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“Genuine Fake Rabbis” are a hit with the unaffiliated



BY **Joel Alpert**

Getting unaffiliated Jews into a synagogue is no easy task, even on the High Holidays. Many people don't have much of a Jewish education or familiarity with rituals. And many have an interest in keeping up with our Jewish traditions, but don't feel that comfortable walking into a synagogue that they don't attend very often. Getting unaffiliated Jews into an Orthodox synagogue could be even more challenging.

Enter, stage left, the Genuine Fake Rabbis of the Atlanta Jewish Experience.

They're two lay leaders, non-rabbis, who lead unique learner's services in Atlanta. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services last year, almost 300 unaffiliated Jews followed these pied pipers into a synagogue for what was promised to be inspiring services they could understand and appreciate.

Four years ago, Beth Jacob, “the Orthodox synagogue for all Jews” started a learner's service for the High Holidays. Little did the congregation know that, by becoming “fake,” the project could gain so much genuine attention. But let's take a step back, and see how “the experience” evolved.



Genuine Fake Rabbis: Kivi Bernard and Matt Lewis

Matt Lewis and Kivi Bernhardt are two Beth Jacob members who gave up their own participation in High Holiday services to do this community outreach. In their first year, they had 40 or so people at Rosh Hashanah services and about 70 at the Yom Kippur service. “We thought there were many more people, young people especially,” says Matt Lewis, “who would be interested in our services, and we wanted to share what we could offer and actively promote these unusual services.”

Taking on the marketing of these holiday services, Matt, Kivi, and I “pumped up the volume.” First we named the services “Atlanta Jewish Experience,” designed a logo, developed a four-color ad campaign in distinctive colors, and gave this learner's service a home on the internet at www.AtlantaJewishExperience.org. We promised our services would be “spiritual, but accessible...with fewer prayers and more perspective.”

We explained that you don't have to be familiar with ritual, and you don't need to read Hebrew. It was for anyone with any level of experience and from any background—Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist—who wanted an interactive, experiential service that had explanations and inspiration for the coming New Year. We also explained that it wouldn't cost a nickel to get in, and there would be no solicitation.

An Associated Press reporter, who was doing an article on the annual scramble for

High Holiday tickets, saw our ads. She was particularly intrigued by the phrase we used in last year's marketing, which branded the two lay leaders as “Genuine Fake Rabbis.” Her article eventually appeared in 30 daily newspapers and publication websites, including *New York Newsday*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Miami Herald*, *Washington Times*, and *Forbes*. And when she mentioned the “Genuine Fake Rabbis,” that handle stuck. In fact, people who made it to the services—and even people who didn't—seemed to remember “Genuine Fake Rabbis” as much as “Atlanta Jewish Experience.”

At last year's services, a wide variety of people experienced these “genuine fakes,” including three college girls with nose rings, grandmothers who always wanted to know more, a gentleman from Alabama

dressed in army camouflage, a father from Alpharetta with his three sons—and even a few members of Congregation Beth Jacob, our host synagogue, who wanted to sit in on these unusual and inspiring services.

Participants heard inspiring stories and perspectives on the Jewish New Year from Kivi Bernhardt (the son of a real rabbi in South Africa), whose knowledge of leopards in the African jungle somehow seamlessly makes its way into conversations about our individuality and our Jewish spiritual heritage. “It is, indeed, a privilege for me to have the opportunity to talk with my fellow Jews from all backgrounds about the meaning and perspective of our traditions and perhaps ignite a spark that touches their Jewish souls.”

Participants also benefited from Matt Lewis' practical introductions to prayers, responsive readings in English, and answers to questions about the services, plus a no-holds-barred Q&A session about anything Jewish, where all sorts of usual and unusual questions were discussed. Throughout the service and during the Q&A, there were quite a few raised eyebrows and “so that's what that's all about” moments of recognition.

From reports last year, most participants were wowed. One said, “It was a great experience. And probably my first visit to synagogue during High Holidays when I did not feel that I do not belong there.” Another said, “It was my first time at this congrega-

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Fake Rabbi

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tion. Since I am not Orthodox, I would not have come otherwise. Their interesting examples, metaphors, explanations were most enjoyable." And Jewish DJ Jimmy Baron, formerly of Atlanta's 99X, said, "It helped me understand Judaism a lot better. Everybody I talked to left feeling they had gotten something meaningful and valuable."

This year, we took the marketing concept further, capitalizing on the press we received last year. We developed the official Genuine Fake Rabbi (GFR) seal and bestowed it upon Matt and Kivi. As we did last year, in this year's marketing we've promised that Matt, an anesthetist in real life, won't put people to

sleep, and Kivi, an outdoorsman from South Africa, will leave his machete at home.

We also began to take advantage of "Web 2.0" internet tools—the enhanced capabilities and interactivity available via evolving internet technology—by embedding a fun video on every page of our website. And we're offering free tickets that are personalized and returned via e-mail immediately after you request a ticket on the site. So that's instant gratification plus access to a taste of our Jewish heritage—a pretty sweet deal for the New Year.

L'shanah Tovah!

Joel Alpert, a direct marketing specialist and business strategist, has been a part of what's now called Atlanta Jewish Experience since 2005.