

A Software Engineer, a Hardware Engineer and a Branch Manager were on their way to a meeting. They were driving down a steep mountain road when suddenly the brakes on their car failed. The car careened almost out of control down the road, bouncing off the crash barriers, until it miraculously ground to a halt scraping along the mountainside. The car's occupants, shaken but unhurt, now had a problem: they were stuck halfway down a mountain in a car with no brakes. What were they to do?

"I know," said the Branch Manager, "Let's have a meeting, propose a Vision, formulate a Mission Statement, define some Goals, and by a process of Continuous Improvement find a solution to the Critical Problems, and we can be on our way."

"No, no," said the Hardware Engineer, "That takes too long. I've got my Swiss Army knife with me, and in no time at all I can strip down the car's braking system, isolate the fault, fix it, and we can be on our way."

"Well," said the Software Engineer, "Before we do anything, I think we should push the car back up the road and see if it happens again."

We all tend to look at the problems in an organization from our own particular specialty, often missing the forest for the trees. Although software engineers, managers, and mission statements sometimes have a bad reputation, mission statements can in fact be a good tool, keeping everybody focused in on the right tasks. A mission statement should be a clear and concise guide to the organization, moving it along the path that the statement suggests.

Recently, Bob Stein shared with me his favorite corporate mission statement, from the Ritz-Carlton company. I found it simple and brilliant. It reads:

“Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen.”

It tells us three things:

- 1) No matter who is hired, no matter what they are hired to do, from custodial services to staffing the front desk, they are expected to behave like ladies and gentlemen.
- 2) No matter who walks through the door, regardless of their dress or level of education, they are treated like ladies and gentlemen.
- 3) The verb “serving” links the staff to the customers, creating a community of high quality service.

With the simplicity of this mission statement in mind, here is my proposal for a Congregation Ahavas Israel mission statement:

“Serious Jews Creating Traditional Jewish Community.”

What do I mean by “Serious Jews?”

No matter who walks through the door to our building, if they have taken the step of approaching us, we embrace them as people to whom Judaism is basic to their identity. Rarely does somebody walk through the door who is 100% observant of every mitzvah. We are not looking to be a community exclusive of people who are searching or looking to grow in their Judaism. We treat each person as one who is serious about his or her Jewish identity, and provide an opportunity for growth.

Yom Kippur happens to be a very serious holiday. But so are Sukkot, and Purim as well. Serious doesn't mean that we don't laugh, sing, and be playful. Serious means that the holidays, life cycle occasions, and other obligations of Jewish life are meaningful. Whether we are instructed to fast and pray or whether we are instructed to eat, drink, and be merry, we provide opportunities for every member of our community to share the experience.

What does “Traditional Jewish Community” mean?

The language and forms of Jewish observance as they have been understood for countless generations, are preserved in a traditional community. We are not individuals in prayer today -- we are a community engaged in expressing the same words, the same thoughts, the same feelings as did our medieval European ancestors or our Biblical Middle Eastern ancestors. Our community is a link in a chain stretching thousands of years behind us and reaching before us towards the future. Our community is a link in a chain stretching to every point on the globe where the same stories of the same Torah are read, the same selections from the Prophets are chanted, the same rituals are celebrated for births, B’nai Mitzvah, and weddings, and the same rituals are performed for mourning death and divorce. Our community encourages liturgy and behavior which reminds us of these links, assuring us that we are not alone.

What does the verb “Creating” signify?

The verb linking the serious Jews walking through the door with the traditional Jewish community waiting inside is the most critical part of our mission.

The present tense verb ‘creating’ signifies a community in progress of continually evolving. We are never finished building our community; despite our mandate to be a traditional community, we are also an ever changing community, responding to the needs of changing times. We are creative. We are always looking for new ways of bring traditional forms of Jewish observance into our community.

Serious Jews Creating Traditional Jewish Community both describes the strengths of our community and gives us a suggestion of a direction in which to head to meet the challenges of the next 5 and 10 years.

One of those challenges is detailed by the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey figures that have recently been released. Among the less than surprising findings -- the North American Jewish community is shrinking. Our challenge, as serious Jews creating traditional Jewish community is that in order to create community, we need the raw materials - the Jewish bodies.

The problem is this: Jewish families are raising an average of just under 1.9 children. In order to maintain a stable population, the average needs to be around 2.1 children per family, to account for those who grow up and don’t marry or have children.

