

Rabbi Lewis' Message for January, 2009

"Will you be celebrating anyone's birthday over the weekend?" the [Camp Harlam](#) staffer asked in advance of our annual [Confirmation Retreat](#). They wanted to know if the kitchen should bake us a cake. "No, it won't be anyone's birthday," I said, "but yes, please bake us a cake. "What would you like us to write on it?" she asked. "Write: Happy 15th Anniversary," I said.

This was our fifteenth Confirmation Retreat at Camp Harlam. Fifteen isn't an especially Jewish number. It isn't like 7 (as in: 7 days of creation) or 18 (as in: the Hebrew spelling of Chai for life). But it feels like a significant number to me this year. Most of the kids who went on this year's retreat weren't even born yet when we held that first Confirmation retreat fifteen years ago.

When I first came to the Jewish Center in 1994, children finished their Jewish education upon becoming bar or bat mitzvah. I remember one of the first questions I was asked: "We hear there is something called Confirmation. Could we have that here?" So we sat down to think about how a



Confirmation program might work in Washington, NJ. In the Reform movement, Confirmation usually occurs at the end of tenth grade. When I was confirmed in Westfield in 1968, I was one of over 60 tenth graders. We at the Jewish Center clearly didn't have those numbers of students in our tenth grade. So we decided that any Confirmation program we offered would include grades 8, 9 and 10. Any other decisions would require input from the kids themselves.

We scheduled one meeting. Two weeks prior to the meeting, my phone began to ring. It was parents asking for advice about how to convince their kids they should go to the first meeting. I remember walking into the room and being greeted by fifteen suspicious pairs of eyes. One student asked what time it was every five minutes until I finally just made her the official Timekeeper of the class. We talked about what they didn't want - they didn't want it to be just like Sunday School again. Then we talked

about what kind of program they might like, how often they would want to meet and when they could meet. We settled on monthly meetings held on Sunday evenings for ninety minutes.

The idea of a weekend retreat was not greeted with enthusiasm. Some had never been away for a weekend before. It was one thing to commit to meeting once a month at the Center; it was entirely different to commit to a weekend away at a place you'd never been with kids you'd barely known. They expressed their reservations. They had homework. They had marching band. They had basketball practice. They didn't want to miss the school dance. Each class member waited to see what the others would do. Okay, maybe they would go, but only if we returned early on Sunday so they could study on Sunday afternoon. The Men's Club would make us breakfast at the Center. Again my phone rang for weeks prior to that retreat. I didn't heave a sigh of relief until the bus showed up and the class clambered on.

Fifteen years later, the retreat has become a tradition. We start planning it in September. We plan everything from what snack food to bring up to what movies to watch to what games to play. The intervening years have brought changes. Fifteen years ago, I remember asking if they would put away their Walkman so they could be present to each other. In the years since, the Walkman has been supplanted by newer and better distractions, including handheld video games, CD players, computers, cell phones and texting. What hasn't changed? Someone always forgets to bring a sleeping bag (that's why I bring two). The kids always want to stay up later than I want to. We always play *Scruples* and *What Nobody Knows About You*. We always have pizza on Saturday night. We've accumulated tons of stories over the years, like the year the Havdalah candle set off the smoke alarm or the year we sledded down the hill on camp mattresses (and got in trouble).

What do we do up there? Not much. Shabbat, after all, is about being, not doing. We just enjoy being together. We do a little praying, a little studying, some meditating, plenty of eating and a lot of talking. I feel privileged to share this with them. We have a policy that once you are confirmed, you are always eligible to come on the retreat if you want. Every year, some juniors and seniors join us. Once you are out of high school, you are eligible to be an official chaperone on the retreat. Every year, we come back tired but contented. There is no substitute for that time together. It isn't just watching kids hanging out; it is witnessing a community's forming.

I just can't believe we have been doing this for fifteen years. Happy Anniversary to us. And Happy Hanukah and Happy Secular New Year to you all.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis

