

Rabbi Lewis' message for November 2005

By the time this newsletter arrives in your mailbox, all of the Fall holidays will be over. We will have atoned and repented, asked forgiveness and offered it. We will have looked through the roof of the sukkah, rejoiced and waved the lulav and etrog. We will have finished reading the Torah and begun again. And together we will heave a collective sigh of relief at the arrival of the month of Heshvan, a month whose only Jewish holiday is Shabbat. But if the holidays are to have the kind of meaning they are designed to have, you have to ask yourself in their aftermath, what in your life has truly changed? The Jewish definition of repentance is not just acknowledging where you erred and feeling sorry; repentance is not complete until you find yourself in the same situation as before with the same opportunity to err but you choose to do things differently this time. You are required to ask yourself: Am I repeating the same behavior because I choose to or am I repeating it because it is a habit? An article from the Jewish Forward recently reported a telling story:

A woman who had recently returned to her Jewish roots, a baalat teshuvah, once was invited to an orthodox family's home for Sabbath dinner. When the time came for the ritual washing of hands before the meal, she asked the women present for a ring. Perplexed, the women asked why. The neophyte explained, "I don't have one with me and I can't do the washing unless I have one in my mouth." In the little experience the girl had had with ritual hand-washing she had seen women remove their rings and hold them in their mouths. One's hands are supposed to be bare when washed. The girl had mistaken a gesture incidental to the ritual for the ritual itself. The women who were seen putting rings in their mouths were simply trying to keep them from getting lost.

We all have had similar experiences; we repeat something we have learned without investigating why. In this case, the habit is a benign one; washing her hands with a ring in her mouth does not hurt this young woman or anyone else. But many of our repetitions are less innocent and more damaging to us and loved ones. Even after the high holidays are over, that is the important message that remains with us until the next new year: When you have the chance, will you do things differently?

May this new year be one of change and growth for us all.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis
November 2005