One solution, on paper, is simple. Each young couple in the Jewish community need to have another 2/10 of a child. I suggest rounding this up to one more child, since every five houses sharing one child would be difficult.

There is a direct statistical correlation between fewer children and higher levels of education in a household. We are a very well educated community; we delay marriage and children until we are older and more established; and therefore, we have fewer children than it takes to replace ourselves. I encourage young couples to consider having a 3rd child (or more), and even having children at an earlier age. We should also be giving a higher priority to finding a spouse, and not necessarily waiting until the ink is dry on the doctoral dissertation!

This approach would work, but I want to suggest another approach that I find potentially more fruitful. To create is an active verb. We shouldn’t only sit back and wait for Jews to come to or be born to our community. When Abraham and Sarah left Haran for the land of Canaan, the Torah says they left with “the persons that they had acquired in Haran,” *et hanefesh asher asu b’haran*. Midrash understood this as referring to converts whom they had led to believe in the one true God. When the Israelites left Egypt, they left with a “mixed multitude,” an *Erev Rav*.

One midrash suggests that these may be Egyptians who formally devoted themselves to the God and community of the Israelites.

I think that the long term answer to the demographic crisis within the Jewish community is conversion outreach. In the first century C.E., 10% of the Roman Empire was Jewish. There was an awful lot of conversion going on. With the rise of Christianity, conversion to Judaism ground to a screeching halt. The idea that Judaism intensely discourages conversion does not come from Jewish sources. For nearly 2 millennia, Judaism discouraged conversion because the Church made it illegal.

We can and should become known in the community as an address for spiritually inclined searching people to visit, worship, and study. We have begun to move in that direction, but we can do more.

There are two ways to market a product. One way is to set your product alongside another brand, and show how your get the job done in a superior fashion, or at a better price. This is considered aggressive marketing.

The other type of marketing, considerably less aggressive, is to show how your product is a great product on its own merits, without mentioning competing brands.

The first marketing type is typical of evangelical Christianity, which markets itself as the only path to salvation; Brand X -- anything else -- is inferior and the salvation it promises doesn't last beyond your lifetime.

I suspect everybody in this room shares my aversion to marketing Judaism in this way. Most forms of Judaism see Judaism as one path to God, but not the exclusive path, consistent with the second type of marketing. We don't believe that heaven or an afterlife are restricted to Jews. We believe that in the messianic era, all people will **acknowledge** God, not that they will all join the specifically Jewish covenant with God. Essentially, we would say that there are a lot of great religious traditions out there and most of them will give you a clear path to God, but for those who are shopping around, why not try ours?

What can you do to help? If somebody asks you questions about Judaism, answer their questions and tell them that there are classes offered at your synagogue that are open to all who are curious. You don't need to talk about conversion at all. If they come to the realization that they are interested in exploring conversion, they will ask me or you, and you might simply refer them to speak with me.

Marketing our religion is a critical components to the continued success of Congregation Ahavas Israel, as well as the North American Jewish community.

Let me close with a story. Back in the 30's and 40's, there was a teacher at Yeshivah Torah v'Daas named Rabbi Shlomo Hyman. He was well known for the enthusiasm with which he gave every lesson. He would throw himself into the lesson with all his heart, soul, and strength, and by the end he would be drenched in sweat. Once there was a blizzard, and only 3-4 students made it to class. Nevertheless, he began teaching with his usual energy. One student interrupted, and suggested, "Perhaps the Rebbe would like to shorten class today, since there are so very students." Rabbi Hyman insisted on giving the same lesson, teaching 4 students with the same passion he would 100 students.

At the end of class, he said to them, "Do you remember the midrash that says when you kill one person, you also kill all the potential people to whom that person might have given birth? In the same way, I believe that when I teach you, I also teach all those people whom you may

someday teach. I don't consider this a class of just a few students. There is no way of knowing how many people my words will someday reach through you."

We have no way of knowing when or where our words or actions may take root. We have no way of knowing when our words, suggestions, or invitations may someday make a difference in the lives of those who hear them. This is one of the powerful messages of Yom Kippur - that our words have more power than we know. May this Yom Kippur be a year in which we and our community touch many lives; a year in which searching people will find a home within our walls; and a year in which we and our community will grow and prosper.