

Expanding Jewish Education in Challenging Times: Let All Who Are Hungry Come and Eat

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by Maggie Bar-Tura

Although myths about Jewish wealth and power persist, the truth is that many Jewish families struggle to make ends meet. The income inequality that characterizes American society has not passed over the Jewish community. According to the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Study – almost a decade before the onset of the Great Recession – over sixty percent of Jewish households in the US were earning less than \$75,000 a year. An estimated 250,000 households in that income bracket were families with children.

Las Vegas, one of the fastest growing Jewish communities in the U.S., is an interesting case study from which we can learn about challenges and trends in emerging Jewish communities. The 2005 Jewish Community Study of Southern Nevada included a Jewish Children's Survey Report that looked closely at Jewish education participation, preferences, and correlates. The Children's Survey Report reveals that one quarter of children from Jewish households earning more than \$100,000 attended Jewish overnight camp, but only five percent of children from families earning less than \$100,000 attended Jewish overnight camp. A quick look at the distribution of income among households with children shows us where the untapped market is: 61% of Jewish households with children in Las Vegas and southern Nevada earn less than \$100,000. It is important to remember that these numbers, published in 2005, don't reflect the severity of the current economic reality experienced by tens of thousands of Jewish families in Las Vegas and across the country – unemployment or underemployment, foreclosure, shrinkage of college funds, and lost financial cushions.

Given the connection between income and participation, it becomes clear that if we want to increase participation in camp and other Jewish educational experiences, we need to create affordable quality options. Raising ever more money for scholarships to keep up with spiraling tuition costs is not the answer – the dollars necessary to reach the scale of participation to which we must aspire are simply not there. If we want children from middle-class and lower-middle class households in Las Vegas (and everywhere else in the United States) to attend Jewish overnight camp at the same rate as their peers from households making more than \$100,000 – a five-fold increase – we can't depend on a steady torrent of funds for scholarships in a time when our communities are struggling to assure the basic dignity of the most vulnerable among us. In order to take Jewish camp and other Jewish educational institutions to scale, we need to look for new business models that expand the range of opportunities to meet the range of financial wherewithal

among the members of our community. This is not just smart business; it is a moral imperative for our Jewish future.

As the Foundation for Jewish Camp begins to explore the opportunities to make the Jewish summer camp experience accessible to all segments of the Jewish community, we look at the hotel industry which offers a strongly branded customer experience at a variety of price points to capture diverse segments of the market. We discover that the creation of lower priced options that deliver strong value does not cannibalize the higher end products, but rather adds new market segments that were previously priced out. That is to say, when the Holiday Inn Express, a limited service hotel, was launched, it did not siphon off customers from the higher priced Holiday Inn and Crowne Plaza hotels. It brought in new customers who could not afford the more upscale hotels.

So are we talking about creating cheap camps for poor children? No, we're talking about good value at affordable prices. Again, let's look to the hospitality industry for some guidance. When the Holiday Inn Corporation researched the market for a new, lower priced hotel, it discovered that the core of the Holiday Inn brand, the quality which dare not be compromised, was the hotel room; the restaurant, lobby, spa, business center, and other amenities were not the primary draw for this market. So they kept the core, stripped down everything else and marketed a "fresh, clean, uncomplicated hotel offering comfort, convenience, and good value." Note that the Holiday Inn Express is not "bare bones." It is "fresh, clean, and uncomplicated." Simplicity has become a virtue.

Compare that message to the marketing for Crowne Plaza, an upscale hotel in Holiday Inn's product line. Crowne Plaza offers "business travelers high levels of comfort, service and amenities." Or the middle market option, the Holiday Inn Hotel, which delivers "service, comfort, and value." The difference in the messaging is subtle but reflects a focused understanding of the customer for each product and the core of the experience s/he expects. There is an important lesson here for the field of Jewish camp and for the Jewish community in general. The Jewish community is not monolithic. In addition to the diversity of ethnic, racial, gender, and denomination that characterizes us, we are many different kinds of consumers. We need to get out into the field and listen – to understand what parents' hopes are for their Jewish children, what are the dreams and passions of children, youth, and young adults. And then we need to deconstruct what we are already doing so that we can respond to those hopes and dreams. We need to be crystal clear about the core of our mission, revisit the trappings, reimagine our programmatic offerings, and reinvent our product line so that all who are hungry for Jewish life may come and partake.

We seek to grow Jewish education in challenging times. We could easily assume that the challenge of these times is economic, but the real challenge is to seize the opportunity to look at the world through fresh eyes. If we are bold and courageous the Great Recession will turn out to have been an extraordinary opportunity.

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