

Rabbi Lewis' Message for November, 2009

I sometimes complain that one of the problems of being a congregational rabbi is that it limits my opportunity to see what other congregations do on Shabbat. Whenever I do get a chance to be elsewhere on Shabbat, I always come away with something new – a melody, an interpretation of Torah, a particular meditation, an unusual custom, or just a different way of doing something. So when I headed to Providence to spend Shabbat with my best friend Judy from college, I just knew I would come back with something new. Our friendship has spanned almost 40 years.

After we graduated, we both ended up in Cincinnati where her husband Alan and I were studying for the rabbinate. The three of us have been friends for many years; we have spent many shabbatot together but none in a long while. Once a month, while a traditional service is being conducted in the main sanctuary of this large established Conservative congregation, my friend Alan goes downstairs and conducts an informal service called Soulful Shabbat. This is how the synagogue describes it:

"Shabbat comes each week to remind us that meaning in our lives lies not in what we accomplish but in being part of the universe. But how can we do this spiritual work? Soulful Shabbat is a Saturday morning worship experience that creates a space for pause and reflection by simplifying and slowing down the traditional Shabbat service. Soulful Shabbat emphasizes silence, quiet melody, meditation, and movement, along with traditional davening and Torah study."

I was filled with anticipation when I walked into the service. We sat in a circle. Three people played drums to accompany our singing. We stretched. We breathed. We chanted. Then I looked up and saw someone enter the room. She looked so familiar, I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I leaned over to my friend Judy and said, "How do I know that woman?" Judy thought for a minute. "Well," she said, "Her name is Claudia and she did go to Brown – but that was after you were here." Then Judy grabbed my arm: "Wait," she said, "I know – you know her from Cincinnati! You were her Sunday School teacher when you were a rabbinic student and she was in 7th grade!" It was true. From 1976-77, I had taught 6th and 7th grade at [Temple Shalom in Cincinnati](#) and Claudia was in my class.

I remembered her as an unusually thoughtful and mature student. And after staring at me for a while, that former student of mine figured it out, too. And on this past Shabbat morning, as I sat in this minyan, it happened to be Claudia's turn to deliver a d'var Torah about Eve and the role of women in Judaism. When she introduced her words, she began by saying: "I was lucky enough to grow up in a Reform

congregation where I never knew women couldn't be rabbis because my teacher was going to be a woman rabbi."

So I did come back with something new, although it wasn't what I thought it would be. It wasn't a melody and it wasn't a clever Midrash. It was a gift that came from an accidental meeting. It was the reward a teacher doesn't often get to see after her students go off into the world. I was reminded that we don't often know in the moment how something we do might have an impact on someone else's life. We just have to live as though what we do matters and let the rest take care of itself.

May your new year be filled with serendipity.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis