

**November 21, 2008**

***Shabbat Shalom!***

*One of the most important lessons I have learned from teaching children of all ages in Religious School is that individual students have differing strengths. They are diverse in their capacity to retain past knowledge, to understand the material in front of them and to absorb new information. I believe that what can also significantly affect the collective personality of any class falls into the area of behavior. A positive learning environment is the result of a classroom teacher's consistent guidance (and support from parents as well!) in helping students to "work independently," "respect authority," "accept responsibility for their actions," "practice self discipline," "listen carefully," "use time wisely," "show effort," and "get along with other students." The combined goodness, kindness and decency of the students in a can greatly impact their ability to learn and be a caring classroom community.*

*This week's Torah portion from the book of Genesis illustrates how our behavior can be the most important aspect of who we are. In Genesis Chapter 24, Abraham's servant, whom the rabbis of our tradition named Eliezer, set out to find a wife for his master's son, Isaac. As he reached the outskirts of the city Nachor where Abraham's relatives lived, Eliezer prayed to God that he might find the right woman to be Isaac's wife. He didn't ask that the woman be beautiful, nor did he say anything about her cumulative educational record. As he watched the women of Nachor drawing water just outside town, Eliezer declared what he was looking for in Isaac's spouse to be: "May it be that the young woman to whom I say, 'Please lower your water jar so I can drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also give water to your camels,' let her be the one whom You, O God, have appointed for Isaac." It was Rebekah who did exactly what Eliezer had mentioned. She turned aside from her task of the moment, gave him water to quench his thirst*

*and then, without being asked, Rebekah offered to give his camels water to drink. Eliezer didn't even have a chance to answer as Rebekah ran towards the well, filled her water jar, and returned to the well and back until all of the carrels had quenched their thirst. We get the impression from this story that Rebekah would have been a model student. She showed that she could work independently and take initiative by offering to give the camels water to drink without being asked. She respected others, including visitors from afar and even animals. She practiced self discipline because she knew it was appropriate to stop what she was doing in order to help a stranger. She used time wisely and showed effort by running, not walking, back and forth to the well to draw water. Her kindness, effort and generosity would guarantee that she could get along with others. The Torah does mention that Rebekah was "fair and good looking," but that is not what made her attractive in the eyes of Eliezer so that she could become Isaac's wife. Abraham's servant was primarily pleased that Rebekah was attractive on the inside.*

*What we know is, of course, an important part of who we are. Rebekah's actions remind us that what we do - the kindness we show to neighbors and guests - can speak volumes about our character as individuals and as a group. May her example guide us as we continue to work together to build community!*

***-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.***

***November 13, 2008***

***Shabbat Shalom!***

***American Attitudes on Immigration and Diversity, a national poll***

*of 1,000 American adults, was recently released by the Anti-Defamation League. This survey presented many hopeful findings:*

*Only 1/3 of Americans believe that racial tensions are increasing in the United States (3/4 of Americans held this opinion in 1992).*

*66% of Americans view the country's population growth due to immigration as "an advantage for America."*

*74% of Americans believe that students perform better in schools with "a racially and ethnically diverse student body."*

*When asked whether it bothered them to see "immigrants succeeding more than Americans who were born here," 65% disagreed with that statement, while 31% agreed.*

*All of these responses are indicators of the hospitality that we show in our country and the welcoming nature of our communities. In the Torah portion for this week, Abraham welcomed three strangers to the family tent (when they arrive, he doesn't know they are angels who will tell him that Sarah is going to bear a son, Isaac). With the help of Sarah and one of their servants, Abraham did not walk, but ran to take care of these travelers. Their actions set the Jewish paradigm for welcoming guests (HACHNASAT ORCHIM), turning unfamiliar wayfarers into satisfied visitors.*

*This example from the Torah can guide us as we greet newcomers (and each other) to Temple and as we recognize how people from diverse backgrounds can enrich any community. May our hands be extended and our hearts be open to both neighbors and newcomers as we tend to their needs and, through our actions, bring them – and ourselves – hope and blessing.*

***-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.***