

Rabbi Lewis' Message for April 2008

Watch out. You may be held responsible for what I say from the pulpit. If you plan to run for President someday, you had better come to every service so you know what I am saying.

Seriously, I felt empathy for my Christian colleagues when the controversy about Barack Obama's minister broke the week before Easter. The pressure was on. They were asking themselves: Should I speak about it from the pulpit on Easter? Is it appropriate to the holiday? Will the congregation be expecting to hear something? The Jewish parallel is when you have all your high holy day sermons written and then something happens in Israel - or New York. Do you do a fast rewrite? Is it germane to the themes of the holidays?

In this country, clergy have freedom of the pulpit. All we have to do is open the paper and read about what is happening with China and the Dalai Lama in order to appreciate again how lucky we are to have that freedom. We can say anything we want as long as we are willing to live with the consequences. We cannot support a particular candidate from the pulpit although we can support particular political positions, especially if we can place them in a religious framework. Rev. Wright seems to be a proponent of Liberation Theology, a particular Christian approach to religious thinking and preaching that emphasizes the connection between theology and social activism. From what I can tell, he did speak from within his religious framework, whether you disagree or agree with what he said.

As to holding candidates responsible for what their preachers say and believe - I sometimes wonder how anyone can survive running for office when we have so much information on them. We scrutinize their every move, including viewing old home movies and asking high school friends about them. What will it be like in the future when we can look back at candidates' youthful profiles on Friendster or Facebook?

I do think that all this information makes us lose sight of the positives of this political race and of the change it represents. Even ten years ago, I wouldn't have believed that we would be seeing challenges from both a serious female candidate and a serious black candidate. I wish I could say that I am impressed with the level of political discourse about and between them, but that would probably be too much to ask.

I was reminded recently of how quickly these social changes have occurred. I attended a dedication of the new [Torah: A Women's Commentary](#) at Temple Emanu-el in New York. This commentary was underwritten by the [Women of Reform Judaism](#) (formerly the National Association of Temple Sisterhoods) at the urging of a female cantor. The book itself is scholarly and unique in many ways. I knew all this

going into the ceremony. What struck me, however, was the visual. I looked up at the stage at the three professors who were to speak. They had all contributed to the volume either by editing or by writing commentary. They all teach serious subjects (Talmud, Midrash, Modern Hebrew Literature) at Hebrew Union College. And they were all women.

It isn't that long since I attended [Hebrew Union College](#) in a time when there was not one woman on the faculty. When we (the women at the time) asked why, we were told that there were no qualified women for the job. We were told that some day, when a woman first was ordained and then went on to get a Ph.D., that woman would be hired. That seemed as if it would take forever, but that night, I felt that forever had arrived. If no one had uttered a word that night, the experience of looking at them on the stage would have been sufficiently profound.

So in the midst of all the *narishkeit* (foolishness) of political campaigns, it is good to take a moment and be grateful that we live in such a time. We have not been freed from all the constraints of the past, but some of the shackles have been removed. Going into Pesach, we can be doubly appreciative of the power of liberation both socially and personally.

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