

Rabbi Lewis' Message for February, 2011

I had decided that I was done posting high holy day sermons on our website. It seemed to me that sermons are written to be heard and experienced in community, not read, and most of our members had heard it all in person. I was also concerned that I might have missed an attribution that wouldn't be a worry if the sermon were delivered orally but might appear to be plagiarism if it weren't footnoted correctly on the website. Then I was put in a position of rethinking my decision. Back in October, I received an em-ail from a stranger in Columbia, South Carolina. His request was unusual.

My wife and I are writing a book that is a compilation of sermons given 9/16/01 - the first after the 9-11 attacks. We found yours online and felt it was appropriate for our book and wanted to ask your permission to use the sermon in the compilation. We hope to have about 40-50 sermons included in the finished manuscript. Yours would be the first Jewish sermon (the other 6 we have acquired so far are from Protestant churches) and we'd like to have more diversity provided the sermons have positive uplifting messages.

I responded to his request by asking for more information about who he was and why he was doing what he was doing.

The idea for the book came a few weeks ago when I was in Washington, DC, and was visiting Ford's Theatre. In the gift shop there was a book titled something like "150 Eye Witnesses". It was of course a compilation of eye witness accounts of the Lincoln assassination. We were thinking of what sort of similar thing could be done about events more modern and of course the 9-11 attacks came to mind. Given that there were millions of eye witnesses we figured that a book like the one about Lincoln probably wouldn't be very interesting for another 100 years or so and we both recalled how we were moved by sermons we heard in Church (and some on TV) shortly after the 9-11 attacks. I was then and now impressed with what some pastors could create on such short notice that could to this day still coax tears from our eyes in many cases, even though they were written on short notice by people who were themselves likely deeply emotionally affected and hurt by the attacks that we were barely able to digest at the time. We decided that this was a project that needed to be done as if we found these sermons so moving so must others who want to be reminded of what things in life are important and the role of God in disasters and other unfortunate events that make up life.

This all made sense to me and I appreciated his being able to take a long look at history and what the future might need to make sense of the past. I reread my sermon in the hopes that I would think it was worth publishing. I then promptly forgot all

about his request until hearing from him again last week. The book is moving forward and he had a few more questions to ask.

1. Tell about how you prepared the sermon and what you hoped to accomplish as you wrote it.
2. Tell about how your congregation was influenced by the sermon and/or by the events themselves or tell about anyone who had special linkage to the events either through a victim or a responder for example.
3. Tell about your thoughts now 9 years later as you look back at the post 9-11 time period and your perspective now.

I can remember little about preparing the sermon. I remember some colleagues panicking about whether they had to rewrite what they had already written and other colleagues asking, if you are speaking about the eternal themes of the holidays, what are you so worried about? And if you aren't, why not? But I don't think I have given much thought to how I feel ten years later. I imagine I will do that prior to these coming high holy days. In my own self-reflection, I will have to consider whether I should change my mind about posting future sermons.

But I am interested now in how you think about it. What do you recall from those events of almost ten years ago? And what are your thoughts now as you reflect back? E-mail me or call, especially on one of these snowed-in days of winter. I'd like to hear.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis