

Rabbi Lewis' Message for Summer, 2013

When Barbara wrote and reminded me it was time for my “last” newsletter message, it took me aback. How was this possible? For nineteen years, I have had this monthly appointment with you.

It is a strange method of communication, if you think about it. It is much more one-sided than a sermon where you are with me in the sanctuary and can react immediately. Writing a newsletter message is more like blogging. I send it off into the universe without knowing if you are reading it unless you tell me later.

In the past nineteen years, I must have written almost 200 of these messages, each one with you in mind. It has been an honor for me to have your ear in this way, as it has been an honor to be your rabbi. I am grateful for all for all these years of love and friendship. I will miss you more than I can say, but I feel better about the parting knowing that I am leaving you in wonderful hands (and by the time you receive this newsletter, you might know who my successor is).

The CCAR ([Central Conference of American Rabbis](#)) recently invited me to post a few blog messages on a new rabbinic blog and I wrote the first one as if I were writing my newsletter message to you. I include it here since I can't think of a better way to say thank you. I titled it, *“In Praise of the Rabbinic Robe.”*

My black pulpit robe has served me well in my rabbinate. It has seen me through two pregnancies and three congregations (actually six congregations if you include student bi-weeklies). It is older than my children. It has traveled many miles and was once lost for 6 weeks in the unclaimed luggage room at Newark Airport. Although it has been re-stitched countless times, the pocket lining continues to shred, allowing tissues and lozenges to make their way through the holes and become unreachably bunched up inside the bottom seam. I fear my old friend has become irreparably worn out.

When I took my first pulpit job in 1980, the new decade heralded the trend of discarding the rabbinic robe. It was too Protestant, too archaic and too removed for our more intimate time. I tentatively shared this information with the chair of the Rabbinic Search Committee in Dallas. In his memorable Texas drawl, he said, “I can handle hiring a female rabbi but I can't handle hiring a female rabbi who doesn't wear a robe.” That was the end of that discussion, and frankly, that was fine with me.

Wearing a robe meant not having to think about what to wear on the pulpit. That fact alone would have offered salvation to any woman living in Dallas at the time. During my five years there, I felt perpetually and inevitably underdressed. Dallas in the 80's was the city of the accessory. My congregants shopped at Neiman Marcus (Stanley

Marcus' mother had been a devoted member of the congregation) before the store moved outside the borders of Texas. Even the sales women were temple members, making shopping that much more of a complicated procedure.

So the robe thankfully removed me from the congregational social competition. But more than that, it allowed the congregation to see me as a rabbi, not as a woman rabbi. The robe unified the three rabbis (two older men and I) as we stood on the pulpit. Congregants could imbue us with whatever emotional and spiritual transferences their individual psyches required. Yes, they could still see my shoes (you could write a book about how people comment on the shoes worn by female rabbis and cantors) but they were too polite in that southern way to comment to me directly. One time, a distant aunt visited Dallas and came to Shabbat services. In the receiving line, she gave me a long look and observed, "Your cousin wears a robe, too, but his is white with gold trim." That was how I found out that my cousin had moved to the Himalayas and become a serious Buddhist.

The robe issue might seem insignificant given the challenges we face in our profession, but it is symbolic of other gender-related issues in the rabbinate. Those of us who were ordained in the early days of women in the rabbinate had high hopes that our charting the way would relieve our younger female colleagues from having to fight the same battles. We have become increasingly aware that, when it comes to the rabbinate, issues of gender run deeper than we had first thought. Eliminating the rabbinic robe might have resolved some very real theological issues but has also created new ones.

During these last few years of patching my black pulpit robe, I vowed that I would not buy a new one. If I got to that point, I knew I would have to revisit the choice of whether to wear a robe at all. And so my robe will retire from the pulpit along with me this June 30. It will be just a pulpit retirement for me, not a full retirement. But for my robe, it will mean the end of a long and satisfying career.

With love,
Rabbi Ellen Lewis