

Stuart M. Matlins,  
American Jewish Distinguished Service Award Speech  
Graduation  
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Thank you Rabbi Ellenson.

The development of Jewish Lights, and the privilege of participating in the development of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as a member of the Board of Governors for almost 17 years, have enriched my life and helped to give it meaning.

Life-changing events sometimes present themselves in disarmingly simple ways. Or, as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains in his life-changing book *Honey from the Rock: An Easy Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Jewish Lights), someone else may have some of the pieces you need to figure out the puzzle of your life. Rabbi Kushner writes:

Everyone carries with them at least one and probably

Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.

Sometimes they know it.

Sometimes they don't.

And when you present your piece

Which is worthless to you, [but may be valuable to another,]

Whether you know it or not,

Whether they know it or not,

You are a messenger from the Most High.

It was 17 years ago that an acquaintance – Barry Katz -- walked over to me at the Morris Zimmerman Institute, an HUC-JIR New York summer study retreat at which Rabbi Kushner was one of the teachers and said: “Did you know that three of Larry’s books are out of print?” I didn’t know that Larry had written a book, and wasn’t sure why I should

P. 2 (Matlins Speech)  
care. “Why are you telling me?” I asked. He thought I was “in publishing” because I had recently brought out a new edition of a book about gems and jewelry [*Jewelry & Gems: The Buying Guide*, GemStone Press] written by my wife, Antoinette. I explained that one book does not a publisher make, laughed and moved on.

Because I found Larry to be one of the most interesting teachers I had experienced, I began to think about what might be done to bring his books back into print, to extend the reach of his inspiring voice. And in the next moment the thought came of extending the voices of my other teachers. Antoinette and I had been blessed to experience the inspiring, life changing teaching of Norman Cohen, Larry Hoffman, Sheldon Zimmerman and other great rabbis.

It was a time when the word "spirituality" did not trip so lightly off the tongue as it does now. Some even confused it with “spiritualism” and thought we might be talking with dead people. After several months of thinking and talking to other teachers, friends and spiritual seekers, Antoinette and I realized that there was a great need for someone to bring people words for the soul based on the Jewish wisdom tradition, words to help people find greater meaning in **their** lives. No publisher was focusing on meeting the

needs of people like us. So, we started Jewish Lights to bring Larry Kushner's books back into print, to help people find the missing pieces of their puzzles. It was just supposed to be a small thing. But, as the old Yiddish saying goes: "People plan and God laughs." Even some of our dearest friends questioned our sanity -- and certainly our

#### P. 3 (Matlins Speech)

business judgment.

What grew out of that life-changing simple question is a publishing house that now is approaching 250 books published, and the point where someone will purchase the two millionth copy of one of its books in English. Dozens of our books of modern and some ancient Jewish wisdom have been translated as well into Portuguese, Polish, Korean, Italian, German, Hindi and even Hebrew -- and half a dozen other languages. Books about a living, vibrant Judaism that is relevant to your life.

The response has been beyond anything we imagined when we began. Those who bemoan the fate and future of the American Jewish community would be wise to reflect on this fact -- two million books. And you don't *sell* books, people *buy* them.

While our primary focus is the Jewish world, many of our books talk to people of all faiths, all backgrounds. We hope that your life will be touched by some of them, as ours has been. There may be a piece of your life's puzzle in one of them.

But we didn't do this alone. I must express deep gratitude to Rabbis Sheldon

Zimmerman, Norman Cohen, Larry Hoffman and Larry Kushner, and to Sam Perelson,

Burton Lehman, Alan Appelbaum and Ruth Perelson, all of whom have helped nurture

this effort from the start, as have others: Rabbi Rachel Cowan and rabbis from other

movements -- Neil Gillman, Gordon Tucker and Arthur Green all of whom have been

#### P. 4 (Matlins Speech)

part of our Advisory Board from the start.

Thanks also to the many authors who have trusted us with their work -- including Rabbis

Kerry Olitzky and Jeffrey Salkin who are here today to receive honorary doctorates -- and

Rabbis Norman Cohen, David Ellenson and Nancy Weiner of HUC-JIR who also are

here today, and to my colleagues at Jewish Lights who have kept that trust with me.

And thanks too to the Woodstock [Vermont] Area Jewish Community that provided so much inspiration for our work and whose president, Bobbi Dagger, and president-elect, Jeffrey Kahn, are here with us today.

The story of the past 15 years of my life can be summed up in a few phrases from our tradition.

From Pirke Avot (2:16): “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from trying”

From Ecclesiastes (4:9): “Two are better than one; for they receive a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one can lift up his comrade: But woe to him who is alone when he falls, and has no one to lift him up.”

So, to my dear wife, Antoinette, who has inspired, encouraged and picked me up as I have stumbled in this task over and over again – two are better than one. Without you it would not have happened at all.

P. 5 (Matlins Speech)

And again from Ecclesiastes (12:12) how could we not include: “Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The conclusion of the oration sums up the whole: Fear God, and keep God’s commandments: for this is the whole of people.”

Finally, to our graduates I quote that great sage Jimmy Cagney who recently spoke to me from an old movie and said in “The Time of Our Lives”: “Sometimes I believe more in dreams than in statistics.”

Believe in *your* dreams -- and make *them* happen.

Thank you.

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