

Rabbi Lewis' message for May 2006

There are months where what I want to write for this message is so clear to me and there are other times when I wait for the Muse but she tarries. More often, I find it is hard to select a topic from all the relevant options. Should I write about the parochial or the universal? Within our congregation, there are priorities to set and goals to reach. Within the slightly larger Jewish world, there is plenty to concern us, from how to increase Shabbat observance to promoting Jewish study to making interfaith families feel a part of the community. Within our country, there are ongoing concerns about the economy, the war in Iraq, rising fuel costs, health care for all and immigration. Then there is the universal world we share with all other human beings, where we wonder how to raise awareness about Darfur, AIDS, global warming, the Middle East and world poverty.

This conflict is broader than my selfish question of what to write for this column. This is the daily tension with which we Jews must wrestle. The Book of Leviticus, which we are reading in our Torah cycle, reflects that the conflict is an ancient one. Lofty commandments about loving our neighbor sit alongside of particular commandments regarding ritual observance. How do we know what is most important? The answer is that it is all important and it is all related.

I found myself thinking about this conflict as I was grumbling about returning my kitchen to its pre-Passover state. The Passover dishes (both sets, milk and meat) needed to go back to the basement, the regular dishes (both sets, milk and meat) had to be returned to their usual places. Someone asked me why I kept kosher; do Reform Jews have to keep kosher? Well, no Jews “have” to do anything; what we do is always our choice, whether we are Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Conservative, Orthodox or other. So I began to reflect on my personal experience with kashrut. I did not grow up in a kosher home but the idea always intrigued me. When I first lived in Israel, it was hard to find non-kosher products and I decided it was a perfect time to try keeping kosher myself. I have never stopped although my feelings about keeping kosher have changed over time. Initially, I liked the idea that all Jews could eat in my home. I still do, but what I focus on more now is the thoughtfulness and intention that kashrut requires. Each time you eat, you think about what you are eating even before you recite a blessing. The blessing requires you to consider the source of life and food. That blessing connects a particular action to a universal God. The personal is particular and universal at the same time.

Ritual observance reminds us that being a Jew is about action even more than belief. How we live reflects our truest values. Kashrut is only one concrete example. There are so many other ways in which we choose live our Judaism at home, in the congregation and in this great world. I would be interested in knowing: Which ways have you chosen to live Judaism in your daily lives? Tell me, call me or email me. I would love to hear your stories.

And may the matza crumbs of Pesach remind us all of the blessings of the freedom that is ours.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis
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