

Rabbi Lewis' Message for January, 2012

I have been thinking about how traditions come into being. When we took our first Confirmation Class retreat eighteen years ago, we didn't know we were creating a new tradition. We were just doing what seemed right at the time. Now it would seem strange for us not to be climbing onto the bus to go up to Camp Harlam in early December.

When I first left Camp on Saturday night to find pizza as a treat for the class, I didn't know that would be the first of eighteen visits to Frank's Pizza over the years. Frank and I are happy to see each other even though we only see each other once a year. There was the year he had surgery and the year he was recovering from surgery. So we ask after each other's well-being as if we were old friends.

Most traditions develop in that way, starting with a one-time event and growing into a regular practice. That is the way much of our Jewish tradition developed over the years. Chanukah now doesn't even resemble what Chanukah then looked like. Chanukah in Israel doesn't look quite like Chanukah in New Jersey. The traditions have changed but are recognizable enough in relation to the first Chanukah.

And so we still celebrate the holiday that was established over two thousand years ago. Tradition and change are words that go hand in hand in our Reform movement. We are always evaluating what traditions to keep and what to change with an eye toward retaining the core of who we are as Jews. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, once famously said that the past should have a vote but not a veto. We agree.

As a movement, we Reform Jews have much for which to be proud and much to work on. We have just observed a major transition in our leadership. At the recent [URJ Biennial in Washington, DC](#), Rabbi Eric Yoffie retired after fifteen years as the president of the Reform Movement. In his tenure, he focused on increasing Torah study, Shabbat observance and Jewish literacy, in addition to supporting social justice and adding new worship initiatives to make our congregations pray with greater joy. He doesn't delude himself by thinking that he finished the work but rather knows there needs to be more change than he was able to accomplish if our movement is to remain vibrant.

And so, in his parting words, he cautioned us that, "Each generation gets the synagogue their parents wanted." His words laid the groundwork for the words of our new president, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, who laid out three goals for the next two years: Catalyzing congregational change. engaging the next generation, and extending the

circles of our responsibility. I encourage you to go to the website urj.org where you can read or watch the thoughtful messages from both of my colleagues (as well as President Barack Obama's entertaining ruminations on how to choose what his daughter Malea is allowed to wear to the b'nai mitzvah she is attending).

If I could implement one change for us in the coming year, I would want us to become more engaged in our national movement. We are so isolated on our own little plot of land in Warren County. We could benefit in so many ways from joining with our Reform brothers and sisters across and country and around the world. We, too, can feel inspired by the excitement in our movement as we welcome Rabbi Rick Jacobs at the start of his tenure. And in two years, we could send a delegation to the next URJ Biennial and feel what it is like to be a part of something so much greater.

I write during Chanukah, where one of our blessings includes the phrases "*Bayamim Ha Hem*" (in those days) and "*Bazman Ha zeh*" (in these days). We live poised between those two phrases, those days of the past and these days of the present. May this coming secular new year be one in which we engage fully in our commitment to both tradition and change, with the goal of building a meaningful Jewish life for the present and the future.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis