

## Rabbi Lewis' message for November 2006

Rabbi Jack Stern, the rabbi who was the rabbi of my childhood, has written a book. Actually, modest person that he is, he didn't write the book himself. Those who have worked with him, loved him and learned from him; they approached him and asked if they could publish a collection of the sermons he delivered over the past three decades. He was hesitant initially for a couple of reasons. One was that he considered himself a better communicator via the oral word than the written. The other is, in his own words:

“When a book is printed, the words are permanently stamped in black letters on white paper – a suggestion of validity for the future. For me, however, each sermon belongs to the time and circumstances immediately at hand, to be explored under the lens of what our Jewish faith and tradition are ready to teach us, what the existentialists call ‘the living moment.’ As such, it makes no claims to future validity, but if, by chance, a sermon offers some insight that extends to some future ‘living moment,’ so much the better.”

The book is entitled *The Right Not to Remain Silent: Living Morally in a Complex World*, a title that aptly describes Rabbi Jack Stern and his rabbinate. I was enjoying flipping through the sermons when I stumbled upon a statement that brought me up short. He was speaking to the CCAR, to a congregation of rabbis, at his installation as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1985. Among the people he acknowledged, he included his teacher Ceil Singer: “I want you to know she was a part of my journey,” he wrote, “Not only mine, but a lot of rabbis in this room tonight learned from her that Talmud torah k'neged kulam [the teaching and study of Torah is the highest principle] and that you were teaching not only a Jewish subject but a Jewish child.” This statement leapt off the page because I realized in that moment that it was a principle I had learned from Rabbi Stern without my knowing that I had learned it from him. In the reliving of that living moment, I was once again face to face with this rabbi who had been my teacher when I was a small child. I remembered how he always knew my name and how he always made me feel special because he was aware, no matter the subject, that first and foremost he was teaching a human being.

That awareness is what I admire most about our teachers at our Jewish Center. They understand that their curriculum isn't found in a book; it is found in the faces and hearts of those children who sit expectantly in our classrooms. Rabbi Jack Stern's “living moment” of the past gave me a moment of appreciation for the “living moments” that take place every Sunday morning in our school. And I like to think that our teachers reflect the culture of our entire congregation, that the most important thing is to remember the humanity of each of our members, whether it is in worship or in committee meetings or in setting up a sukkah.

It has taken me thirty years to call Rabbi Stern by his first name, not because he didn't offer, but because the child in me was so overwhelmed by the love I felt when I saw him that I had a hard time remembering I was an adult. The child in me still recalls the respect I felt from him so many years ago. His teaching lives in my heart today even though the original living moment happened years ago. At this new year, while we are still assessing our lives and asking how we might live differently, I was grateful for the reminder that each of us has the potential to create “living moments” every day.

Ken yehi ratzon, May it be God's will.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis

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