

“Titanic Difference”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

A poignant comment from historian John Lukacs in his book *A Thread of Years*: “Of the many differences between the movie *Titanic* and history, one in particular is telling. In the movie, as the ship is sinking the first-class passengers (all third-class human beings) scramble to climb into the small number of lifeboats. Only the determination of the hardy seamen — who use guns to keep the grasping men at bay — gets the women and children into the boats.

“In fact, according to survivors’ accounts, the ‘women and children first’ convention was observed with almost no dissension, particularly among the upper classes. The statistics make this plain. In first class, every child was saved, as were all but five (of 144) women, three of whom chose to die with their husbands. By contrast, 70 percent of the men perished. In second class, 80 percent of the women were saved but 90 percent of the men drowned.

“The men on the first-class list of the Titanic virtually made up the Forbes 400 of the time. John Jacob Astor, reputedly the richest man of his day, is said to have fought his way to a boat, put his wife in it and then stepped back and waved her goodbye. Benjamin Guggenheim similarly refused to take a seat, saying: “Tell my wife...I played the game out straight and to the end. No woman shall be left aboard this ship because Ben Guggenheim was a coward.” In other words, some of the most powerful men in the world adhered to an unwritten code of honor — even though it meant certain death for them. The movie makers altered the story for good reason: no one would believe it today.”