

Synagogues adjust ticket policies for High Holy Days

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(RNS) The sputtering economy is fueling changes in synagogues' ticketing policies and marketing strategies for their annual High Holy Days services.

Synagogues typically require annual memberships or a fee to attend services over the High Holy Days, which start Wednesday (Sept. 28) with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and continue through the end of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, on Oct. 8

But this year, some Jewish communities are trying new approaches to bring in financially distressed Jews and those who feel little connection to Jewish life.

"You're starting to see more synagogues going for the free model," said Rabbi Motti Seligson, a spokesman for Chabad, a traditionalist Orthodox movement that uses Jewish holidays as an outreach to lapsed Jews.

Tickets to High Holy Days services can cost between \$100 and \$200, and annual membership for a family can top \$2,000.

One Chabad congregation in Yorba Linda, Calif., mailed free High Holy Days tickets to 2,500 families. The mailings targeted those who

likely would not attend services otherwise.

Rabbi David Eliezrie, the leader of the Yorba Linda congregation, said his group has always done some advertising, but never before mailed out tickets. The tickets invite families to register online for reserved seats at High Holy Days services, free of charge.

"There's no question that the economic environment has become an inhibitor for people to become more involved with the Jewish community," said Eliezrie.

A synagogue an hour north of New York City also mailed out free tickets, and is advertising through lawn signs that say "High Holidays On Us." A companion TV commercial features a "welcoming message" from talk show host Larry King.

"People have been calling, people have been thanking," said Rabbi Shmuel Gancz of the Chabad Jewish Center of Suffern, N.Y. "It's been tremendous."

Gancz spoke of one woman who had lost a job with a six-figure salary and wasn't able to afford a synagogue membership anymore. Receiving a free ticket in the mail prompted her to return to the High Holy Days services for the first time in four years.

Seligson said there has been a "spike in interest" this year in the free High Holy Days services listed on a searchable database on Chabad.org. But financial barriers are not the only reason Jews might stay away from High Holy Days services, Eliezrie said.

"We're dealing here with a confluence of different issues: an economic challenge, (and) a modern Jew who knows less about their tradition and who doesn't feel that same kind of cultural, emotional, historical and spiritual connection as in the past," he said.

Recognizing that "sometimes people are not very comfortable with going to a synagogue," Rabbi Yisrael Kugel of Chabad's West Side Center for Jewish Life is offering a free service in Manhattan's Central Park where people can hear the shofar, a traditional ram's horn blown during High Holy Days services.

While many of the free offerings are being hosted by Chabad centers, they aren't the only Jewish communities that are changing their High Holy Days business models.

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism sponsors a program called "Come Home for the Holidays" that offers free High Holy Days tickets at congregations around the world to "young adults who grew up in the Conservative Movement."

Temple Shalom, a Reform congregation in suburban Washington, has family-oriented Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur afternoon services that don't require tickets.

For the past several years, Temple Shalom has offered complementary tickets to all High Holy Days services to "anyone who meets with Temple Shalom clergy to discuss personal Jewish needs and goals."

Although High Holy Days tickets are a main source of funds for most synagogues, Eliezrie and Seligson said that open services also can be a financially viable path.

When fees are made optional, Seligson said, people who can afford it might contribute even more, because they want to support "this kind of open environment."

"The old business model is not necessarily the one that's going to work nowadays," said Eliezrie. "We don't have membership. We just thought we'd get rid of that whole thing."