

Rabbi Lewis' Message for February, 2009

I have never liked the term Judeo-Christian. While we have much in common, we Jews and Christians, we are not the same and do not share the same belief system. It has always seemed to me that the term obscured significant differences. "Judeo-Christian" reminds me of the outmoded "Melting Pot" philosophy that once advocated that our varied ethnic groups would melt into being one America. I have always much preferred the Rev. Jesse Jackson's idea that we Americans are more like a "fruit salad," a group of different kinds of fruit that all retain their own flavor but together create a delicious harmony. That is why these are my favorite words from President Obama's inauguration address:

"For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth."

President Obama accorded each religious (and non-religious) group its own place, appreciating that together we create a whole that is greater than its parts. These religious groups do not have to melt together nor do they have to be in conflict; they all share the goal of a strong free America in which they can practice (or not) as they choose.

If we can make this patchwork heritage work, we have something to teach the world: People who are different from each other can live and work productively together. Perhaps then we won't have to feel so discouraged when we look at the seemingly intractable issues that plague Israel and Gaza, two peoples who share a common heritage and geography yet seem hopelessly far apart. Instead, we will be able to offer them alternative ways of preserving their respective nations while respecting each other.

If all goes according to plan, I will be in Israel this month and will see with my own eyes what we only get to read about in the newspapers. Every seven years, the [Central Conference of American Rabbis](#) meets in Jerusalem. This year, the [Women's Rabbinic Network](#) (a subset of the CCAR) is also holding its convention in Jerusalem immediately after the CCAR.

We do not conduct business as usual when we are in Israel, other than installing a new president (my colleague Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus, sister of my dear friend and classmate Rabbi Michael Weinberg). We spend our time meeting with Israelis and learning what Israel has to teach us, from politics to language to religion to history to geography. I plan to spend a day with colleagues in Sderot, the city that has been the recipient of

Gaza's missiles for the past eight years. And I plan to bring my experiences back to the congregation (including the Israeli chewing gum I promised the 6th and 7th graders).

It is hard to remember the light in the darkness of winter. It is hard to imagine peace in a time of war. At the same time, our Torah reading cycle this month relates the story of the exodus from Egypt, a difficult time of hopelessness that ended in sweet redemption. *Ken yehi ratzon*. May it be so for us and the world once more.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis