

Rabbi Lewis' message for Summer 2007

I heard some disquieting information the other day. Dr. Steven M. Cohen, who is Professor of Jewish Social Policy at [Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion](#) in New York, spoke to an assembly of rabbis at the [MetroWest Jewish Federation](#) in Whippany. Dr. Cohen is a sociologist who focuses on American Jewry. Of late, he has focused on Jewish identity and Jewish continuity as it relates to Jewish education. What the studies have found is what disturbed me.

It turns out that, while different kinds of Jewish educational experiences can help form strong Jewish identities and build Jewish continuity, the one kind of educational experience which actually has a negative impact is the one-day-a-week Religious School. I don't recall how the statistics measure continuity and identity, although I do know that intermarriage is one of the parameters. Since we operate a one-day-a-week school, I paid particular attention to Dr. Cohen's theory about this phenomenon. He offered the possibility that there is a community reinforcement of minimal observance. Whatever the reasons, the statistics stand.

We have a terrific group of teachers, kids and parents who are enormously dedicated to our school. I would like to think that we are the exception to the rule quoted by Dr. Cohen, but I don't think that should be an excuse for our avoiding the hard questions. We do meet only one day a week. Yes, we tell the children they are expected to come to services as an additional part of their education, but we can't require that of them. Are our kids very well prepared for their b'nai mitzvah? Yes, they are. Do almost all of them continue on to Confirmation? Yes, they do. But what we don't know is how those experiences shape the Jewish future.

Our obligation is not just to educate our children for the moment but to educate them to be leaders of the Jewish future. Are we giving them the idea that being a Reform Jew is being minimally Jewish? Do they take seriously the idea that marrying within Judaism, while not guaranteeing a Jewish household, does offer a better chance of creating a Jewish family? Do they think going to Religious School fulfills their Jewish obligation so that they don't have to observe Jewishly at home? How many of them live in homes, interfaith or same faith, that take Shabbat observance seriously? Dr. Cohen's words reminded me that there are serious conversations we have yet to have.

I often find myself telling the sixth and seventh graders that we can't teach them everything there is to know about Judaism, that in fact, we can only scratch the surface. And so I tell them that when they go to college, they should take courses in Jewish History and in the Hebrew language. I tell them I expect them all to go to Israel. That way the choices they make as Jewish adults will be educated choices and the observances they choose will be meaningful and serious. In the meantime,

however, we as individuals and as a community need to take our Jewish life seriously in the present.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis