

Rabbi Lewis' message for January 2005

Last Sunday, one of the children in my class asked, “Why do we have Sunday School on Chanukah?” The other students jumped in and said, “Because Chanukah isn’t a major Jewish holiday.” There seemed to be some confusion about what holidays were major and what holidays were minor, so we talked about it. After further discussion, the class decided that Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, Sukkot and Shavuot (for those that knew Shavuot) were major; they also agreed that Chanukah, Tu Bishvat and Purim were minor. “Which major holiday did you forget to mention?” I asked. Someone finally realized we had forgotten about Shabbat, the most major Jewish holiday of all.

Too often, we forget about Shabbat. And yet we are told, “More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel.” For generations, Shabbat has shaped how we live and how we view the world. We Reform Jews may not observe Shabbat according to the specifics of Jewish law, but that does not mean that we do not take Shabbat seriously. We believe in the sanctity of Shabbat at home, in the lighting of candles, the recitation of blessings, the blessing of the children, and the sharing of a Shabbat meal. We believe in Shabbat evening and morning worship and study, and in making Shabbat special, a day unlike other days. How do we teach our students to take Shabbat seriously? The simple answer is for us to take Shabbat seriously ourselves, both at home and in the synagogue.

In 1979, when I served a student pulpit during rabbinical school, I was invited to Shabbat dinner at the home of recent Russian immigrants. They had set a beautiful table, complete with candles, challah and wine. They asked if I would lead them in the blessings and I demurred, as I usually did with congregants, telling them I preferred to listen to them lead the words of prayer in their customary way. There was a brief embarrassed silence before they told me they didn’t know the words. They had never seen anyone observe Shabbat in Russia because they had been forbidden to study and practice Judaism. They were so proud to have a rabbi as a guest in their home that they had carefully researched how to set the Shabbat table, but they didn’t know the blessings. I remember being so choked up that I could barely lead the blessings myself.

My mother tells a story of when she and my father attended a Shabbat service as newlyweds. The rabbi gave a sermon asking people to consider about what they did in their homes that made their home Jewish. My mother, who had been raised in a very assimilated German-Jewish home, says she realized then that she needed to introduce Shabbat rituals into our home. She first had to learn how to do them herself; then she began to light candles and eventually they progressed to making kiddush and blessing

challah.

Shabbat is not just the most important Jewish holiday; it is also a gift the Jewish people gave to the world. Give yourselves that gift. Shabbat observance can begin with one small step. In these dark days of winter, let Shabbat bring light into your home.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
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