

Rabbi Lewis' message for May 2004

I love the kind of service we had last Shabbat evening. It was quiet and reflective, followed by an oneg Shabbat at which people lingered and visited. One of our youngest members asked me some difficult theological questions (“Does God answer prayers? Because if two teams are playing a game and both sides are praying to win, how does God decide?”), followed by the question, “Did you always know you wanted to be a rabbi from the time you were a little girl?” I told her that it hadn’t occurred to me to become a rabbi until I was in college, that when I was a little girl, women couldn’t become rabbis. She looked positively mystified. You have no idea how happy her surprised reaction made me (and how it made me even happier when she reported that she just might become a rabbi herself one day).

Our conversation made me stop and think about how much our Jewish world has changed since I was a little girl. No women sat on the Board of synagogues, no women sat on the bimah unless it was to present the bar mitzvah gift from the Sisterhood, no women were called to the Torah, and no women went to rabbinical school or cantorial school (and no women earned PhDs and taught at rabbinical school). Just look at us now. And beyond the gender issues, look at how the entire Reform movement has continued to evolve. The Reform prayerbook has changed a number of times since my childhood and is soon to change again, all in an effort to facilitate the kind of worship which stays true to the past while meeting the needs of the present. We will be exploring that prayerbook in our adult education sessions in the Fall.

Nothing important ever stays the same, least of all Judaism. We have always been a “reforming” religion, not a “reformed” religion since that would imply a process that is over. We are continually re-forming ourselves in our attempt to understand and do what God wants of us.

That conversation Friday night reminded me that change is an imperative in our tradition, not a choice. If that daughter of our congregation becomes a rabbi, she will be serving a Jewish community who will not look like us any more than our community looks like the one created by our founders over 60 years ago. As the needs change, so does Judaism wrestle with those needs. Staying the same is not an option; it is the equivalent to going backwards. We are a people who look backwards only for inspiration that will help move us carefully and thoughtfully into the future.

As the season changes and the buds flower, consider the changes that surround us each day and say a blessing for a world that does not stay the same.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
May 2004