

Rabbi Lewis' message for January 2006

One of the students in my Sunday morning 6th and 7th grade class recently asked the following question: "Where does theology come from?" I remembered an answer given by one of my teachers years ago: "Theology begins when someone asks you what you believe and you have to explain it." Until then, your belief is just your belief; only when you have to articulate it to someone else does it become theology.

"Much have I learned from my teachers, but even more from my students." My students ask me questions like that every week. Questions like that remind me of why I teach. Questions like that force me to step back and think about why I do what I do. And if I needed yet another reminder, teaching the Taste of Judaism class also made me take a step back; the experience forced me to explain to adult learners the concepts I take for granted. Eight members of the community came into our Temple, ate a delicious lunch provided by Sharon Herson ("How can you call it a Taste of Judaism and not have food?") and Judy May, and studied alongside of some of our own members. The structure of the course was simple. Each session was devoted to one major Jewish concept. Session one focused on God; section two on Ethics; and section three on Community.

The goal of the Reform movement-sponsored class is outreach to the community. The idea was to advertise in the local papers, invite people in and let them know how welcome they would be in our congregation. Some of them were born Jews who had spent many years living outside the Jewish community and wanted to find a way back in. A few were the children of intermarriage who wanted to learn more about their Jewish heritage. One or two had been raised in other religions but, for whatever reason, felt drawn to Judaism. One person just wanted to learn more about her Jewish neighbors. One person came and cried because she felt that she had been searching and finally had found her home.

I don't know if you can imagine how moving it was for me to teach this class. I wish you all could share the excitement of people discovering Judaism for the first time. I can't tell you how privileged I felt. I don't know where these individuals will end up, but I know that they have begun a process which won't end with the end of the class. I hope that those who are comfortable will join us in worship and study as a part of our community. We Jews don't believe in exclusive salvation and so have no theological incentive to force people to join us, but that shouldn't prevent us from reaching out with open arms and welcoming those who choose to walk through the door.

May the upcoming secular new year offer you all continued opportunity for study and community and may the lights of Chanukah dance in your hearts through this dark winter.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis
January 2006