

Marketing Prayer

by Marge Eiseman

How do we “market” prayer to bring people into places of worship regularly?

I was in West Palm Beach a few years back and drove past a church with a sign out front proclaiming “Amazing and Inspiring Worship Service -- Sunday, 10 a.m.” I cynically thought, no synagogue would dare put out a sign like that! And that’s part of the problem. We’re not sure our people want to be amazed or inspired by worship – we generally just hope we have enough to “make a *minyan!*” If we promised “moving prayer experiences, meaningful teachings, joyful community, and an opportunity to permanently deepen your spiritual life,” as the promotional material from a weekend with Jewish Renewal leader Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and his wife Eve Ilsen declares, we would begin to market worship services in a very different way.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman teaches that if we approach services as if we are boarding an airplane, where the rabbi and cantor are the pilot and navigator, and all we have to do is sit back and enjoy the ride, we have abandoned our responsibility as participants.¹ In this model, we don’t matter — the plane will take off and land whether or not we are paying attention, regardless of the number and individual identity of the “passengers.” But what if we understood our role differently? Imagine how it would feel if each person came into worship prepared to actively pray, to reach inside and find his/her heart’s urgent desire to commune with God, or to request help in dealing with a personal problem, or to soak in the sense of solidarity that comes from being a part of the *kahal* (community).

I’m not advocating that all Jews enter the synagogue expecting to lead worship services, or that the rabbi hand off the controls and let everyone create simultaneous prayer experiences in lieu of leading a worship service (even if that would be interesting to watch!). But the challenge to our clergy is to be consciously seeking to offer something that engages each person upon entering into the worship space – setting an expectation that something inspiring, something that breathes life into the holy and timeless ideas of our faith, something amazing is just waiting for you to experience!

Upping the Ante

How could we do this? We could up the ante. Instead of reading through the prayers, I have led numerous services without *siddurim*, just from the collective understanding and memory of the order of the service. Another way is to weave *kavanot* (intentions) into the introduction of the prayers. One of the most powerful concepts for me has to be the bracketing of the *Shema*, surrounded as it is by prayers about love. In the morning, it is preceded by *Ahavah Rabbah* and in the evening, by *Ahavat Olam*, and then always followed by the *V’ahavtah*. I have taken to asking people, “What do you know to be TRUE about love?” and then offered three people the opportunity to speak their truth about love. Generally, they speak about love between people, and then I relate that kind of love to the love of God and God’s love for us. It occurs to me that only after we understand love can we get to unity, which is the core of the *Shema*. And then, we are told to take these great ideas about love and unity out into the world, “teach them to your children...on your way, in your home.”

Another possibility is to actively try to create a warm community of praying people. This means opening up the prayer service to include personal sharing. At Congregation Sinai in Milwaukee, WI, the *Shabbat* morning *minyan* is a very informal service, led around the table by the participants. The highlight is the *Mi Shebeirach* for healing, where more than just the name of the person is shared (we hear how they are related, what the struggle is, notice how long they have been suffering). This is followed immediately by sharing the good things of the week – the grandchildren who visit, the honors that people have received, and, sometimes, just expressing gratitude for being part of such a wonderful group.

So we have examples of things that do work, that could be “marketed” and used to encourage people to come for personal reasons, thoughtful participation, and community. But we generally never advertise our regular services, because on some level we view them as obligatory and feel that we are supposed to attend to make certain things possible for the community’s sake (like saying the Mourner’s *Kaddish*, which requires a *minyan*). If it’s an obligation, and not optional, then who cares if it is inspiring? You come, and if you find meaning, good for you. This makes a marketing strategy very challenging!

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Marge Eiseman is an award-winning teacher, a life-long Jewish learner, and an inspiring singer-songwriter with two CDs of original music to her credit. She is an author, columnist and host of Jewish Waves, an online Jewish music and culture experience. werallconnected@yahoo.com

Consistently, But Not Routinely, Uplifting

Let's follow this thread. If obligation is the underlying reason people come to worship services, then it's not likely they are looking forward to it. My parents used to call some events "command performances" where we had to be on best behavior, dressed nicely. Come to think of it, that's how we expect people to come to synagogue as well! But as we get older, we begin to have ideas of our own, and spiritual needs of our own, and it's reasonable to think that we could find some response within Judaism. That certainly seems to be on the agenda of many Jews by Choice that I have met, people who have chosen Judaism as their faith path as adults, and who want the prayer experience to be consistently (but not routinely) meaningful and uplifting.

While no one can guarantee that a prayer experience will inspire another person every time, let's hold open the possibility of some kind of meaningful experience, perhaps even transcendence. That's the ultimate goal of ritual and worship, isn't it? To connect with the Divine? We use the ancient words and formulae that worked for previous generations, layering our voices over the echoes of their prayers that still fill the sanctuaries we attend. But, how many of us would be drawn to our grandfathers' style of worship? Times change, and even an eternal religion like Judaism has to change with the times!


So once a month, we get creative. There are congregations with house bands offering "Friday Night Live", "*TorahPalooza: Shabbos with an Attitude*," "*Simchat Shabbat*," "*Shabbat Hallelu*," "*Shir Chadash*," "*Rock Shabbat*," (you get the picture). These services are generally very well attended, and lively – people even dance spontaneously in formerly Classical Reform congregations! There's even "*Yachad: The Travelling T'fillah Band*," out of Kansas City, who will come to your congregation and liven up the place! We market the heck out of these services – promise folk/rock music (no *chazzanut* here!) – and people of all ages come to be part of the scene.

But what happens the other weeks? If there's not a special program at most Reform congregations, they are happy to have a quorum, say 40 people in a 400-household congregation. That might be 5-7% of the congregants, given that some couples

attend, and there are usually some guests or people there following a recent loss. That number might swell after a tragedy like 9/11, but it's obvious that attendance is event-driven, not a regular part of one's daily or weekly life.

Looking to the Mega-Churches

If we don't want to market only the big production number services, then we need to look at who is successful in attracting congregants to "normal" worship. The local mega-churches offer us some marketing ideas that might work. They engage as many members in teaching children as possible; services routinely feature "witnessing" – people standing up and declaring their faith experience. Another thing they offer is a small group within the larger one – by creating study groups or other affinity groups – we would call them *havurot*). Some of these mega-churches have a fast-food court so people can share a meal together after the service, or before an evening class. We could certainly have coffee and bagels on the tables in the social hall for parents to enjoy during Sunday school, and then expand to having a discussion take place, or a few Jewish publications available for reading. The one thing that many churches do that many synagogues don't do is set the expectation that membership means attendance at regular worship services.

You can get the donkey to move with the carrot or the stick. Rather than being heavy-handed about requiring attendance, I believe we begin to meet the challenge of marketing prayer to get people to the worship services when we set higher expectations for our clergy. They should be bringing an intensity to the practice of prayer leadership that models for people the possibility of personal fulfillment and satisfaction that prayer can bring. Then, let us sing about the joy of being in community, sharing worship and other experiences together. As Rabbi Heschel said, "A religion that is oppressive, boring, insipid and dull doesn't deserve to be transmitted." I couldn't agree with him more! 

ENDNOTES:

1. Hoffman, Lawrence A. *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999.