

Rabbi Lewis' message for December 2003

We get so confused about what is sacred and where it belongs. The Ten Commandments are sacred, but do they belong in the civil courthouse? The latest court ruling says no. Then there is the court battle over the Pledge of Allegiance and the phrase that is causing such controversy: "under God." The plaintiff wants those words removed from the Pledge on the grounds that he is an atheist. The original Pledge of Allegiance had no such phrase. The words were inserted in the 1950's during the McCarthy Era. Yet to some Americans, it seems as if these words were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. We have taken something secular and tried to make it sacred.

The yearning for the sacred is part of our human psyches but it sometimes can become misguided. I am thinking now of the custom we have of reading the names of the deceased every week before Kaddish. The *yahrzeit* list is a relatively new phenomenon, introduced by the Reform movement at some point no one can determine. Prior to that, the only tradition for reading the names of the dead came from the Middle Ages and was restricted to the names of those who had been martyred, who had died *al kiddush ha-Shem*. Why do we read these names? We want to honor the memories of our loved ones on the anniversary of their deaths, surely a heartfelt task. Yet for some, that lovely tradition has become so sacred that, if the name is not read on the correct Shabbat, it is as if the world has come to an end. Nasty phone calls are traded, emails are exchanged, blame is placed, and worst of all, our Temple volunteers are maligned and even threatened for the lapse.

This is not the way it should be. First of all, there is nothing sacred about the reading of the name. What is sacred is your coming to honor that person's memory by reciting Kaddish. Whether the name is read does not reflect on you and your sacred task or on the memory of the person you are honoring. Second of all, even if reading the names were the most sacred event in the history of humankind, it would not excuse anyone's maltreating another member of our congregation. How does it honor the dead to insult the living? Our Ritual Committee works hard to make sure that things go the way they ought. Occasionally, things don't go the way we have planned. That is cause for simple correction, not condemnation.

There is nothing more sacred than the way one human being relates to another, whether inside the sanctuary or out in the world. It is easy to fix errors on a *yahrzeit* list; it is not so easy to repair breaches in human relationships. Our prayerbook says: "We do best homage to our dead when we live our lives most fully, even in the shadow of our loss." Live your lives fully; that is the most sacred task of all.

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