

Rabbi Lewis' message for March 2004

One Friday morning last month, I watched in frustration as the snow and sleet once again foiled our plans to worship together. Another Torah portion not read and sermon not given, I thought. Yet even while I was busy grumbling to myself, I also experienced a moment of gratitude when I recalled that a conversation about wintry weather had been the final deciding factor for me in my becoming the rabbi of this congregation ten years ago. The discussion was with members of the Rabbinic Search Committee and it went something like this: "When the weather is bad, we cancel services. "We don't want people risking their lives to come to the Center. And even if the weather in Washington is clear but the weather by you is snowy, Rabbi, we want you to stay home and be safe."

You may think that it just makes sense to be concerned about the safety of rabbi and congregants alike, but I did not take it for granted. It spoke volumes to me about the character of this congregation. I had worked previously in congregations that took pride in never canceling services. What that meant, I discovered, was that the rabbi, cantor and organist were expected to brave blizzards that kept sane congregants home. One day as I skidded down a hill on my way to the temple, I asked myself, "Is it worth risking my life to get to the Temple? If our tradition values life above all else, what am I doing in my car today?" In that moment, I knew I needed to be in a congregation that valued life above worship. That is what I found in the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey.

That is not to say that Jewish life should stop because of snow. Even if we can't worship together, Shabbat and study still continue. I recently read a column describing strategies Joining us for Shabbat Across America will be cantorial for parental success that included this recommendation: "Don't outsource parenting. The fact that you're not a professional athlete doesn't mean you're not the best person to teach softball."

I loved the phrase, "Don't outsource parenting," and thought about the many times I have searched for an eloquent way to say, "Don't outsource being a Jew. That fact that you're not a rabbi doesn't mean you're not the best person to teach Judaism." Our busy lives force us to delegate so much these days. Coming to the Center is not the only way to live a Jewish life. You don't have to know Hebrew to pray; you don't even have to know Hebrew to sit with your child while he or she practices reading Hebrew. You don't have to be a scholar to make the your homes a source of Jewish love, learning and practice.

It doesn't take a rabbi to know when to cancel services. What's more, when the leaders of our Center cancel services, the decision is a very Jewish one. It is a decision that doesn't "outsource" Jewish decision-making; rather, it affirms the value of life both inside and outside our Temple. So on those days and nights when we are not together, say a prayer of gratitude for life and a word of appreciation for our thoughtful leadership.

Looking forward to spring,

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
March 2004