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## Inside Marketing Judaism

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We face choices daily — sometimes barraged with appeals, incentives, and invitations to join, donate, and participate. Are Jewish organizations marketing strategically and wisely, in line with Jewish values, to draw in newcomers? Or does marketing demean and diminish the very values we are teaching?

# The Jewish Marketplace

*Chava Weissler*

Although American Jewish institutions have energetically recruited members and funds for much of the 350 years of Jewish life in America, only recently has "marketing" taken center stage as a conscious strategy and, perhaps of even greater interest, as a topic of discussion. What emerges from observing the field is the notion of individual as consumer, putting together assorted and appealing bits and pieces of Judaism.

If modernity is defined as the multiplication of choices, as the sociologist Peter Berger once argued, post-modernity can be understood not only as the explosion and fragmentation of choices but as the emergence of new ways of choosing. We can see this, for example, in the new "entrepreneurial" occupational structure where the virtues of loyalty and perseverance in a company, the ability to grow into ever more challenging roles within its structure, the very sense of a "career" as a structured path through a working life, have been replaced by the virtues of negotiation and flexibility, the ability to conceive of oneself in ever new ways, the sense that one must create new — and temporary — structures, and find the path and the alternatives that are best suited for the moment. Parallel to this is the ever-growing significance of what sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof calls the "sovereign self," making choices relatively unconstrained by communal, organizational, and sometimes even familial ties.

These are structural changes in American society, and, not surprisingly, they register in American religious life as well. As we know, American Jewry is struggling with the decline of traditional loyalties to congregation and community. Like other Americans, Jews live in a commodity culture, in which consumption is the main means of self-expression. There is a realization that Judaism resembles other leisure commodities offered to consumers in the marketplace, and is judged by similar criteria. The current interest in marketing Judaism is the attempt to find ways to key into the desires for personal enrichment, novelty, enjoyment, and aesthetic attractiveness that motivate other consumer choices.

The market has both pleasures and costs. One of the insights of post-modern theory is that the grand narratives, including those of modern Judaism — such as the flowering of an open civil society and the Zionist dream of creating a new Jewish society devoid of the evils of Diaspora life — have been shattered along with the decline of social cohesion and religious coherence. This situation creates tremendous freedom to be choosers, negotiators, and consumers. We take this freedom for granted and can scarcely imagine living according to the constraints of the past. Yet, for some consumers, this creates a hunger for the missing meta-narrative and for lost communal bonds, or for an intensity of experience to replace them.

The emphasis on "the market" has emerged in parallel with a search for "spirituality," pointing to a dual phenomenon: a Jewish spiritual marketplace. Although Jewish organizations continue to offer many types of activities — from book groups to fund-raising galas — the "spiritual" sector of the market has expanded enormously over the past two decades.

Consider these examples: the Synaplex program, a project of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal), attempts

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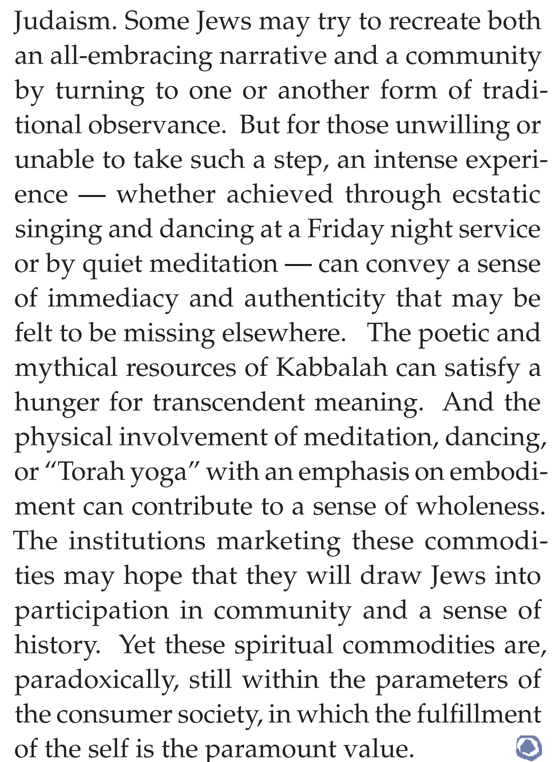
to get Jewish bodies into synagogues by offering study, yoga, and meditation in addition to services on Shabbat. A recent article in the *Forward* described the rise of new *minyanim*, informal prayer groups, in Manhattan, some incorporating meditative techniques. In other cities, people gather on Friday nights for prayer services using the melodies of Shlomo Carlebach. Or consider the fact that two decades ago, one could scarcely find an adult education class anywhere on Kabbalah, not to mention Jewish meditation. Now one can find a plethora of classes on Jewish mysticism, and Jewish meditation retreats are offered by such mainstream organizations as the Union for Reform Judaism, federations, and JCCs.

