

Rabbi Lewis' Message for September, 2008

I had thought I would wait and write this message when I returned from China but I was seized with a desire to write as I waited at Newark Airport for my flight to Shanghai via Tokyo. I left Newark Airport on July 31st and I think it is now August 1st here in Tokyo. I realize that I am looking forward to being a visible minority among Asians. It isn't that I haven't experienced being part of a minority group. I know what it is to be the only Jew. In the grammar school I attended in Westfield in the late 50's and early 60's, my sisters and I were the only Jewish students. I know what it is to be the only woman. I was once the only female among 40 other students in a chemistry lab in college (my name was the only one the teaching assistant could remember). And certainly I experienced being a minority as a female student attending rabbinical school in the mid-1970's. So I know what it is to be in a minority as a woman and as a Jew, but I have never experienced being part of a racial minority. I wonder: Will this be what my friend Shelia experienced as an African-American growing up in Westfield? Will this feel different?

The New York Times reports today that some of the greatest cyclists in the world are planning to arrive early in Beijing to test the air for their colleagues who will be joining them for the Olympics. I have been warned. I am arriving armed with an inhaler, just in case, although I have balked at the idea of wearing one of those white dust-cover face masks.

People have asked if I am going to China for the Olympics. Why else would anyone go to visit Beijing in the hot smoggy summer when hotel rates have quadrupled and the streets will be filled with international tourists planning to attend the Games? I am not going to the Olympics, although I plan to be in Beijing in the week prior. I am going to China now because this is the only time of year I can take three weeks of vacation to see how my son Micah has settled into his Shanghai abode.

I travel with mezuzah in hand since I doubt that he thought to pack one in his move from San Francisco. He has laughed at my elaborate preparations for this journey. "Mom," he says, "You know they have shoes in Shanghai. And clothes. And food. And flush toilets." I do know, of course, and yet because China is so much farther east than I have ever traveled, I feel much more like Marco Polo than I have in previous forays out of the country.

The initial flight to Tokyo's Narita airport was a surprisingly short 12 hours and 17 minutes because the flight plan took us the short way up over the Arctic Circle. I am spending this five-hour layover at an Internet cafe in the Tokyo airport during what I calculate to be my usual sleeping hours. Then I take the final leg to Shanghai. Since I

made the reservations using frequent flyer miles (120,000) accrued over the years of visiting my children when they lived in California, my return trip will be a horrifying Shanghai to Tokyo, Tokyo to Detroit, and finally Detroit to Newark. But for now, I am just at the beginning.

By the time you read this, I will have returned to New Jersey and readjusted to normal life. We will be at yet another beginning, this one of our school year and our (blessedly "late" this year) High Holy Days. This will be the fifteenth year I have welcomed the new year with you, my friends at the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey. For the first time, I will have been with you more years than my two previous positions combined. It hardly seems like it has been that long. I can't think of a place I'd rather be to welcome this new year, or people with whom I would rather spend this time. May it be filled with blessing and may we all go from strength to strength.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis