

Reviving Judaism: Consultant-Speak Goes Religious

By Naomi Schaefer Riley

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A few weeks ago, Hillary Clinton got started on a new "listening tour." Her first one, during the 2000 Senate campaign, was aimed at soliciting the ideas of New York voters on what legislative issues were important to them. This one is aimed at hearing the thoughts of Democratic strategists on the subject of her presidential run. But the idea behind the tours remained the same: Find out what the people want -- and, if possible, give it to them.

In politics, such an approach has an irrefutable democratic logic. But is it well suited to religion? Arnold Eisen, the chancellor-elect of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has spent the past few months on a "listening tour" of his own, holding town-hall meetings around the country to figure out how to reinvigorate Conservative Judaism. Mr. Eisen is looking to find out what Jews want -- and, if possible, give it to them.

Trying to make Judaism more popular is not a new idea. Jewish leaders have worried for decades that high rates of intermarriage and assimilation are causing the Jewish population to diminish dramatically. And they are right. Between 1990 and 2000, the American Jewish population declined to 5.2 million from 5.5 million. With Jewish women getting married later in life and having fewer children, this trend is likely only to accelerate.

But the most recent response to this crisis has been less than inspiring. The Jewish Week recently published "17 Seriously Cool Ideas to Remake New York's Jewish Community." These included creating a Jewish culinary institute, building a kibbutz in the Big Apple, providing high-quality Jewish toddler care, hosting a hipper Israeli Independence Day parade and baking better kosher pizza.

Perhaps these ideas were meant to be a little tongue-in-cheek, but other ideas are not -- and probably should be. Take a new project called Synaplex. Sponsored by the Star Foundation, Synaplex is, according to its Web site, "designed to provide people with new reasons to make the synagogue the place to be on Shabbat." About 125 synagogues are already "enabling people to celebrate Shabbat the way they want to."

What does that mean? Instead of attending a traditional service, Rabbi Hayim Herring, Star's executive director, tells me, some people would do "Medi-Torah" or "Torah and Yoga." Others might attend a lecture or go to a musical service followed by a "latte cart." And still others might prefer to attend a Friday night wine-and-cheese reception.

Rabbi Herring says that some of the participating synagogues double or triple their attendance on the day of a "Synaplex" Shabbat, but it's not clear whether such one-day surges result in long-term membership gains. Religious groups that have grown the fastest in recent years (including Orthodox



Judaism) are the ones that demand the most of their adherents, not the ones that offer religion (and refreshments) cafeteria-style.

Rabbi Herring acknowledges this trend when I mention it to him. But he is not sure that it applies to the people he is trying to serve. He believes that "one failure of some of the Jewish movements is bludgeoning people with the notion of mitzvah [commandments], as opposed to taking people where they are and being patient enough to not impose their own vision of spirituality."

As it happens, the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, whose mission is "to inspire a renaissance of Jewish life," gives money to the Synaplex project. Adam Bronfman, the foundation's managing director, tells me that "each individual accesses meaning differently." He himself was "born a Jew and decided to live a Jewish life," he says, and he wants "others to access that if that's what they choose."

This way of thinking is making its way onto college campuses, too, where Jewish leaders hope to persuade students to remain Jews and not drift into the surrounding secular culture. Wayne Firestone, the president of Hillel, the Foundation for Campus Jewish Life, says that the "millennials," the members of today's college generation, have "many different options" on campus. Their identity is "similar to a Windows operating system," with many programs running at once. The Jewish "program," in other words, has lots of competition.

After extensive surveys, Hillel has concluded that many unaffiliated Jews, in Mr. Firestone's words, "don't feel welcome" by the Jewish offerings on campus. I was surprised by this claim, having always thought that college was probably the easiest place to practice Judaism. At big universities particularly, services of all types are easily accessible. Kosher food is not hard to come by. Religious celebrations abound.

But if the surveys are correct, some Jewish students are still feeling left out. The problem, according to Mr. Bronfman (whose foundation also gives to Hillel), can be thought of in terms of ice cream: "Some people want rocky road and some people want vanilla and some want strawberry. But Hillel was only able to provide one aspect, one flavor."

So Hillel is expanding, hoping to double the number of students involved in campus Jewish life. It is offering community-service trips with Torah studies; hosting its activities in non-Hillel buildings; even reaching out to American Jews studying abroad.

There is nothing wrong with these ideas or anything else in Hillel's "five-year strategic plan," and they may result in greater numbers of students taking Jewish ideas and culture seriously. Indeed, the other outreach efforts, however tacky or trivial, may also strengthen Jewish life in America. Still, there is something strange about all this consultant-speak. Listening tours, marketing gambits and strategic plans may be an inescapable part of modern life, even in the realm of religion. But in the end, for a particular faith to thrive, God can't just be for dessert.

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