

Rabbi Lewis' Message for December, 2011

Our Board meeting last month made me think about something an instructor once said during my psychoanalytical training. She said, “HELP is a four-letter word. When you find yourself wanting to help someone, be careful.” What could possibly make her include HELP among curse words? It is this: What you think will be helpful to someone might not be experienced that way on the receiving end. You have to make sure you are helping people get what they feel is helpful, not what you feel should be helpful. This is a basic therapeutic principle that has many other applications.

The conversation that sparked my thinking about “help” centered on what would “help” people bring their children to services. In the last few years, the attendance of children at services has dropped significantly. That includes Shabbat evenings and mornings and the high holy days. (It doesn’t include the Chanukah service where people bring their children in sheer self-defense against the December holiday pressures.) Since we have only one day of Religious School, we have always considered going to services as the second day of education where students not only learn the prayers but do so with their friends. This helps them feel like a part of the Center community, another of our educational goals.

We discussed all the things we usually discuss when this topic comes up: move services to an earlier time, eliminate the Torah service, eliminate the sermon, make it a requirement, offer Shabbat dinner first, make services more “fun,” assign parts in the service to kids, and other ideas I can’t remember. We have tried many of these various changes over the years but perhaps we need to try them again. Maybe we will find just the right solution.

On the other hand, I keep thinking about the idea of HELP as a four-letter word. I found myself wondering during the Board meeting: Are we trying to “help” people do something they don’t really want to do? Are we assuming that people really want to bring their kids to services? Perhaps people feel like bringing their kids to Religious School is enough of a commitment, in which case, no matter what changes we might make, they won’t be experienced as helpful. People are busy. They work hard. Their kids are in many outside activities. And while people say that they’d like to bring their kids, the reality is that their priorities don’t always match that desire. If soccer feels like it is most important, it just doesn’t matter what changes we might make on this end.

What are our goals as a congregation? We try to be realistic about our goals. We know that we are never going to produce Talmudic scholars in a school that meets only one day a week. What we can create, even in our limited time, is both comfort

and competence in worship and a feeling of being part of this Jewish community. Those are two valuable skills our kids can take with them into the world. These skills can't be taught in the classroom alone. They have to be experienced in the context of a worshipping community.

Are we trying to help people do something they don't really want help with? If that is the case, we have to consider if any effort is destined to fail. Before we start trying to solve the problem, we have to agree on what the problem is. This is a discussion that goes to the core of who we are as a congregation. We need to be sure we are discussing the real issues, not the ones we think should be real. That is the only way we can fulfill the responsibility given us by previous generations and build a Jewish future.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis