

Rabbi Lewis' Message for February, 2012

When I first came to the Center 18 years ago, it was the self-appointed job of Matty Schneider to retrieve our mail from the post office. When he brought it to the temple, he never left it in the same place twice. I would find it on the banister leading downstairs, on a pew in the sanctuary, in the kitchen and only occasionally in my office.

I once asked why we didn't get mail delivered directly to the Center. I was told that there had once been a discussion of putting a mail slot in the front door but people were afraid of what else might be put in that mail slot. The Ku Klux Klan had once had a large presence in Oxford centered in the Colonial United Methodist Church. The Center experienced some early anti-Semitic incidents about which I have only heard rumors and vague memories.

It would be nice if we could say that all that danger is behind us now, but the incidents in Bergen County would prove us wrong. Over the past month, there have been four separate incidents of anti-Semitism, including the fire-bombing of the rabbi's home attached to the synagogue in Rutherford.

How frightened should we be? We should be careful but not frightened. We aren't living in Europe in the Middle Ages or Germany under Hitler. Our law enforcement agencies are on our side. They will find the perpetrators. So yes, we should be alert and keep ourselves as safe and secure as possible. But we shouldn't let fear get in the way of living openly as Jews in New Jersey.

That this comes on the heels of Martin Luther King Day reminds me of Dr. King's unflagging optimism about human goodness despite all evidence to the contrary. When he received the Nobel Peace Prize, he said: "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality."

The same scripture that inspired Dr. King inspires us. We, too, hold onto hope and refuse to be defeated by racism and war. Our people have seen both the best and the worst of humanity over the centuries. We would have reasons for pessimism about human nature. And yet our tradition commands us to search for righteousness and justice and peace, no matter the obstacles.

We can't let our fears deprive us of being open to the world. We have not just seen the Promised Land; we have been there. And anti-Semitic incidents should just strengthen our resolve to fight that much harder for a just world.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis