

Rabbi Lewis' Message for April, 2010

As we sat listening to student cantors. audition at [Hebrew Union College](#) yesterday, I realized that we have achieved a new status. We at the Jewish Center have become a training ground for future cantors of the Reform movement.

We didn't start out with that as a goal. We began 6 or 7 years ago with the idea that we might enjoy having a monthly student cantor who could enhance our Shabbat and holiday worship as well as continue to build our music program in the school. We asked them to learn how we do things and to maintain our musical traditions. Since then, we have been fortunate that we have developed relationships with three different student cantors, all talented, all unique.

But as we sat and listened to students from among whom we hope to find our fourth student cantor, I thought that somehow this felt different. What began as a wish has turned into a new tradition in our congregation. We are no longer just thinking about what we want; we have also learned to ask what the students themselves want to get from this experience. We have taken on the responsibility of helping them to develop their skills – whether they be musical, educational, relational or spiritual - so they can take that experience with them as they move into their careers.

Although I am not in the business of making predictions about the future, I don't foresee that we will ever become a congregation that can afford a full-time cantor (or a full-time rabbi, for that matter). What that means is that we are not in a position to offer a cantor a multi-year commitment. Our student cantors will come and go for a year or two or three, and then they will leave us. And while that is hard on us – to fall in love with a cantor and then have to say good-bye – we gain so much from them during those couple of years. They bring excitement, new ideas, new ways of thinking, different melodies, rock bands, and inspiration. We receive their offerings with an open mind and, more importantly, with an open heart.

These auditions have brought me back to the time when I was a student in rabbinical school and was lucky to be trained by these small student pulpits. I spent two years at a bi-weekly congregation in Pittsburgh (where coincidentally our student cantor Tifani Coyot served during the two years prior to her joining us).

That congregation has grown over these past thirty years and now has its own building and a full-time rabbi. I spent the high holidays in Victoria, Texas one year (go to Houston and then drive south for a few hours on the way to Corpus Christi).

They have been in existence since the mid 1800's and describe themselves as “home to one of the oldest, continuous, small-town Jewish communities in the Southwest.”

They are quite small and are managing to function with a monthly rabbi, monthly services and a monthly religious school. And then I had a monthly pulpit in Natchez, Mississippi, once a prospering river town.

There was once a thriving Jewish community in Natchez dating back to the mid 1700's but over the years the population has dwindled and now only a few elderly members remain. Even when I was there thirty years ago, the congregation only numbered 28 people. They have formed a partnership with the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience so that, when the temple finally closes for good, it will be turned into a museum teaching the history of the Jewish community in Natchez.

I learned so much from each of those pulpits. They took pride in training their rabbinic students over the years as we can take pride in training our cantorial students. We shoulder a large responsibility in bringing in a student and we all win. We help them and they help us.

May your Pesach be a sweet one.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis