

Rabbi Lewis' message for March 2005

One day in December on my weekly train-ride into New York, the man who sat down next to me volunteered a story about his mother. “My mother was a woman of faith,” he said; “People would rent from her and leave owing her money. I would say, Mama, you didn’t get paid. And she would say, I give what I can give; the payback belongs to God.” I was so moved by the story that I wrote it down. I wanted to remember it.

The story came back to me when I read last week’s Torah portion, Terumah. The parasha tells us that when the Mishkan – the desert sanctuary – was first built, the people just could not stop giving. They had to be told to stop. Did they give out of love for God? Were they grateful for their salvation from Egypt and the gift of Torah? Or was their experience a result of the excitement of creating their own Mishkan, something which had been denied them as slaves in Egypt?

Anyone who has ever been a part of building a synagogue will tell you how exciting it is. The problem arises when the excitement fades and the desire to give fades with it. It’s like the excitement of falling in love. How do you sustain the relationship once the excitement is gone?

Those generous souls who founded our Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey gave us the gift of a paid-off building. We have never had a mortgage. Unlike most congregations, we have enjoyed the benefits of having a building supported only by comparatively low annual dues. But now our building needs attention. We all know that it is imperative to make our building handicapped-accessible. This time, our savings and our dues will not sustain us. Like our ancestors in the Sinai desert, we will have to dig deep. Like their gifts, each contribution you make will be practically and religiously significant.

I am thrilled that our Center is choosing to honor the 25th anniversary of my ordination by raising money to make our building handicapped accessible. Nothing would please me more than to open our doors to everyone who wants to enter. I thank you in advance for this great honor and look forward to celebrating with you, my spiritual family.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
March 2005