

Rosh Hashanah Day One/Yom Kippur (Yizkor) Sermon 5783:

Consumer vs. Member, Transactional vs. Transformational: WE NEED YOU.

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Shanah tovah.

This year, my family hit a **milestone** that I wanted to share with you: *[diaper]* This may be the **last... Yanoff... diaper**. As a family, we are, for the **first time in fifteen years** (twelve of them spent here with you at Adath Israel) – for the **first time**, we are **out of diapers. Finished**. Four children. I feel like we should get a **letter of commendation**, a thank you, a “we’ll miss you...” – but the fact that there **IS NO SUCH recognition** actually taught me something this year.... Raising my kids has taught me **many lessons**, and at this milestone I learned an important distinction: The **difference** between being a **consumer**... and a **member**.

It is an important difference – and one that, I think, may help **chart the future path of synagogues** and other communal gatherings. In our Jewish community, are we **consumers**, or are we **members**? Are we customers, expecting a product or a service... or are we **stakeholders, investors** – for whom we should certainly expect a high-level experience, but **FROM whom** the community organization *also* has come to **hope** for an **emotional buy-in**, a **hook**, an **ask** – *not just* what your **Judaism** can **do for you**, but **what you can do for (and with) your Judaism?**...

Amazing: I learned this all from... **diapers**. Or really, from the **end of diapers** in the Yanoff home. Because I was, **unapologetically**, a **CUSTOMER**, a **CONSUMER** of **diapers** (**thousands** of them, biodegradable, washable, disposable, Disney characters, plain, rainbows, butterflies, superheroes...) – for *fifteen years*, a consumer. I am **not**, in any way, a **MEMBER** of some “Diaper Community.” Going forward, in the store, I will **not walk wistfully** down the **diaper aisle**... I will **not** think, “Well, **generations of diaper families** invested in *my* children’s diaper-wearing, so hey, *even though* I’m not using diapers as much now, I’ll **continue my investment**, to **support** the current community of diaper households.”

That’s just **not** how it works. With **diapers**, I was a **CONSUMER**, **not** a **MEMBER**. Now, being a consumer may be a **symptom**, a more-**superficial aspect**, of being a member, of something bigger. For example, though I was a consumer of diapers, I might consider myself, more **long-term**, an **identifying, card-carrying MEMBER** of a wide-ranging community of people who are **caregivers** – parents, but also including anyone who has **ever changed a diaper** – babysitters, nannies, preschool teachers, hands-on grandparents or aunts or uncles... anyone who has stopped on the side of I-95 with cars whizzing by, because the **next exit is [squirm] just... too... far....**

And to **voice a sensitivity** that may be present for some here: I am *also* a **reluctant member** of a community of people who have **experienced loss** surrounding pregnancy, who have struggled to have children in the first place, where **diapers** were the **goal**, the **dream**.

This is the **difference** between being a **consumer** and being a **member**. And here – and in all of our other Jewish affiliations – **ideally**, we are **not consumers, but members**, caring, invested stakeholders. And though it’s been really hard to navigate a Jewish communal institution back to communal gathering, coming out of pandemic – it’s something I **learned** over the past two and a half years: I have learned that, **ideally, you are all, on some level, members... investors** in a Jewish future... by your very presence and involvement here.

If you’re here right now, in-person or online, you get this. Because you **invested** – at the **precise time** when, truth is, try as we might, strive as we certainly did, we **delivered our “product”** with **one hand tied** behind our backs: For consumers, our product as a communal gathering-place, a **beit kenesset** (the Hebrew word for synagogue, which literally means, a “house of gathering”) – for **consumers**, despite our best efforts, our “purchased product” was... **sub-optimal**. And yet, you all **hung on**. And for those of you **new** to Adath Israel, you joined, you **invested, up-front**, you became part of it – **welcome!**

For those of you **NOW** on **livestream** – you have decided to **tune in, log in**, sign up, **HERE**... *despite* the fact that you can go online and “attend” almost any synagogue for **free**. (*Maybe I shouldn’t be telling you that...*). But this is **YOUR place, YOUR home**. Which makes you **NOT consumers**... but **something more**.

Now, a few points of **definition** – about what this **distinction** between membership and consumerism is **NOT**: It's **not** about “**taking attendance**” or “**keeping score**” – that you're *more* a member if you come more often. Remember, we used diapers every day, several times a day, for fifteen years – but we were decidedly *consumers*, not members. So this is **not** about who is “**more**” or “**less**” **frequently or deeply Jewish** – not that I think we could even calculate that by synagogue attendance or Jewish observance.

And being a **MEMBER** does **not** mean that we should *not* expect great things, that we should **tolerate mediocrity** because we're already “in” the community. **NO**: Anyone who has ever worked with me on a program or project knows that it's actually the opposite: We should **expect more** from our communities of affiliation, of covenant. That's what this is, that's what membership is: It's a **COVENANT**, a way of saying “**I'm in**, I'm a part of this.”

But the **real difference** between being a consumer and being a member is whether you're **seeking a relationship** with your Judaism that is **transactional**, or a relationship that is **transformational**. It **often STARTS** as **transactional**: I need a **preschool**, my kids need Jewish education or a bar mitzvah, rabbi will you **marry** me, or do my loved one's **funeral**... but when we do it right together, pretty quickly, it starts to feel **transformational**: That **TOGETHER**, we are **building something** that **sparks growth in one another**... that this affiliation makes us **better, stronger, more celebratory**, more comforted, more **affirmed** in my **identity**, **NOT** in what I **HAVE** or what I **GET**, but in **who I AM**.

Now, this idea of being **PART** of something **transformational** *really cuts against the grain* of societal trends. So much of our world today prizes **consumerism** – the newest iPhone, the latest on-demand show to binge, not at a set communal time so we can all talk about last night's *Seinfeld* episode at work the next day, but whenever **WE** want it, all at once or piecemeal, on-demand. Being a **MEMBER**, a **STAKE-HOLDER** in a **community** is pretty **counter-cultural** nowadays.

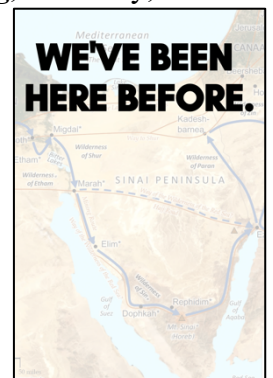
Being a member is **transformational**. Being part of something – a **SMALL but CRITICAL part** of something much **bigger**, much **more impactful** than we could ever be on our own.... Being **part** of something like that, being a **member**, an **emotional investor**, a **stakeholder** grounds us, it makes us... **US**. *Whoever* we are, we learn that, we affirm that, through the places we **IDENTIFY**.

And this is something, right now, that I think **almost ALL of us need**, desperately. Let me ask you, by a **show of hands** (*keep them up*): Does anyone here today feel a little... **uncertain**? A little **unmoored**? A little **less hopeful**, **less optimistic** about the future? Studies show that **this generation** of young adults is the **first generation** in centuries that does **not** think it will **end up better-off** than their parents. Who feels... **unsatisfied**, **uncertain** about where our world, our country, our society is right now, where it's headed? **Hands up!**

With all our **political differences**, our **polarization**, our **religious diversity**, our **economic disparities** – this **uncertainty** may be the only thing we can **almost all agree on!** Some of us are **frustrated** because of **injustices** we perceive in the world.... Some of us are **frustrated** because **reliable, comforting structures** and terms seem to be **slipping away**, making a world that is **angry** and **unnecessarily complex**... some of us have **long felt marginalized** by those **reliable power structures**... and some of us simply **haven't found our place** in a world that **shifts so rapidly**.... I mean, *no matter what* your feelings, don't tell me you **don't** feel just a **little concerned** – that's probably a load of... **[hold up diaper]...**

It's **scary**, for sure, to be that unsure. **Again, hands**: **How many of us** feel like we're **wandering**, aimlessly, in some **wilderness** – we know that where we **were wasn't great**, but where we're **going is unknown**, certainly **no guaranteed “Promised Land”**... and where we **are** is completely foreign?

