

Got God?

For Young Jews Hungry for Connection, Jewish Advertising Offers a Bland Diet

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

The full-page ad in the Utne Reader, the Reader's Digest for the alternative press, drew me up short. It offered "a few Rosh Hashanah thoughts" along with a list of 14 suggested ways to enjoy the holiday. These included "Write your own holiday prayer. Share it," "Balance serious conversation with laughter," "Reflect on your good fortune," "Forget your office voice mail," and "Rejoice in the love that surrounds you."

Who was responsible for so generous and welcoming an advertisement, so traditional in its feel for the rhythms and themes of the New Year but attuned to the contemporary feelings of so many American Jews? What Jewish organization was willing to reach out to the granola and Birkenstocks crowd, those New Age seekers whose Jewishness is often decried by traditionalists as "narcissistic," "syncretic," even "pagan"?

Well, no Jewish organization, it turns out. The advertiser was the Solgar Vitamin and Herb Company in Leonia, New Jersey. And it is no small irony that it took a nutritional supplement company to highlight the bland, stale and often unhealthy diet served up by most Jewish institutions in their advertising.

Over the past few months I have been collecting advertisements placed by synagogues, community federations, JCCs and other institutions, usually in Jewish newspapers. I've then shown them to various Jewish audiences, asking which of the advertisers' pitches appeal to them, and which sorts of messages they would like to see coming out of organized Jewry.

Especially among the 20-something, marginally-affiliated-but-willing-to-be-convinced cohort that is seemingly the target audience for many of the Jewish advertisers, the reaction to most of the ads was surprisingly negative. Surprising to me, at least, an old fogey of 39 who thought many of the ads were on target, even hip.

Before I could understand their objections, I had to understand the ads. And to do so I played the old hermeneutic trick you use when studying the Torah commentaries of the 11th century sage Rashi: Mah kashe l'Rashi? What's bothering Rashi? Rashi's commentaries include his answers to questions posed by the text, but not the questions themselves. Similarly, every advertisement is a solution to a problem identified by the advertiser. How do we get adults to drink more milk? How do we get consumers to spend more for our name-brand product than for the cheaper, generic variety?

What's "bothering" advertisers, then, is the behavior or perceptions of certain target audiences; the "solution" is to make emotional connections and either transform or reinforce the desires that fuel their consumer choices. Advertisers often identify these target audiences by their mindsets: their values, yearnings, needs. I was able to identify at least seven audiences, or mindsets, seen by Jewish advertisers as likely targets for their products or services-as "problems" to be "solved."

Below I list these seven cohorts. Five of these categories were particularly bothersome to younger audiences despite what I thought were good intentions-and even brave community criticism-on the part of the advertisers. I paraphrase their objections. The last two approaches hint at a way of communicating-indeed, at a way of being Jewish-that may offer the best hope for effectively connecting Jewishness with the majority of American Jews.

1: The "Why Does Judaism Have to Stink?" Audience

In an ad for the new Saatchi Synagogue in London, part of a controversial campaign for a synagogue pitching itself as an Orthodox alternative for those under the age of 45, there's a picture of a meatball on a toothpick. Over the nosh is the headline: "At our new synagogue, this is the only thing that gets rammed down someone's throat." The ad copy goes on to read, "We don't see...why an Orthodox service must necessarily be a boring service."

Many Jewish advertisers take this tack: The cohort they're after thinks Judaism is irrelevant, boring, staid, obsolete, coercive, synagogue-based, Sunday school, you name it. They're looking for the hipper, more interesting alternative.

The Objection: "Sure we hated Hebrew school, but don't remind us. Instead of focusing on the negative, tell us how Judaism can be a positive influence in our lives."

2: The "There Has to Be More to Life" Audience

"Better than shopping. Better than tennis. Better than sleeping in." That's the headline on an ad for an "anxiety-free, 'no-Hebrew-necessary' " beginner's Sabbath service sponsored by the National Jewish Outreach Program. The service will "keep you looking forward to Saturday mornings."

The assumption here is of a cohort that is fed up with the spiritual emptiness of typical American rituals like the weekend. These consumers have material comfort, but feel a spiritual void. Jewish connection can provide the meaning that they're missing.

The Objection: "Who are you to say my life is empty? It's quite rich, thank you very much. What I'm looking for is a Jewishness that will enrich, not replace, the activities that already give me satisfaction."

