive tax falling more heavily on the poor. But this uniformity is imposed to send a very tangible message of equality. While in other ways the well-off were, and are, expected to shoulder more of the burden of supporting the community, the half-shekel contribution was a clear statement that every Jew had an equal stake in religious life, an equal claim on the Temple.

The Torah is telling us that no person, no member, is more or less significant in synagogue life. There are no machers, there are no schleppers -- there are only Jews and we value each one for whatever he or she contributes to our communal life.

It is also important to remember that the half-shekel contribution is not Tzedakkah. Our obligation to the poor is an important, but separate matter. What we are talking about here is the obligation to support religious institutions, particularly our synagogues.

How much better off would we be if people viewed their synagogue dues and other contributions as an offering, or even a tax, instead of a subscription? Synagogue membership is too often seen as a fee-for-service transaction. Parashat Shekalim suggests a different understanding of synagogue life: Our dues and donations are the equivalent of the half-shekel, meaning that we give because this is simply what Jews do. We give because the giving itself is a mitzvah. We give because the giving itself is a holy act.

The words we use shape our attitudes about Jewish life. Perhaps words like "dues" or "donations" do not capture what it means to materially support a shul. Taking our cue from Parashat Shekalim, the term "*Terumat Adonai*," the Lord's Offering, better reflects the duty and the privilege of being part of a synagogue community.

All Blessings  
Rabbi Z  
[rabbizamek@ujc.org.hk](mailto:rabbizamek@ujc.org.hk)

19<sup>th</sup> February, 2009