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Free Services Are the Ticket To Continuity

Opinion

By Judith Hauptman

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As the High Holy Day season draws to a close, let us face the reality that many Jews, in particular young ones, are going to show up at a synagogue only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur — and some will not show up at all.

It is ironic that we American Jews, who are so worried about our shrinking numbers, close our synagogue doors to those who actively seek us out at this intensely Jewish time of year, just because they have not purchased tickets. What sense does it make to create programs all year long to reach out to disaffected Jews, but then bar them from entering at High Holy Day time? It is precisely at this time that we should open our doors as wide as possible.

We behave in this self-contradictory manner because we cannot free ourselves from thinking the way we did generations ago. Back then, when the Jewish community was more cohesive, any Jew who would not buy a costly ticket for High Holy Day services was considered a freeloader and kept out.

The searching young Jews who are showing up today, by contrast, generally still feel connected to things Jewish.

If we deny them admission to High Holy Day services, they may drift away, never to return. But if we capitalize on their desire to spend time with us, we might just be able to hold on to them.

We need to create separate services for them that are geared toward their needs: where along with the cantor's chanting, the rabbi explains what is going on and imparts nuggets of Jewish wisdom; where the congregation is taught the High Holy Day nusach, or recurring melody, and is encouraged to sing it together with the cantor; where the prayer book contains transliteration of all key prayers so that people who cannot read Hebrew can still join in; where people are asked to actively discuss the Torah reading in small groups in between aliyot; where a light lunch follows the Rosh Hashanah service and a break-fast follows Ne'ilah so that people can shmooze with each other.

But we should not stop there. We need a service where there is no solicitation of funds; a free service so that people who would not spend money on a ticket will choose to attend; a walk-in service so that people can make up their minds at the last minute that that is how they want to spend time on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; a full service, and not an embellished yizkor service.

Back in 2004, with these ideas percolating in my mind, I experimented with such a service. I encountered reasonable success, and have repeated the experiment each year since.

A long time ago
we lost 10 tribes.
It is now time
to find them.

This year, the project, called Ohel Ayalah, attracted 300 people to a Rosh Hashanah service, 550 to two back-to-back Kol Nidrei services, and 150 to Ne'ilah. About 75% of those who attended were in their 20s and 30s. Other community services, with somewhat different philosophies, have also attracted large numbers.

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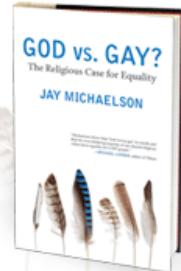
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—RABBI DAVID ELLENSON



Michaelson is a contributing editor to THE FORWARD.

What these figures show is that if you offer young people a service aimed at them — one that does not create in them the feeling that they are not Jewish enough but instead accepts them for who they are, one that has as its sole goal keeping them connected Jewishly — then they will flock to it.

Are such free services undermining synagogues? Not at all. By warmly welcoming these young Jews in their interim years — the time between graduating college and settling down when many do not choose to join a synagogue — such services will augment membership later on.

We need to spend our communal funds on establishing such services in a wide variety of places, beginning with the metropolitan areas where many young Jews live. We need to hire community rabbis, ones unattached to any particular synagogue, who would work on such projects. And since young Jews get their information electronically, we need to create Web sites advertising these services.

We cannot afford to live with the attitudes of the past. Every Jew is precious; every Jew is worthy of our attention. A long time ago we lost 10 tribes. It is now time to find them.

Rabbi Judith Hauptman, a professor of Talmud and rabbinic culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary, is the founder of Ohel Ayalah.

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Samuel Kuckley
Tue. Oct 9, 2007

Many years ago, the leadership of our congregation began providing services for unaffiliated members of the community. It is a fixture in the community and is greatly appreciated by those who attend. It is not without cost, however. All are welcome. Those who have the ability and inclination, are asked to contribute, which they do. While this service is not a path to eventual membership in our congregation, we feel that we are doing the Jewish community a great service.

Meir goldsmith
Wed. Oct 10, 2007

The Orthodox Community has been doing this for years check out www.nomembershiprequired.com !! no wonder they have such continuity

Sephardiman
Sat. Oct 6, 2007

At my congregation, Chicago's Ohel Shalom Torah Center, we've never required tickets for seats on the Yamim Noraim. Anyone is welcome and this has worked very well in our 20 years of service to the Jewish Congregation!

Jew in Manhattan
Sun. Aug 23, 2009

Eldridge Street Synagogue offers free orthodox High Holiday Services as well as free year round services. B"H, people of diverse backgrounds and ages attend. Check out the web-site for more info: www.manhattansynagogue.com

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