

## ***Pay to Pray? This Ain't Vegas, Folks***

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**“How can we expect these folks to stay involved if they can't even afford to pray?”**

**Somewhere along the way in Jewish history in North America, we created a myth. This myth continues to be perpetuated each year in most communities, though there are a few bold, practical thinkers who attempt to shatter it. The myth is that it costs money to pray, especially during the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and advanced-purchase tickets are required.**

The practice, often referred to as “pay-to-pray,” is becoming less and less popular with a Jewish community that continues to struggle with membership and affiliation. Every year the same arguments are tossed around. On the one hand, synagogues understand the financial benefits, as these are the two days a year that people are willing to pay for services. On the other hand, being Jewish shouldn't be cost prohibitive. Giving someone the opportunity to experience the High Holidays for free might encourage them to come back and even pay annual dues.

This year is different, though. With high unemployment and a poor economy, many families simply can't afford to pay yearly dues, much less fork over additional money for the High Holidays. Recent surveys have found that dues-paying members are reaching out more than ever for help from their synagogues. How can we expect these folks to stay involved if they can't even afford to pray during what many consider to be the holiest days of the year? Luckily, there are a growing number of places for these families to turn. Chabad, well-known for its ubiquitous large menorahs for Hanukkah, has long offered free services for anyone who arrives. It even has an online directory where you can easily look up the closest Chabad service in your area. In New York, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah fills to capacity an oversized room in the Jacob Javits Center on Yom Kippur. Some congregations, like Nashuva in Los Angeles, put their High Holiday services online.

Whatever the method, money should never be the deciding factor for someone considering a trip to synagogue. We understand that Jewish institutions are not immune from the bad economy, but they need to ask what's more important: A few extra dollars during the High Holidays, or free services that can lead to a lifetime of engagement?

— *Levi Gibian Fishman is the communications associate for the Jewish Outreach Institute, [www.JOI.org](http://www.JOI.org).*

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