The hunger for a meta-narrative and for deep communal affiliation can help us understand why the marketplace offerings are so rich in "spirituality," when until recently this term was rarely used in relation to American Judaism. Some Jews may try to recreate both an all-embracing narrative and a community by turning to one or another form of traditional observance. But for those unwilling or unable to take such a step, an intense experience — whether achieved through ecstatic singing and dancing at a Friday night service or by quiet meditation — can convey a sense of immediacy and authenticity that may be felt to be missing elsewhere. The poetic and mythical resources of Kabbalah can satisfy a hunger for transcendent meaning. And the physical involvement of meditation, dancing, or "Torah yoga" with an emphasis on embodiment can contribute to a sense of wholeness. The institutions marketing these commodities may hope that they will draw Jews into participation in community and a sense of history. Yet these spiritual commodities are, paradoxically, still within the parameters of the consumer society, in which the fulfillment of the self is the paramount value.



# Missing: The Vision and the Values

*Andrew Silow-Carroll*

WHEN WE TALK about "marketing" Judaism, it's no longer a question of whether we should or shouldn't. Every institution has an advertising and public relations budget; few worry about getting their hands "dirty." And the taboo about corporate sponsorship — glossy ad pages and lists of "community supporters" at the back of event brochures— has paled.

And yet, despite experience with marketing, Jewish communal institutions don't seem very good at it. While some individual advertisements and campaigns have been clever or appealing, they always seem to address short-term goals: How do we get you to come to this service? How can we entice you into enrolling in this course, or give to this campaign? This exemplifies a "product-driven" model of Jewish life, as if our institutions offer only discrete services to consumers.

What is often missing from Jewish communal marketing is a reflection of the bedrock vision of the institution behind the ad — the core values and purposes that the institution hopes to share with its members.

In this, mainstream Christianity is way ahead of us. Jewish groups look with envy on the 20,000-member "mega-churches" and assume their success has everything to do with their shopping mall approach to faith: a sprawling campus offering dozens of choices for Sunday-morning worshipers, combined with a JCC-like array of activities for the rest of the week.

But a look at the literature of the mega-church movement suggests that this approach to "selling" Christianity is only successful if it reflects a clearly articulated, inspiring vision at the church's core. In that, how-to books for preachers are as likely to quote self-help guru Steven Covey as they are Jesus Christ. Take PastorPreneur, a new book by Dr. John Jackson, pastor of the Carson Valley Christian Center in Minden, Nevada. Jackson offers a step-by-step guide to "planting" a church and helping it grow, with the requisite "five strategies" for getting there. His advice is practical: build relationships with area institutions, greet every new face at the door as you would a long-time congregant, plan three or four major "faith-building events" a year to attract outsiders.

But the heart of Jackson's message is to clarify the vision. "Establishing your church's identity is extremely important," he writes. "It becomes the motto or tagline that people associate with your church."

Jackson is not suggesting mere sloganeer-