



## THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

# SHABBAT SHALOM

26– 27 March, 2010

12 Nissan 5770

Parashat Tzav  
(Leviticus 6:1-8:36)

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Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

This Shabbat is Shabbat HaGadol, The “Great Sabbath” that precedes Pesach. It may be its position just prior to a major festival that makes this Shabbat greater than the others, or it may be that the title derives from the majestic words of the special haftarah that is read on this day:

*“Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the great, awesome day of the LORD.”*

Some commentators suggest, however, that it was the length of the service on this particular Shabbat that made it “great” in people’s minds. Shabbat HaGadol was one of the two times of the year in the pre-modern synagogue when it was customary for the Rabbi to deliver a sermon. These Shabbat HaGadol sermons were immense and expounded on all aspects of the observance of Pesach in exquisite detail.

Shabbat HaGadol can still be great without burying us in mounds of instructions. This special Shabbat is an opportunity to contemplate the central message of the festival — an idea that is arguably the central teaching of the Seder and the rationale for the entire observance of Pesach. This idea is expressed in this simple and easily overlooked passage from the Haggadah:

*“In each and every generation, each person is obligated to see him/herself as if (k’ilu) he/she had personally left Egypt, as it says in Scripture, ‘Tell your child on that very day: ‘this is what Adonai did for me when I left Egypt.’”*

The whole of the Seder is aimed at absorbing the lesson summarized in these few lines. Exodus is not an event that happened once in the distant past. This story of oppression and liberation is our story. We participate in the Exodus, rather than merely recall it.

Of course this is true in a spiritual sense. For us, Egyptian enslavement and Divine liberation are states of being. At times our ability to be the Jews we know we should be is constrained. We are ruled by the Pharaohs of circumstances we cannot control and by Pharaohs of our own devising. At other times, with HaShem’s help, these tyrants are forced to let us go and we experience the enlivening thrill of liberation. The link between our experience of microcosmic bondage yielding to liberation and our collective freedom narrative is the little word “k’ilu”.

As Lawrence Hoffman notes in his commentary on the Haggadah, when we translate “k’ilu” to mean “as if” we are apt to lose much of its import. Translating the word in this way, Hoffman says, “might imply the subjunctive mood — only ‘as though,’ but ‘not really.’ The Hebrew is intended as just the opposite.” *K’ilu* is an invitation to engage the sacred imagination. We are meant to pour our subjective experience of oppression and liberation into the Haggadah’s recreation of the Exodus and, to the greatest extent possible, be there.

The willingness to see oneself in the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* is what separates the wise son from the wicked. It is only an act of sacred imagination that allows us to say “what are the statutes, the laws, and the ordinances which the Lord or God has commanded us,” rather than, “what does this ritual mean to you.”

The “k’ilu” of the Haggadah makes explicit a truth that applies to all of Jewish life. The Jewish future depends on Jews taking the tradition personally. If a Jew sees himself or herself as part of the story, as a participant in the journey from Egypt to Sinai, then all the rest is commentary. The fundamental act of Jewish identity is the use of the word “I” — I was a slave, I was freed, I was at Sinai, I accept the gift of Torah, *k’ilu*, as if it is all happening right now.

Chag Sameach

All Blessings  
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