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## ***Emotional Judaism***

*by Jerry Silverman*

The past year has considerably challenged the Jewish sector. With the deterioration of the financial market, a philanthropic disaster left in the wake of scandal and the war in Gaza, the US Jewish community is faced with serious issues that cannot be ignored and will force very difficult decisions in the coming months. But as the new American president reminds us, it is in these darkest moments that the greatest light can emerge. Change is, indeed, the order of the day.

The Jewish community needs to look at change through a lens of opportunity. We need to change very proactively - change the way we spend ever-more precious philanthropic dollars, change the way we think about engaging a new generation of Jews, and change our frame of mind when it comes to invigorating our community. We need to look at how we can collaborate more effectively as Jewish organizations and ensure that we are creating and supporting community.

One critical investment area that has seen enormous growth and results in the past few years has been the promotion of Jewish identity and continuity. Whether it be day schools, Hillel, youth groups, birthright Israel or Jewish camping, it is critical that we continue to look to our future and provide paths that lead us and our children to safe, sacred spaces.

Where are these spaces? They can certainly be found at Jewish summer camp, which not only provides a safe haven for the present, but actually secures and makes sacred our future by forming a connection between Jewish youth and Judaism that lasts well into adulthood. Camp has mastered this by creating "emotional Judaism," and while this may not seem to hold much weight at a time when our community is struggling for funding, it's actually one of the keys to our future, and our success. It turns out that change must come in how we experience Judaism at a young age.

A NUMBER of years ago, I was sitting in a meeting with some world-renowned experts on branding, marketing and advertising. At the time I worked for Levi Strauss, and we were discussing the most powerful attributes of the Levi's brand. Unanimously, these experts affirmed that an emotional connection to a brand or product was the "holy grail" of marketing; to have consumers talk about "MY Levi's," as if a pair of jeans was a close friend, was the ultimate goal for that - or any - company.

Now, as I travel around North America as the CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Camp and speak about Jewish summer camps, I am struck by the emotion and passion with which former campers and counselors speak about their camp. Clearly, an unbreakable bond was created in their youth. It is the same powerful relationship I hear in the voices of today's campers when they speak about my camp friends, my camp, my Judaism.

These camps have captured what the brand experts always speak of: the emotional connection to a product. In doing so, these camps have created emotional Judaism. Summers at Jewish camp are magical, forming Jewish hearts and souls, cementing a young person's bond with his heritage and community. Moreover, camp resonates with young

people because it inherently meets them where they are - Jewishly and developmentally. Far from home and school, youths are given the freedom to learn about and practice Judaism in a safe, nonjudgmental environment on their own terms. Suddenly, the traditions become each camper's own, and the rituals become personal.

Camp is not alone in its ability to create emotional links. Young Jewish athletes and artists return home from the JCC Maccabi Games and ArtsFest each year with a similar rush and lasting memories, and we are already familiar with the power of Israel trips and social justice immersion programs to do the same.

The profound link to Judaism that these programs create is both beautiful and inspiring, but it leaves all of us who work and volunteer with Jewish organizations with big questions: How can we harness these welcoming, inspiring environments so that youth can experience them year-round? If we're looking to influence Jewish youths on a deeply personal level, then how might we take this incredible community, religion and heritage that we have and make them feel like it's theirs? How can we leverage the 24/7 immersive experiences of Jewish camp to build stronger communities so that we will also hear young people speak of "my congregation" and "my school?"

WE CAN start by engaging in a period of introspection. Over the past year, including the onset of the current global financial crisis, funders have shown they are still investing in the Jewish community, but they have a problem: They are not receiving enough big, bold ideas that will enable them to feel that their investment is truly making a difference. They are not seeing the paths to deeper engagement and personal ties that signal "emotional Judaism." An emotional connection leads to quantitative and qualitative results - imperative in today's funding environment - and organizations need to deliver on both ends of the equation to create a strong return on investment.

When Levi's built its emotional connection to its brand, it did so through intimate commercials that united the consumer directly to the product. Dockers, for example, used men in situations that were comfortable and familiar - standing and talking in a kitchen during a party - to demonstrate the comfort and fit of those pants. Levi's was also the first company that used music as a way to reach specific audiences and create emotional bonds. These connections led to a period of record sales for almost nine successive years.

Jewish camp offers unique traditions and situations that provide similar connections: Friday-night services outside under the stars, rousing song sessions, spirited color wars, post-tournament team huddles and group community service work. These experiences not only build a strong camp community - they also fortify campers as individuals. Through their group experiences, campers each walk away with a new connection, a new perspective, and perhaps even a new friend. In other words, it transforms into my Judaism.

WE NEED to take what we've learned about developing emotional Judaism at camp and use it to construct a "road map" to engagement and success in the Jewish community. If the measure of success is, in fact, my Judaism, then we can start by speaking with our rabbis, our JCC directors, our Jewish school teachers and administrators, our Jewish camp supervisors, counselors and alumni. Perhaps most importantly, we need to reach out to our friends and acquaintances who are less involved in the Jewish experience. We should ask them: How can we engage you as a Jew? How can we make you feel like this is yours?

We need to do this together, and to begin thinking three-dimensionally about how we can leverage our organizational and communal efforts to deliver our sacred missions.

There are myriad options and opportunities for forging an emotional bond between our children and our Jewish world. And just as we invest financial resources to ensure that they attend the college or university of their choice, we need to look at this branding exercise as a similarly sound investment - one with an equally significant return. In the same way that consumers devote themselves to a brand that delivers on its promise, we need to deliver on our promise to Jewish families. We need to create the kind of return on investment that happens when children with formative Jewish experiences become synagogue members, community leaders and adult learners.

And quantitative results aside, we need to keep our sights set on the real return on investment - the one seen when parents arrive at camp at the end of summer and find their child crying, not wanting to let go of their experience and newfound friends, the kind found in that child's statements on the ride home: "This is my community, and my heritage. This is my Judaism."

The writer is CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Camp.