As Rosh Hashana approaches, synagogues are eager to attract worshippers and new members. Recent issues of New York’s “Jewish Week” newspaper, as well as other publications, have included ads by area synagogues that promise “inspiring” services and sermons, talented cantors, special programs for children etc. Several hotels have placed ads attempting to lure customers to spend the holy days in their “luxurious and chic” facilities, where guests will enjoy services led by fine cantors, rabbis and scholars in residence. In perusing the various ads, it struck me that virtually all of them are appealing to readers’ desire to be entertained.

The ads seem to be saying: come to our synagogue or hotel and you’ll have a great time, good music, good speakers, lots of inspiration. You should come to us (rather than to others) because we can entertain you better, or cheaper, or for free. I suppose it should not be surprising to find synagogues marketing themselves as entertainment centers, even if they also include “inspiration” and “meaningful” services as part of their draw. We live in a culture where people are increasingly passive, and where they expect others to provide entertainment for them. Symptomatic of this tendency are the enormous salaries of professional athletes, musicians, movie stars etc. Even in the world of politics, people want the candidates to entertain them rather than engage with them in a serious way.

We live in an era of photo ops, one-liners, glitz, and show biz. Yet, in reading the pre-Rosh Hashana ads, my heart sinks. Have we really sunk so low that we need to resort to p.r. glitz to attract worshippers? Do synagogues now have to see themselves as entertainment centers that must provide name speakers and singers to attract members?

Traditionally, the month of Ellul is a period of self-evaluation in preparation for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Special prayers are chanted, the shofar is sounded. The season is not here to entertain us, but to challenge us. It is not meant to be a time of spiritual passivity, but a time to encourage us to raise our spiritual levels by dint of our own efforts. Shuva Yisrael ad Hashem Elokekha, ki khashalta ba-avonekha: Return O Israel to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your sinfulness. These words of the prophet Hosea provide the central message of the High Holy Day season.

Yet, while such a message is profoundly powerful to religiously inspired people, it doesn’t “sell” among the wider public. Who wants to return to the Lord and face the Eternal directly? Who wants to admit sinfulness? Who wants a message that requires serious contemplation, commitment, willingness to change?

Apparently, many synagogues have concluded that the authentic message of the Holy Days is “not where the public is.” The public needs to be lured into synagogues by promises of entertainment.
and instant inspiration. The public doesn’t want to be told that they actually have to take personal responsibility, or that they need to work at their own spiritual development. Since we all want as many Jews as possible to experience the High Holy Days, I hope that those who indeed are simply looking for quick inspiration and entertainment will find their ways to the synagogues and hotels that promise these things. And I also hope that some of these Jews will actually be inspired to take the next step: becoming serious about their religious commitments and their spiritual development.

I look forward to the day (may it come sooner rather than later) when synagogues will not feel the need to market themselves as entertainment centers, but as bastions of genuine spiritual striving. I look forward to the day when synagogue ads will simply say: “Return O Israel to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your sinfulness. Please join us as a religious community striving to serve God, humbly and honestly. No glitz here, just sincere prayer and thoughtfulness.”

And better yet: I look forward to the day when synagogues will not need to take ads to attract Jews to Holy Day services because Jews will be on such a high spiritual level that they will not need ads to bring them to synagogue.

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