

Rabbi Lewis' message for March 2007

I find myself continuing to think about the meaning of the Center's 60th anniversary. I invite you to think along with me. Each holiday seems to inspire in me another way of considering that meaning. Every Purim, for instance, we begin with a song entitled "You Can Change the World" (words and music by Cantor Jeff Klepper and Rabbi Don Rossoff). It's a cute song about a serious dilemma; i.e., whether Esther should risk her life and approach King Ahasuerus in an attempt to save her people. Esther realized she was the only hope for the Jewish people. The chorus goes like this: "You can change the world, you can make the world complete. Take the pride you feel inside and never accept defeat." In the end, we know how Esther chose.

Although the song's words are inspiring, they are also intimidating. Can you even imagine the idea of becoming a modern-day Atlas, carrying the burden of the world on your shoulders? When you think about how much change the world needs, how can you fail to feel overwhelmed before you even begin? Esther models for us the only possible way of approaching the task: think big, but start small. As Rabbi Harold Kushner writes: "No matter how much we would like to, we can't bring the Messiah and solve the world's problems. Nor can we bring the Messiah for ourselves and solve our own problems. But maybe we can bring the Messiah for someone else."

Even trying to bring the Messiah for someone else seems pretty daunting, but it offers us a way in. That is what our founders did in establishing this congregation. They acted out of self-interest, of course, but they were also thinking into the future. They thought big and started small. We are the beneficiaries of their foresight. A few of them even left significant money in their wills to perpetuate the Temple and Jewish education, and we have relied on that legacy. They were bringing the Messiah for us.

And so it is our job to bring the Messiah for the future. Esther realized she was the only hope. Our situation at this Center is not nearly as dire. Yet the question remains: if every member relies on someone else to do the job, how does the work get done? How will that ensure the Center's survival? What might you do differently if, instead of relying on someone else to do the job, you thought of yourself as the Center's only hope?

There are many commitments begging for your time. Each of you has to answer that question for yourself: what might I do differently if I see myself as the Center's only hope? I have never forgotten the words of one of our members, Don Meltz, who once told the story of his childhood congregation in Rahway. He said that because they didn't plan for the future, they had to close, and it caused him great pain. He didn't ever want to see us in the same position.

You may have heard this story from Jewish folklore about choices and consequences. I quote parts of it from a book called Sidrah Stories by Steven Rosman:

Rabbi Baki was the wisest teacher in all Lithuania. There was no question he could not answer. There was no subject about which he could not teach. Students came from far and wide to sit at his feet and listen to him teach about the early rabbis called the Tannaim and the Amoraim or about the great sage of the Middle Ages Moses Maimonides. All Rabbi Baki's students adored him. All, that is, except one. His name was Tipesch. When he had first heard of Baki's reputation, Tipesch left his village and traveled to the town where Rabbi Baki lived. He planned to enter the rabbi's class to ask him a question the rabbi could not possibly answer. Tipesch, of course, would know the answer, and thus he would become famous as a wiser person than Rabbi Baki.

Tipesch asked Rabbi Baki a number of questions, but each time, the Rabbi was able to answer them. For two days, Tipesch stayed away from class, straining to invent a question without an answer. Then, finally, he came upon a solution. With two hands hidden behind his back, he approached the rabbi. "Rabbi, I am holding a dove in my hands. Can you tell me if it is alive or dead?" Tipesch had devised a wicked scheme. If Rabbi Baki replied that the bird was dead, Tipesch would simply open his hands to show everyone a live dove. If the rabbi said the bird was alive, then Tipesch would close his hands around the dove and smother it, showing everyone a dead bird. "There is no way the rabbi could solve this puzzle," thought Tipesch.

Baki closed his eyes and stroked his long beard. Although only a few moments passed, it seemed like forever before he opened his eyes and spoke. "Tipesch, you have presented us with a very difficult puzzle indeed. In your hands, you are holding a life. Choose well what you will do with it. The answer to this puzzle lies in your hands."

Think big, start small. It is your choice whether to bring the Messiah for someone else. The answer to this puzzle lies in your hands.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis