

## **Rabbi Lewis' message for Summer 2006**

Last night, I sat in the audience and listened to the stories of four remarkable women. All were in their mid-forties or younger. Each had experienced a life-altering event: one had risked her life to donate half her liver to her dying sister; one had survived leaving Cuba as a young child, then had survived both World Trade Center attacks; one, a former runner, almost lost her life and her leg in a car accident; and one who has had ten surgeries for breast cancer continues to experience recurrences. They told their stories and then told us what they had learned. To a one, they said: I have learned how to be in the moment. And to a one, they also said: Our faith in humanity was restored due to the acts of kindness we experienced as we healed.

They described neighbors who cooked, who shopped, who ran errands, who helped with children, who left fresh flowers. There were neighbors they didn't even know who helped; there were other neighbors they had known who stayed away. Each of these women nodded forgivingly when they spoke of the ones who stayed away or said foolish things. One woman said, "If you speak from the heart, even saying a dumb thing isn't dumb." There was no trace of resentment or bitterness in them. They meditate, volunteer as an EMT, do yoga and laugh every day. They are more accepting human beings now than before.

We know that tragedy can elicit the very best from the human community, at least initially. In some paradoxical way, it is harder to function as a healthy human community when life is going along normally. That is what made last Sunday morning in our community so impressive. It was normal. First, there were the nine confirmands whom we have taught all these years and who now have become our teachers. They told us how different they all are. Those of us who taught them can vouch for that. In the past, they argued and laughed and tattled and interrupted each other when they talked. And yet it is this very shared history that has led them to know that their class wouldn't be complete without them all. They are like the ten commandments, they told us, each different but each necessary to the community.

Every grade participated in that service, from the youngest to the oldest. Our teachers had the joy of listening to their students lead us in prayer and of watching their former students (and in two cases, their own children) become confirmed. Our children's choir sang Hodu L'Adonai as Chelsea and Helene Friedlander, after five devoted years of teaching music, turned the musical reins over to Grace Weiner and Sam Kunzman. Lisa Bauch represented the parents in thanking the teachers; the teachers, in turn, can't do it without the parents. Then we all made kiddush together.

When the Jewish people stood at Sinai those many years ago, they weren't a perfect community. They bickered and whined and tattled. They didn't always understand each other. And yet they were able to stand as one, to hear the divine word and to say, "Naaseh v'nishma – despite our human limitations, or perhaps because of them, we will accept our obligations as a community." We, too, stood at Sinai; and over and over again, we say: "We, too, will hear and do God's word."

Rabbi Ellen Lewis  
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