

Does anyone here like Jimmy Buffet? I've been a pretty loyal fan for the past 25 years, and never tire of hearing songs like *Cheeseburger in Paradise* (its kosher if you only listen to the music), or *Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes*. But my absolute Jimmy Buffet favorite is a lesser known ditty from his 1976 release, *Havana Dreaming*. It's a catchy tune entitled *This Hotel Room*, and goes something like this: This hotel room got a lot of stuff, a laundry bag and a shoe shine buff; two big chairs sitting side by side, with a Holy Bible and a TV guide -- TV guide, TV guide, great God almighty it's a TV guide. . . ."

The first time my wife, Susan, heard me play this song, she immediately said, "He must have written that one for you." She was absolutely right: the fact is, I've loved staying at hotels ever since I was a child. The more stuff a hotel has, the happier I am. I may never use the facility's business center, but I take pleasure in knowing its availability 24/7. Give me an outdoor/indoor pool with a spa facility, maid service, room service, an all-you-can-eat-breakfast buffet, a micro-fridge and honor bar with twelve varieties of snacks . . . and I'm in heaven. There's something very special about a place where food appears at your door for the asking, and someone makes your bed every morning without having to be asked. Sure, you have to pay for it, but that's a mere technicality. If the world-to-come is anything like the Ritz-Carlton, I, for one, will have no complaints!

Last Yom Kippur I preached a sermon about the importance of congregational "customer service". An effective synagogue and a well-run hotel share a variety of common denominators: Both exhibit a welcoming demeanor, have thoughtful and caring staffs, and strive to anticipate people's needs even before they are articulated. The feeling that every individual counts is fundamental to the success of shuls and Sheratons alike.

We've made many strides toward becoming a more welcoming congregation in the past year. No, we don't offer a turndown service or place a chocolate mint on your pillow, but we have gotten better at warmly embracing those who walk through our doors. And that is important -- not only because the satisfaction of our membership is crucial to our well-being and growth, but also because our tradition encourages affability. To quote the words of the great 1st

century sage Shammai, “הוי מקבל את כל האדם בסבר פנים יפות” -- Greet every person with a cheerful countenance” (*Avot* 1:15).

But even as we must continue to fashion ourselves into a more user-friendly facility, we need to be careful not to confuse medium with message. Customer satisfaction is a means to an end, not the mission itself. The corporate world speaks the lingo of market share and consumer research, profit margins and commercial branding; that language is useful whether you’re selling Calvin Klein’s Eternity or God’s Eternity. Yet there is still a crucial difference between a product and a way of life. Beyond the commercial hype, companies aren’t in the business of caring whether their wares make you into better human beings; they don’t judge success by the extent to which their products inspire you to lead a meaningful life suffused with holiness and purpose. In the it-oriented world of business, market share and revenue are the Holy Grails to pursue; they, and they alone, determine the value of the product.

To reach our full potential as a synagogue isn’t about doing more consumer research, or offering sexier programming, or making our services more theatrical . . . though I’d be the first to admit that all of these might prove useful. Rather, to be the best congregation we can be requires that looking beyond the paradigm of a well-run hotel, and imagine ourselves as a spiritual home and haven, as a community in which we connect through others to God, and through God to others. It’s about being a place that changes people’s lives starting with our own. To be the best congregation we can is about much more than asking what you want of God; its about inspiring you to ask God what He wants of you.

Synagogues will always fall short of the mark if they operate like hotels or health clubs. As we know from the tight economy we’re currently in, luxury items are the first to go by the wayside when times are tough. The pampering of a five-star hotel may be a *mehaye*, but you and I can make do without it, if need be. When synagogues are only about the quality of their programming or services, they invariably create the conditions of their own obsolescence, because there’ll always be someone who isn’t interested in the product being sold. Empty nesters don’t need synagogues -- their children are grown. Singles and DINKs (Double Income No

Kids) don't need synagogues -- they don't have children. Other Jews, young or old, don't need synagogues because it's too far, there are too many kids, not enough kids, the services are too traditional, not traditional enough, or I don't attend frequently enough to justify the cost. Around the country and across the globe, houses of worship will continue to invent and re-invent themselves as they pursue an elusive vision of a Jewish El Dorado, the perfect balance of programming that appeals to all people all the time. But so long as we define our mission as offering the program that our customers want, we will never reach the Promised Land..

Most of us in this room believe in God in some fashion. Even those who struggle with the notion of a personal God still have faith in some cosmic moral force -- we believe that kindness and compassion, integrity and justice have an objective claim on our behavior. Judaism teaches we are fashioned *b'tzelem Elokim*, in God's image, and consequently, there is a spark of the Divine inside each of us, that we are priceless and unique. It would seem to follow that if God put such loving care into our creation, there's got to be some purpose to our existence. Yet how often do we stop and ask ourselves, "Why did God give me the soul that I have? What was God's thinking in placing me on this earth here and now? Will it matter that I lived? Will I leave something worthwhile behind when I go?" These questions are not about programs, they're about purpose; they go to the very heart of being human. They impact equally on all of us, regardless of the demographic group to which we belong. You can terminate a synagogue membership, but it's much harder to resign from the search for meaning; living with a sense of vital purpose is indispensable. Were we to frame our reason for existing as a congregation in these terms, to help individuals ask these questions and explore how Judaism might answer them, we could stop worrying about how relevant we are. Because if asking "Why am I alive and what does God want from me?" is irrelevant, then I don't know what is.

We've just spent the last several hours singing, chanting, reading and mumbling about how great God is. And in just a little while, we're going to spend a couple more hours singing, chanting, reading and mumbling about how great God is. Well, if God is so great, then why do synagogues spend so little time trying to understand what it is that God wants of us? We need forums and focus groups, power point presentations and bar charts, 8 x 10 color glossy photographs with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one -- but friends, we'll

never transform the Jacksonville Jewish Center into a change agent of spiritual growth unless we also start talking about what it is that God would like of us.

When God doesn't live at the very heart of our communal life, a fundamental disconnect takes place. A passionate sermon about the terrible sin of gossip is followed by gossip during *kiddush*; the lesson about respect for fellow students is followed by bullying in the lunchroom; the *d'var torah* about *menschlichkeit* in the board room is followed by *unmenschlich* behavior in the parking lot. To talk about God is very different than to enter into a relationship with God. It is not surprising that so many of us don't find attending services a more meaningful experience -- because when we are here we talk about God rather than to God; even more sadly, we no longer know how to hear God's voice, whether channeled through the prayer book, the Torah reading, the sermon, the pangs of our own conscience, the hunger of our own souls, or the wonder and gratitude of simply being alive.

In the *shul*-as-Sheraton model, successful worship is measured exclusively by enjoyment and attendance. What did people get out of it? How many came? How long did it last? Was the music catchy? Was the rabbi's sermon interesting? Sometimes people say "Rabbi, I really enjoyed services today". At other moments I hear, "Rabbi, our services would draw more folks if (-- you fill in the blank --) a) they were shorter; b) had less Hebrew; c) included an elaborate *kiddush* every week; d) featured a gospel choir."

Don't get me wrong . . . we need to be creative, to think out of the box, to offer a variety of alternative worship experiences. But to enter truly into the realm of the sacred requires that we have to hold ourselves open to God; it's not merely about what I want, what I need, what I like; it is about what God asks and expects of me. It's about a readiness to stretch myself, to open up, to take risks, to trust in God and my community to guide me. And if we're afraid to sing, to clap, to sway, to tap, to hum, to make a mistake in the Hebrew, to look foolish, to be looked at, it's because we haven't yet learned how to free ourselves from the prison of the "I", that fear of looking foolish which is itself a kind of reverse egoism. If God is happy that you're swaying, clapping or humming, who cares if the nice lady two rows back gives you a funny look? This isn't about her and you, it's about God and you.

More than two centuries ago, the Berdichever Rebbe composed a simple poem which he'd often sing as a love song to God. himself: *Riboyno shel oylom, ich vil dir a dudele shpilen* -- Master of the Universe, I will sing you a song. Where I wander -- You! Where I ponder -- You! Only You, You again, always You! Sky is You, earth is You, You above, You below, In every tread, at every end, Only You, You again, always You! *Du, Du, Du!*

That, my friends, is what real prayer is about. And when we grasp that, we will begin to understand that worship isn't limited to what happens in this room. Worship happens when our hands, our feet, our thoughts are directed to God and by God. Worship is not a part of congregational life, *it is congregational life*. A synagogue that genuinely hugs its members by asking them when they've been touched by God and why has achieved a moment of real *davening*; giving *tzedakah* is an act of prayer; visiting the lonely and the sick is worship, as is joyously dancing around bride and groom at a Jewish wedding; or learning to read Hebrew to engage oneself more fully in the liturgical life of the Jewish people, that's worship, too. When we act ethically, when we make love to our soulmates, when we resist temptation to undermine the fidelity of our marriages, when we strive to teach our children to be *menschlich*, these are all acts of worship. You above, You below, Only You, You again, always You! *Du, Du, Du!*

To flourish as a synagogue we must spread the word that worship isn't simply about what we get out of services, but what God gets out of us as a result. We must teach ourselves and others -- those who come once a week and those who come once a year -- that there are as many opportunities for worship as there are minutes in a day and places on earth. Everything we do must communicate this message, because if we don't, we run the risk of making our services -- no matter how well attended, and no matter how enjoyable -- obsolete and unnecessary. We must preach this lesson as if our life as a synagogue depended on it . . . because it does.

Some years ago I happened to be on vacation with Susan and the kids. We occupied a suite on the top floor of a rather nice hotel . . . hey, there was even a TV in the bathroom! Around 4:30 AM the Sunday morning of our stay, I heard the loudest, and most horrific noise of my life: it was the hotel's fire alarm. We sprang out of bed, grabbed the kids, ran out the door, and made our way down 16 flights of stairs. It wasn't until we were standing outside in the

parking lot that I realized I'd left my shoes upstairs. Believe me, standing barefoot on the pavement in the darkness of an icy cold January morning in Wilmington, Delaware isn't something you want to do too often. But as I hopped painfully from one frozen sole to the other, a fellow hotel guest took pity and gave me the extra blanket he had grabbed from his room. The fire engines soon arrived and the process of checking each floor for signs of danger began. As soon as it was safe to re-enter the lobby, some of the guests took it upon themselves to make hot chocolate from the coffee stand in the hotel foyer, and to pass around the hot cups. In those few minutes, a common experience transformed us from a hotel full of strangers to a community of caring individuals. We introduced ourselves, laughed about the twist of fate that brought us together at 5 AM in a hotel lobby. It was a temporary community, to be sure, but for the duration of its existence, it was nonetheless real. And wonderful.

Now, we're not going to pull any fire alarms this morning. But I am going to ask that each one of you turn to a person you didn't come with, and preferably someone you've never met. Look to the row behind you, or tap the shoulder of someone sitting in front of you. Don't worry that you're interrupting the sermon . . . I want you to. Introduce yourself. Share one thing about yourself with that person. Wish them a happy and healthy year. Do it now!

You see, when you or I go to a hotel we're generally not interested in our neighbors . . . except when the folks next door make too much noise. We put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the front door, turn the lock twice and make sure the latch is on as well. Every guest room is an island to itself in a sea of customer service. And that's how it's supposed to be.

But synagogues, unlike hotels, aren't about what we do with aloneness, but rather how we celebrate togetherness. To know what God wants of us is not only to look upward or within, it is to look into the face of other people and to see the Divine Image reflected in their eyes. We cannot love the Godspark of our own souls if we do not love others, nor can our hearts touch God, if we cannot touch one another's hearts.

And that my friends is yet another reason why we need synagogues -- they teach us that to be truly human requires that we participate in the fellowship of community, it reminds that

living with purpose and meaning is founded upon giving of ourselves to others. What if the Jacksonville Jewish Center formed volunteer crews to build housing for the poor? What if we offered to staff hospital gift shops on Christmas or Easter? What if serving as a PTA officer were perceived as a sacred trust? What if being on the Finance Committee were viewed as an opportunity to further God's own plans for this congregation? What if you expected yourselves to volunteer five times each year as members of the synagogue because you knew that God wanted you to participate in the sacred task of building a holy community? Can you imagine how exciting and vibrant we would be as a House of God?

Maybe it's all pie-in-the-sky, but evangelical churches do it all the time. And they're good at bringing people in, not just because they have slick marketing, but because they really mean what they say, and say what they mean; they preach it and they practice it. The secret of their success is the knowledge that living for God's glory doesn't begin with hymn singing in the sanctuary, but with baking cookies for God's glory in the kitchen. If we can figure out a way to put our love of God into the cookie batter of a PTA bake sale, the rest will come naturally.

Friends, there is a certain hotel that is "Programmed to receive. You can checkout anytime you like, But you can never leave!" But with all due respect to the California rock band, *The Eagles*, we do not have an open-ended reservation in this world. We are temporary guests here; for each of us there is a check-in date and a check-out time. We can opt to lead our lives and run our synagogues along the lines of a hotel. But think about the last time you left a hotel room -- if you are like me, you probably checked the drawers and underneath the bed for any stray possessions, zipped up your bag, and took one last look around the room that had been yours -- other than an unmade bed and a few towels on the floor, there was nothing that indicated you had ever been there. Twenty minutes of maid service and even that nominal evidence of your existence would be utterly erased. The next guest would never suspect that you had once existed, the sterile furnishings identical to those of a hundred other rooms would never reveal that once you had lodged there.

Synagogues can be like that, if we choose them to be. Our members can come, be served, and disappear without trace. But if we choose to, this can be a place that challenges us to grow toward God each and every year; this can be a place that offers us an opportunity to matter because we care enough to make a difference, because we believe God trusts us enough to make us partners in the sacred task of healing this fractured world. We can be that synagogue, because so often we already are. In the coming year, may God help us understand that we can be as holy as we allow ourselves to be. Where I wander -- You! Where I ponder -- You! Only You, You again, always You! Sky is You, earth is You, You above, You below, In every tread, at every end, Only You, You again, always You! *Du, Du, Du!*