

Rabbi Lewis' message for February 2007

What would you do? You couldn't help but ask yourself that question when you heard about the man who jumped onto the New York City subway tracks to rescue someone who had fallen. His action was heroic and unselfish. He risked his life for a stranger. We wondered: Did he think about it first? Was it reflexive? Did it result from his military training? Is he more morally evolved than the rest of us?

We have always wondered about what motivates altruistic people. Studies have been done on people who rescued Jews in Nazi Europe. Samuel and Pearl Oliner wrote a book almost twenty years ago that disproved what was then the current thinking about "the fully developed moral decision-maker." At the time, the belief was that the "the fully developed moral decision-maker is the unencumbered self who transcends communal conventions in order to determine the values and principles by which he will act" (Theodor Adorno and Lawrence Kohlberg, summarized by Richard Neuhaus, National Review). The Oliners interviewed seven hundred rescuers in depth. They wanted to find out what distinguished the rescuers from the non-rescuers.

Despite all the previous theories about relevant factors, the Oliners came to one essential conclusion: "What most distinguished the rescuers is that they lived in embedded relationships." The family represented the most important embedded relationship; those families had a deep religious commitment to the welfare of others. Those families lived in communities of similar values who taught the moral thing to do. A Dutch rescuer named Kirk is quoted as saying, "It's not because I have an altruistic personality, it's because I am an obedient Christian. The Lord wanted us to rescue those people and we did it."

"Virtuous behavior is learned in communities of virtue," writes Neuhaus. It seems so simple. Yet that might be the most important goal of our community at the Jewish Center. Anyone who attended the January planning meeting saw a community of virtue in action. Making a sustained commitment to our Temple can only be good for everyone.

I don't imagine too many of you will be confronted by having to choose whether to jump onto the subway tracks. I pray that none of you will find yourselves in the position of the rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe. But if you find yourself in any situation where help is needed, I hope you remember the value of community for which the JCNWJ stands and has stood for sixty years.

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