

Rabbi Lewis' message for April 2006

I have taught 6th and 7th grade for so many years that I can at times predict their responses. When I say, "Go home and look it up in the Bible," they inevitably say, "We don't have a Bible at home." I have learned that they're not just trying to get out of doing the assignment; they truly don't know that they have a Bible at home.

You can find a Bible in most if not all homes in our congregation. But what does it say that our kids don't know that fact? If the Bible is gathering dust on the shelf or, worse, if it still has a ribbon around it or gift-wrapping on it, then that Bible is an artifact and not a living book. That doesn't mean it has no value, but often the value is sentimental ("I got that at my bar mitzvah," or "That belonged to my grandfather"). The kids don't experience that Bible as a living witness to our history or as a source for study or storytelling.

One of my professors in rabbinical school, the late Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus, used to say that American Jews were the most literate educated Jews in the world. His evidence? That every Jewish home had at least one Jewish book on the bookshelf, usually a history book, and that the family members had actually read the book. He contrasted this experience with earlier generations of Jews in which the elite were educated but the average Jew was not.

The world knows us as the People of the Book. It is a title we have carried with honor. Is it a title we still deserve? Step back and take a look at your home libraries. Are there books of Jewish interest? And, more importantly, are these books you read, consult, discuss and enjoy? What books should a good Jewish library contain, anyway (what a good topic for a future Adult Education program!)? Despite the competition of the internet, Jewish publishing has flourished.

So pick up a good Jewish book. See what you can learn. And talk about it. You never know, it just might be catching.

May the Haggadah you hold in your hands this Pesach be stained with red wine and filled with the love of the ages.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis
April 2006