3: The "Old Time Religion" Audience

A Cleveland funeral home boasts of a refurbished library and a "state-of-the-art" sound system. At the same time, "there's a lot we haven't changed. Like the traditions of our faith. We still wash and purify the deceased.... We still use wooden caskets. And we are still here to advise Jews of the traditions and rituals that help make grief bearable and enable life to go on."

For this target audience, Judaism provides the comforts of tradition, roots and stability in a world that emphasizes change, immediacy and mobility. It's where one turns for life cycle and holiday rituals and ceremonies. It provides a way to talk to God in times of distress and celebration, gratitude and mourning. It is your father's Oldsmobile.

The Objection: "Ugh, it's my father's Oldsmobile."

4. The "Don't Think it Can't Happen Here" Audience

"When we stand as one, hate can't stand against us," reads the ad for the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond, Virginia. The ad lists recent anti-Jewish incidents, and declares that "a new wave of anti-Semitism is sweeping over the world." Supporting Federation is "our best weapon against those who wish to destroy us."

This is a less popular tack than it once was, except among "defense" agencies like the ADL and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. It is meant to appeal to those who feel the social acceptance and economic security of contemporary American Jewry is fragile. For this cohort, Jewish belonging is an obligation, to honor the memory of the victims and to rebuke our enemies. Unity is strength. Finding "meaning" in Judaism is fine, but a luxury, not a priority.

The Objection: "This is America 2000, not Berlin 1938. First you tell me that the gentiles are out to destroy me, then you object when they want to marry me."

5. The "Judaism for Dummies" Audience

To encourage neophytes to take part in the daily study of Talmud, or Daf Yomi, a full-page ad features a clean-shaven, casually dressed man, reading a volume of Talmud and sitting next to a stack of 19 more. The tag line: "I'm on my way to finishing the entire Talmud. Pretty good for someone with two years of Hebrew school."

The target cohort is a close relative of the "Judaism doesn't have to stink" crowd. Judaism is intimidating, complex, esoteric. They'd like to get more connected to Jewishness, but don't have the background, and feel they'll never break the code. They'll enroll if you remove the prerequisites.

The Objection: "I'm no dummy."

So much for the negatively received campaigns. The following two approaches are more rare, but were more generously received.

6: "The "Have it Your Way" Audience

An ad by the Jewish Community Centers Association of America juxtaposes two photos. One depicts fit, attractive yuppies working out in step class. In the other, toddlers with paintbrushes are at work in a classroom setting. The tag: "You get perspired. They get inspired." Emphasizing the typical JCC's Fitness Center and Early Childhood Learning Center, the ad copy describes "just two ways families grow here in body, mind and spirit."

This is the reverse of the "better than tennis" approach (see number 2). Rather than reject "pick-and-choose" Judaism, it embraces a cohort that wants to be involved Jewishly, but not necessarily in "traditional" activities like prayer and ritual. They don't think it is hypocritical to send the kids off to the classroom while they pump iron. This cohort declares, "I'm Jewish, but I'm also a [take your pick] mother/father/liberal/conservative/musician/professor/Generation Xer/retiree. I want a Judaism that lets me be me, with people just like me, without asking me to be something that I'm not."

7: The "I Didn't Think Judaism Could Be Like That" Audience

Another ad from the National Jewish Outreach Program is similar in format-and spirit-to the Solgar Vitamin Rosh Hashanah ad. It suggest 12 ways to "Light up your life-with Shabbat: "Rest those weary bones-catch up on your sleep," "Exhale the mundane cares and concerns of the workday week by saying a little prayer for anything or everything," "Chill out with some wine (for Kiddush)," "Volunteer to visit patients in the hospital," and "Get to know someone really important a whole lot better- yourself."

Both ads appeal to those who want an expansive, open Judaism that offers choice, not coercion; tradition that speaks to, and with, modernity; a Jewish way of framing the American reality. Such Jews do not want to choose between their various identities. They want to come to the table-and the synagogue, JCC and federation-with all that they are, but are open to new ways of experiencing connection, commitment, spirituality and activism.

A tough sell? Perhaps. But in a buyer's market, which the 21st century spiritual marketplace certainly is, the smart seller knows that success comes to those who understand, and can respond to, the real needs of the consumer. Experience shows that Judaism can be sold-without being sold out.