Well, I have some **comforting, good news**: **We've been here before**. We've been on the **brink**. We've **pulled back** from the brink. **Against all odds**. **Knocked down, spiritually exhausted**, we've **gotten up**, brushed ourselves off, and **built anew**. We've been in the **wilderness** – in Torah times, after the **Exodus** from Egypt, but *also* in the past century, and countless times before: We've **been here before**, and **each time, however improbably** – we've hit some **Promised Land**, some **reason for hope and renewal**. This **very synagogue**, along with so many American synagogues, was founded in the **wake of the darkest, most**



uncertain time in Jewish history, after the **Holocaust** – and here we are, celebrating our 75th anniversary this year, having grown to a vibrant, pre-eminent institution in the region. So **yes, we’ve been here before**, and we’ve **found our way, clawed our way, built and redeemed our way, out of the Wilderness, to a Promised Land**. The Wilderness is **not** just where we **wander** aimlessly; it’s where we **ultimately find our way**. In finding our way, we gain **new insight** and **new direction**.

And if we’re **feeling uncertain**, wandering in the **Wilderness** – isn’t there **comfort** in being **wrapped** in the **embrace** of a **community**, where we’re **not just buying something** for a moment, but **investing for all time**? We just spent two and a half years **isolating, convincing** ourselves we can do things alone. But **guess what: We can’t do it alone**.

We **can’t do it alone** – and that, right there, is our **secret sauce**, the **cure** for feeling so **unmoored**. It’s so **simple** – and it goes back to that **feeling** of being a **member**, *more* than a **consumer**... a **stakeholder**, *more* than a **taker**.

We **first learned** the secret in the **Wilderness** – when Moses and God realized that we needed a Jewish home – and we built the **Mishkan**, the **Tabernacle**, the traveling Temple, the **Porta-Shul**. We were in the Wilderness, as Eagles fans say, “**We all we got – we all we need**.” – And **people gave** so much of themselves... Yes, they gave resources – but that’s not what the Torah emphasizes. The Torah teaches us they **gave, kol nediv libo** – each person **gave** their **heart**... their **talents**, their **caring**, their **love**, their **commitment**. And without the heart of **every single person** – that Jewish home would have felt emptier. Because we can’t do it alone.

Kol nediv libo – to give our heart – *that’s* what it means to be a **member**, *more* than a **consumer**. You want to know the **secret sauce** to feeling better about where we are as a society right now? It’s **so easy**, it’s **so Jewish**; it’s **three words**: **[Uncle Sam sign “I Want You”] – NO, not that one, this one: [REY Uncle Sam] - WE NEED YOU**.



WE... NEED... YOU. That’s it. That’s our **secret sauce**. **[Last Sign] We need you.** And *especially*, at this **uncertain time**, this **inflection point** for Jewish communal institutions, for synagogues, we need you. Rosh Hashanah is *Yom Harat Olam* – a day the world was **imagined, reimaged, recreated**: That’s what’s going on in synagogues all around the world – we’re **recreating it, putting it back together, imagining anew**. And that’s **why we need you**. We need you at **daily minyan**, we need you at **Shabbat**, we need you at **Kiddush**, we need you to **volunteer**, we need you at every **class and social action project and school event and Israel gathering and gift shop sale and play audition**. Please **don’t take it for granted** that there are **enough people**. It’s not going to happen automatically, some minyan by **serendipity**. We are **out of the habit** – **ALL of us** – and so we need you, all of you.

Now, maybe there’s a slight **risk** in saying this, “We need you.” Do I sound **desperate**? Do we seem vulnerable? People like to back a **winning horse**. Are we **vulnerable**? I mean, we’re **doing better** than most shuls out there – but yes, we need you. We’re **vulnerable**, but **we’ve been here** wandering in the wilderness before, and each time, we’ve reached the **Promised Land**, so I’m hopeful... But *still*, we need you. **Kol nediv libo** – **we need your heart**.

... And that’s a **GOOD thing**. Barbara Streisand said it: **[SING] “People who need people – are the luckiest people in the world.”** So yes, we need you. And we **want you to need us**. **THIS is a transformational relationship**, what

it is to be a **member**, a **part** of something, **not just buying or consuming** some product. It's the **gift** we offer you: The **gift of being needed**.

That's what **this place can offer** you, right now: The **gift of being needed**. There may be **no better, no more affirming** gift – than to be needed. It's **not just transactional** – it's **transformational**.

Now, I ask of us: **Will we rise to the call** of being needed? Will we give our hearts? I hope so – but **think** about just **HOW transformational** even a **small response rate** would be! Think about it: If just a **QUARTER** of the people here said, “Okay, I hear him, they need me, so... ***ooh, that feels good, to be needed...*** So good... I'll come to **Shabbat** or holiday services, once or twice a month” – our community would be completely different. If just **FIVE PERCENT** of this congregation said, “*Ooh, I like this being-needed feeling.* I'll come once a week to a **minyan**” – we'd *never* be nervously **counting** people again. Against even a **small response rate**, our **marginal success rate** for outcomes is **ENORMOUS**. That's why I'm hopeful.

But **don't** let that allow you to **sit back**: **Imagine** that **YOU** are that person, the **ONLY person**, doing it... that **YOU ARE** the **success rate**, the **tenth** at the minyan, the **one** who volunteers in the gift shop or gives just a little more of yourself, because it **feels GOOD TO BE NEEDED** this much, at this critical moment in our history. You will **feel – FULL. Fulfilled**. Filled with **love, more joy, more comfort, more heart**. It's like a **flame**: It only adds light by sharing that light. It is a sacrifice, but it is a sacrifice that does not diminish, but adds.

I mean, isn't that **why we're here, right now**? Because we realize that, to feel comfort, to remember the lights that illumined us, the people who came before us – that we **can't fully do that alone...** that **we need one another**, to experience the **comfort** of being **wrapped in, embraced by**, a **community**?

As it says in the **Psalms**, which we'll recite on **Sukkot**: **[SING]** “*Lo ha-meitim y'halleluyah...*” – that **those** whom we come to **remember need US**, too – they need us to **remember them**, because they cannot be remembered, without us, together. **They need our heart**, our **love**, to conjure their **memory**, to **inspire** our **lives**; they **need our heart – kol nediv libo**.

At the High Holidays, we are instructed to **imagine** ourselves as **scales**, perfectly balanced – such that **ONE tiny**



mitzvah can **tip our scales** in the right direction. **One thing**, makes all the difference... It's all that is needed. **YOU are all that is needed. We... need... you.** That's why, in front of you, right now, you see a different kind of **pledge card**: It has a **fold-down tab** for a way to feel needed. Pick one. Pick them all! But the ushers at the back have **name labels**. Find your name,



put it on the card, **fold down a tab** – and **feel** what it feels like to be **needed**, what it feels, **kol nediv libo** – to give your heart.

THAT's the **secret sauce** to feeling **more grounded, more anchored, more affirmed**. It's to **feel... NEEDED**. To feel like a **member**, a **stakeholder**, a **part** of something that **needs** you, **needs each one** of us, and that we need it – *less* as a **transactional consumer**, and *more* in a **covenantal, two-way, engaging, transformational relationship**. I **pray** that we **enter this year, re-affirmed** in our connection here, to one another. I **pray** that we **step up, knowing** that we're **needed, knowing** that we can **lean on** and **rely on** one another, at **this critical moment** and always. **Keyn yehi ratzon** – So may it be God's will. And let us say: AMEN.

Let us lean on one another, let us need one another and BE needed BY one another – seeking comfort from the wilderness of these past few years, the wilderness of difficult emotions – as we join together for the Yizkor service...