

Rabbi Lewis' message for June 2003

I went downtown and visited the local cobbler this week to ask what time they open in the morning. He answered, "Eight a.m. on a good day, 8:10 or 8:15 the rest of the time." Next door to the cobbler is a café. I asked them the same question about when they open in the morning. "Well, usually around 8:15 or so," the owner answered. A customer chimed in, "She likes to go to the bank first. That's the way it is in a small town."

We could use the same words for the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey. So often we say, "That's the way it is in a small congregation." We say the words with the same attitude of the cobbler and the café owner in my town, with love and appreciation for individual needs and foibles, with a tolerance of variation from the norm. And yet we have seen the increasing disappearance of both the small town and the small congregation. In part, that change is due to the lure of the big city as well as the lack of economic resources in a small place. In a small town, more people have to stretch to do more volunteer work to keep the town going. And so we, too, know what they know in small towns: if we are to stay alive, we have to be every vigilant about protecting our identity. We have to remain aware what that we can and can't do, not try to do it, all but to do what we do best.

What we do best in our congregation is to teach the values of community. By our actions, we demonstrate the importance of the individual to the community while also teaching its sobering obverse: that membership in a community cannot be delegated. We can hire someone to paint our house but we can't hire someone to be Jewish for us. We can drop our kids off at Sunday School but that alone will not make them Jewish. In a big congregation, a data base of members may contain twenty others who possess the skills you possess. In our small synagogue, you may be the only one who can chair the PTO, organize the Purim carnival, teach Hebrew to sixth and seventh graders, run the Religious School, or balance the books. You might not be the only one who can dust the sanctuary chandeliers or change the bulb in the Eternal Light, but you might be the only one who notices it needs to be done and takes the time to do it.

I often tease our thirteen year olds that once they become b'nai mitzvah, they are no longer allowed to say "No" to me. They laugh, but they know that what I say is akin to the truth; they're not really saying "yes" to me, they are saying "yes" to the obligation of being an adult Jew. That's what they learn when they see their parents and other adults saying "yes" to the mitzvot of membership. Being part of a small community entails both privilege and obligation; the one doesn't exist without the other.

Don't wait to be called and asked, and for the sake of heaven, don't say no. Being an adult in our small Jewish community means saying "yes" even before you are asked. In Pirke Avot, Rabbi Tarfon offers a metaphor in which God is the Employer and the individual Jew the employee: "The day is short, there is much work to be done, yet the laborers are lazy, even though the wages are great, and the Householder is insistent." And Rabbi Tarfon continues: "It is not up to you to complete the work, neither are you free to desist from beginning it."

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
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