

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

Welcoming all who seek a Progressive vision of Jewish life

SHABBAT SHALOM

18- 19 May, 2012

27 Iyar 5772

Parashat Behar - Bechukotai
(Leviticus 25:1-27:34)

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Education & Programming Director Rabbi Martha Bergadine
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From the Rabbi's desk

Chaverim

Rabbi Martha wrote a splendid D'var Torah this week for the UPJ Parashat HaShavuah newsletter. I am not sure our whole chevra got a chance to see it, so I asked her to be a guest columnist in this week's in Shabbat Shalom. I know you will appreciate this insightful message.

While the financial side of communal life has become an issue of central importance in these uncertain economic times, it is a very, very old concern. No matter what the level of standard dues, synagogues and communal institutions have always been dependent on generous voluntary donations made in addition to those required for membership. The Torah even addresses funding the Sanctuary at the end of this week's *parashah, B'chukkotai*.

Several methods of funding the Sanctuary, both required and voluntary, are outlined. One of these is a votive pledge of silver described as the "equivalent of a human being." This gift of silver harks back to a time when people would dedicate themselves, or their children, to Temple service. The story of Hannah's dedication of Samuel to the sanctuary at Shiloh is one example. However, donating the equivalent of one's life in silver allowed the Sanctuary to receive necessary funding, while at the same time satisfying the ancient tradition of dedication.

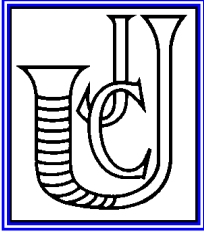
But if silver is to be accepted in place of a lifetime of service, how is the amount to be determined? Leviticus 27:3-7 specifies the amounts that are to be paid in "shekels of silver by the sanctuary weight." The amounts are presented in the chart below:

<u>Age</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
20-60 years of age	50 shekels	30 shekels
5-20 years of age	20 shekels	10 shekels
1 month – 5 years of age	5 shekels	3 shekels
over 60 years of age	15 shekels	10 shekels

A quick glance at the chart seems to indicate that the age ranges reflect productive capacity — people age 20-60 are in their prime working years. The differences between males and females may be linked to presumptions of productivity or reflect the social status of women. In any case, the Torah specifies a value in silver as the "equivalent" of each human being.

Determining the worth of a human being in this way seems very foreign. While insurance companies and lawyers may at times determine certain payouts based on age and projected productivity, outside of these narrow contexts this kind of calculus makes us squirm. Those of us who live in progressive, egalitarian societies espouse that all people, regardless of age or sex, are equal.

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But if we look closer, it becomes apparent that the world at large does indeed find some people more valuable than others. We value the rich over the poor, the beautiful more than the ugly, the successful more than the unsuccessful, and the clever over the dull. These are more subjective measures than those of age and sex used in the Torah, and perhaps more insidious.

The synagogue is part of the world, surrounded by a semi-permeable membrane. This allows Jewish ethics to diffuse into the wider world, but there's no denying that, for good or for ill, the values of the wider world do filter into our sacred communities.

We strive to create egalitarian communities where all are welcomed and appreciated, and yet at times some are valued more than others. If we are honest, all of us have seen this at one time or another: the member whose outrageous demands are met because he is a large donor; the painfully awkward teen left on the periphery of the youth group; the woman who yields undue influence because she presides over a clique; the man that no one talks to at the Oneg Shabbat because he is "odd." Despite our best intentions, our very human attraction to wealth, beauty, and charm, can distort our vision and prevent us from seeing the true worth of an individual.

But the Torah portion provides a remedy for this as well. It says, "But if one can not afford the equivalent, he shall be presented before the priest, and the priest shall assess him" (Lev. 27:8). The priest was to look at the person who could not pay the specified amount in silver, and determine an appropriate contribution. To do this, the priest would have to look at the person and truly see him as an individual. What if we, like the priest, were to focus our gaze on all those around us and see their true worth? Not bank balances, or beauty, or superficial, easy charm, but kindness, patience, and wisdom. A willingness to listen, support, and encourage. A longing to be a part of a community and to contribute to it. This is the true value of a human life.

B'chukotai specifies that the shekels donated were to be assessed by "the sanctuary weight" — a holy measure for a holy act. May we too value others "by the sanctuary weight," assessing their worth, not by the world's measure, but by God's.

17th May 2012