

ing. “A church’s identity,” he writes, “reflects its grasp of God’s purposes and character, and how God wants to use the gifted people in the church to meet the specific needs of people in that community.”

“God’s purposes” is not a phrase I hear in Jewish communal meetings, since we tend to be wary of individuals or institutions who claim to know exactly what those purposes might be. But you don’t need to embrace Jackson’s specific vision to appreciate the importance of having a vision — any vision at all. Madison Avenue calls it “branding”; corporate culture calls it a mission statement.

“Consumers” respond to these visions — if not at a conscious level, then at a subconscious

one. While a good ad might raise attendance at a particular event, only a strong sense of purpose keeps people coming back. When I worked in public relations, I often asked my boss, “What would success look like?” For the pitch in question we’d talk about ticket sales or the number of articles generated in the press. But I was looking for a different answer, a different focus — not measuring success for this program or position, but a broader, deeper measure of success.

These aren’t just marketing questions. They are questions about the essential Jewish enterprise. If a Jewish institution can’t answer them, there’s no advertisement campaign in the world that can save it.

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## Advertising Judaism

*David Nelson*

THINK OF THE BEST television commercials, or the most creative, eye-catching print ads you’ve ever seen. Now imagine that kind of advertising for synagogues, for Jewish study, or for Shabbat. When I recently pitched this concept to a colleague, he said, “We have to be careful not to commercialize Judaism.”

Why? Why do so many Jews have a visceral, negative reaction to the “commercialization” (by which we mean the selling) of Judaism?

Some people feel that “selling” and “advertising” connote cheapness and lack of inherent worth. Should we sell Judaism like potato chips? Wouldn’t that cheapen and commodify our sense of Judaism? People don’t give up their lives, or stake their children’s future, on commodities.

But there are also ads for universities and hospitals, ads to discourage drug use, or smoking, or to encourage people to use public libraries. These ads represent institutions and causes that affect our survival and our ultimate welfare. And they advertise because we live in a very crowded marketplace of ideas, images, and products. The competition for our attention is enormous, and each candidate — no matter how noble or important — has to compete. In an environment crammed with images all screaming for our attention, it is naïve to think that Jewishness is so important that it need not compete. If we don’t, we will fail.

While professional creative advertising is

hugely expensive, and companies spend millions to advertise, if we are to function in the real world (as opposed to some nostalgically imagined, pre-modern world in which Jews were Jewish because there was no alternative), we must pay the price. We have done this before. When Ethiopian Jews were initially allowed to leave for Israel, the Jewish world judged it worthwhile to spend \$10,000 for each new immigrant. No one would ever have argued that \$10,000 is too much to spend for a life.


The difference between ransoming Jews at \$10,000 each and paying millions for effective advertising lies in our sense that advertising isn’t about saving lives. Although there is no equivalence between saving human lives and the metaphorical “life-saving” that happens through educating Jews and inspiring them to love being Jewish, our survival requires both the preservation and protection of our lives and the preservation and protection of our traditions, practices, beliefs, and memories — goals of synagogues, schools, summer camps, and youth programs in Israel. To preserve these vital organs of our communal life we must make them competitive in the overcrowded marketplace. If we don’t, they will fail.

How would we know if the ads were successful? This is a difficult question. Years ago, commercials were straightforward. They told us to buy Brand X detergent because it was better and cheaper than Brands Y and Z. After a few months of running the ads, if sales of

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Brand X increased over sales of Brands Y and Z, then the ad agency could claim success. But consumers have become much more sophisticated, and advertising has changed to accommodate that sophistication. Now the best commercials don't try to convince us openly to buy a product. They take a subtler tack — a captivating television commercial where we have no idea what is being advertised. The goal of such ads is to create what advertisers call “buzz” — excitement, curiosity, and interest. They attempt to link the product, the brand, or the logo with positive feelings in the consumer's mind. Instead of telling us that Brand X cleans better and costs less,

they try to create a link between Brand X and happiness, or power, or sexiness, or fun. If it works, eventually we feel good every time we see the Brand X logo. That means that the immediate pay-off in sales will be harder to spot. What the ads are trying to affect, initially, is not our buying patterns but our attitudes. This approach takes patience.

The Jewish community has historically been unwilling to spend large sums on advertising, and it has been impatient. If we are committed to the long-term success of Jewish life, we must be willing to spend the money, hire the best creative talent available, and be patient. 

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## Marketing Undermines Judaism

Jay Michaelson

“Advertising signs that con you  
Into thinking you're the one  
That can do what's never been done  
That can win what's never been won  
Meantime life outside goes on all around you.”  
- Bob Dylan, *It's Alright Ma*

ADVERTISING IS, at its heart, about the deceitful exploitation of desire. You don't really want the new car, but you see the sexy, sleek images on television, and you want that: the power, the glory, the speed. And then, by sleight of hand, the message sinks in subliminally: the car will give you power. To the extent that we succumb to marketing of this type, our deepest yearnings are being cynically manipulated. We consume instead of exercising real (political) power, or manifesting real (intimate) sexuality with our loved ones. As Nike has shown, even revolution can be used to sell shoes.

To “market” Judaism, as Andrew Silow-Carroll and David Nelson suggest, contradicts exactly what makes Judaism worthwhile. Consumption co-opts our loves and energies to enhance our selfish desire (the *yetzer hara*), but Jewish practice reins in our selfish desire so that we can love and serve better. Marketing asks us to sublimate yearning into consumerism; Judaism asks us to restrain our consumerism and open up to yearning. From *tzitzit* to sexual morality, to laws against charging interest on loans, halakhah, in large part, is a laundry list of reminders that our time is short and that, in Goethe's words, “what

matters most should never be at the mercy of what matters least.”

Our own individual answers to “what matters” will vary, but the essence of branding, marketing, and image — and I say this as vice president of marketing for a software company — is precisely to press what matters most (deep values, needs, etc.) into the service of what matters least (consumption). When Jews witness an awesome sight of nature, they are asked to pause and open themselves to wonder, to make a blessing to the *Oseh Ma'aseh Breishit*, Maker of the Works of Creation. But in advertising, our feelings of awe and wonder are directed toward buying services and products. As Rabbi Nelson says, advertisements “try to convince us that there is some mysterious link between Brand X and happiness, power, sexiness, or fun. If it works, eventually we feel good every time we see the logo of Brand X.”

This is idolatry, however widely practiced it may be. Judaism cannot use power/sexiness/fun as tools to sell itself; Jews need to recognize that the Source of All Blessings, sexy and otherwise, is precisely that which cannot be reduced to a logo. I know that some say we have to be “realistic.” We live in a society of constant marketing, they say, and to not participate will make Judaism a religion without adherents. And Judaism has always marketed itself, from the original purpose of the Hanukkah menorah to Chabad's use of it in American public squares. But we undermine Judaism by dumbing it down,