

Rabbi Lewis' message for January 2004

The voice on the Temple answering machine asked plaintively, "Where are you?" It sounded like an older man, although he left no name and no number. Our phone system reported a phone number, however, and so I called back. I recognized the voice when the man answered and introduced myself as the Rabbi of the Jewish Center. "Where are you?" he asked immediately. "Where are you?" I asked. "Blairstown," he said. "And who are you?" I asked. He told me his name but persisted in demanding, "Where are you?" I told him we were located near the intersection of Rtes. 31 and 57 and asked if he would like to join us for services. "No, thank you," he said: "I just wanted to know where you were."

Some people just want to know that we are here. Perhaps it makes them feel a little less alone. Maybe it is simply nostalgia. For whatever reason, our presence both surprises and reassures them: "You're located where? I didn't know there were any Jews out there!" Yes, we tell them, we are here. But how do we convert that yearning for us into joining us? We have always been a people good at translating seemingly impossible dreams into practical reality. We have a Membership Chairperson who diligently pursues new members. Before the high holy days, another Board member carefully placed ads in selected local newspapers with an eye toward increasing our visibility and encouraging others to join us. The Board itself, with agreement from the congregation, voted to offer free education for children as an incentive for membership.

But in a congregation like ours, membership should not be the province of one or two or ten people. All of you are our best advertisement for membership. Don't be shy. Keep your ears open. Invite your friends to join you for Shabbat dinner and services. Invite total strangers you meet in the supermarket. When I walked into Trader Joe's in Florham Park recently, I ran into someone who said to me, "Where do I know you from?" I looked at him and said, "I recognize you, too. You come to services on the second day of Rosh Hashanah every year." "Oh, yes," he said, "And we enjoy your services and your congregation." "Then may I ask you why you don't come join us for the rest of the year?" I said. He had his reasons, none of which had to do with us. "Just come," I said.

It's time for us to retire the title of "Best Kept Secret of Warren County." The goal is not for us to become a large congregation but to sustain the synagogue we all love. Where are we? Right where we want to be. But we could use a little help from our friends.

May your candles shine brightly this Chanukah.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
January 2004