

Rabbi Lewis' message for December 2006

I write on the eve of Rosh Hodesh Kislev (and on the day before Thanksgiving), the month in which Chanukah occurs. In the aisles of the malls, red and green decorations have been joined by blue and white. Retailers have figured out how to appeal to the Chanukah shopper. Although you wouldn't know it from the decorations festooning these stores, Chanukah has always been a home-based holiday. The lighting of the chanukiyah, the eating of latkes, the spinning of the dreidel – all those were and are home rituals, although they have entered the public arena in recent years.

While I know this is a battle I cannot win, I still vote for keeping Chanukah a home holiday. The identity that is formed at home is the one we take into the world; it is what shapes and sustains us. The rabbinic sages envisioned the Jewish home as a miniature sanctuary within which all relationships are sanctified. We live within our homes as if we are all priests, our tables are all holy like the ancient altar, and the prayer of our heart replaces ancient sacrificial offerings; our home reminds us that each of us is created in the image of the Divine and therefore is deserving of respect. We then bring those values into the world when we leave our homes.

That is the concept of the Jewish home; but in a country whose primary religion is secularism, how do we live out those values? Chanukah offers us the perfect opportunity. It is not just a holiday of candles, jelly donuts and gelt; it is and has always been most fundamentally a holiday about assimilation. The struggle between Antiochus and the Maccabees only acted as a cover for another more difficult internal struggle, the one between the Jews who wanted to become more secularized and the Jews who wanted to retain their religious identity. That struggle continues to be reenacted in our homes at this time of year. The conflict referred to as the December Dilemma challenges our values and our identity. We are tempted to cave in to secularism and consumerism.

We become indulgent in ways that conflict with core Jewish values. We allow ourselves to be convinced that a Christmas tree is just a secular symbol and therefore can find a place in a Jewish home. We spend excessively so as not to feel (or let our children feel) a sense of deprivation from all the gift giving around us.

What does belong in a Jewish home? Shabbat observance, not Christmas trees. Deeds of loving-kindness, not excessive gift giving. Study and prayer, not consumerism. Dedication to religious values, not impulsivity. The synagogue can partner with the home in reinforcing these values but cannot replace or supplant it. As Jews, we have always considered it our mission to bring light where there is darkness and clarity where there is confusion. It is the values we live that will endure, not the ones to which we give lip service. In a time which is as unclear and confused as any within

recent memory, we have a gift to offer ourselves and the world. That gift is to live our Jewish values both at home and in public, not because we have been frightened by a troubled world, but because our worldly conflicts have reminded us of what we already know: that these values by which we strive to live are the enduring ones that make life meaningful.

May this Chanukah truly be a Festival of Rededication for us all. May its eight nights bring light into your souls, your homes and into our world.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis