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The Miami Herald 

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Forbes

The Washington Times

Note; Versions of this article appeared in over 30 daily newspapers and magazines, here's one of the articles that features our Genuine Fake Rabbi's.

Religion Today

Thursday, September 28, 2006

Some call it the seat tax, and not with affection. During the Jewish High Holy Days, the ticket fee to attend some synagogues can reach hundreds of dollars.

It's enough to keep some young adults away, Jackie Saltz realized. "Couples would say, 'Look, it's not that we're poor, but we have expenses. Rent comes first,'" he said.

So as the 10 days that span Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur continue through next Monday, Saltz leads one of several efforts to erase those fees. They're meant to bring a generation back to the faith while the percentage of Americans joining synagogues continues to fall.

In Atlanta, one Orthodox synagogue hosted a free, shorter, English-only Rosh Hashanah service hosted by two young men who call themselves "genuine fake rabbis." Worshippers could wear what they liked, enjoy the leisurely 10 a.m. start and eat a free meal afterward. Last year, in the service's second year, about 200 people came. Most were young professionals.

"Free -- we feel it's critical," said 32-year-old Matt Lewis, one of the "fake rabbis" who guides the service and answers questions. Regular membership at Congregation Beth Jacob is about \$1,000, holiday tickets included. Six other U.S. congregations in the Orthodox Union are holding the free, so-called "Beginners' Services" this year.

To someone outside Judaism, the holiday fees may be surprising. "Why should I have to pay to pray?" said Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg of the Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C., echoing a common question.

Part of the reason is to fund a faith that doesn't pass the hat on the Sabbath _ and to pay for the extra staff and services required at the busiest time of the Jewish year.

The Chabad Lubavitch movement this month launched JewishNewYear.org, a search engine of more than 2,000 centers around the world that offer free holiday services. In the Boston suburbs, 26-year-old Jesse Grinberg, took advantage of Chabad after

learning the closest Conservative temple charged about \$700 a seat for the Yom Kippur service. The closest Reform temple charged about \$400.

Grinberg was just starting his own Internet-based business and didn't have that kind of money. "I thought I'd shop around more," he said.

Saltz is leading the second year of "Come Home for the Holidays," which matches young people who grew up in the Conservative movement with free places to worship. More than 115 synagogues across the country are participating.

"It's like a free trial," said 27-year-old Gabe Taraday. Last year, the project matched him and about 75 others with free services at Adas Israel, where holiday tickets are usually \$100. A free New Year's lunch and a free fast-breaking meal were included.

Since then, Taraday has organized semimonthly Friday services at Adas Israel for young professionals. But like the majority of Jews in America, he hasn't joined the congregation as a member. The 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey found that just 46 percent of U.S. Jews belong to a synagogue.

"However, 80-plus percent become members at some point," said Steven Bayme, who studies contemporary Jewish life for the American Jewish Committee. "By offering tickets, synagogues are saying, 'Look, we know you're not a member today, but we know you're interested.'"

The trend to free tickets can mean an investment in possible future members. But some synagogues say they're happy just to attract and educate the curious.

Last month, Rabbi Selwyn Franklin and other members of the BMH-BJ Congregation set up card tables outside Denver grocery stores. They handed out honey cakes and invitations to a free "learner's service" at the Traditional synagogue during the High Holy Days. Free baby-sitting was included. Holiday tickets usually are \$200.

"We wanted to make it as easy as possible," said Connie Susan, the congregation's membership coordinator. She said about 150 new people were expected to attend.

They included Julie Horowitz, 36, who missed holiday services last year because she was "too new" to the city. The free service attracted her this year.

Also planning to attend was Valerie Varan, 46, who isn't a practicing Jew at all. She'd meant to dodge Franklin and his card table outside the grocery store, but "he had a gentle warmth and smile. And his Australian accent was so cute."

She planned to attend the holiday service with friends. Varan is liberal in her religious approach, but fiscally conservative.

"I'm not gonna pay to explore. No way!" she said. "If it weren't free, we wouldn't be there."