

## **Rabbi Lewis' message for April 2004**

On a recent Sunday morning, only one student showed up for class. It was one of those potentially negative situations which became a positive opportunity. We spent our time doing something we otherwise would not have been able to do — we practiced writing his name in Hebrew script. I told him this was an important Jewish skill. I told him how many times I have arrived at a wedding and found myself teaching the adult witnesses how to sign their names in Hebrew so they could sign the ketubah, the wedding contract.

That morning reminded me how important it is to learn the Basic Skills of Judaism. When my kids were young and first were learning to play basketball, they groaned when they had to repeat drills over and over again before the coaches would let them play a game. The coaches explained that the players needed to work on their fundamentals before they could go on to the next level. The religious arena also has its own set of fundamentals or Basic Skills. When we joined together for Shabbat Across America, we began with a Kabbalat Shabbat service. Before we sat down to eat together, we recited the Shabbat blessings over candles, wine and challah. We blessed the children. We recited the Birkat HaMazon, the blessing after the meal. We sang Shabbat zemirot, songs from our tradition. All of these skills are part of being competent as adult Jews.

It isn't just about competence. It is also about the sense of ease competence brings, about feeling comfortable in your own Jewish skin. If you feel comfortable with your Jewish identity, then you will know how to respond to people's questions about Judaism. Basic skills are the best form of Jewish self-defense I know. Leading a fulfilling knowledgeable Jewish life is the best form of Jewish offense I know.

As I was thinking about this column, I noticed a newspaper ad for a summer writing program at Sarah Lawrence. It read: "Writing is both a calling and a craft." The same is true of what we believe; Judaism is both a calling and a craft. The calling is a divine gift; the craft is our own contribution to the creative processes of the universe.

May the coming Season of our Freedom be one of gifts and opportunities.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis