

## Why Be Jewish?

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Why be Jewish?

Why **do** Jewish?

We, American Jews, live in a time of choice. We choose to belong to a synagogue or not. We choose to keep kosher or not. We choose whether to find community among Jews, or not.

Whether or not to do Jewish, is a choice for us in a way that it wasn't for most of our grandparents and great-grandparents. They *did* Jewish because they *were* Jewish. As recent immigrants, they needed support and camaraderie that comes from fellow immigrants. They suffered through antisemitism and snubbing, which prevented them from marrying non-Jews and joining other communities. Now, most of us do not have immigrant mentalities or deal with snubbing on any significant level. For us, even though we *are* Jews, we can easily choose not to identify with Judaism in any way whatsoever. So, why should we be Jewish?

The new great wave of Jews, millennials, seem keenly aware that Jewish identity is not a given; it's a choice. In his book, *Next Generation Judaism*<sup>1</sup>, Rabbi Mike Uram describes the choosiness of millennials. Millennials, he says, "expect unlimited options and a high degree of customization for everything, whether it be their food, their consumer products or even their religion . . . This is all part of a larger shift in our society from a 'Ford economy' built on uniformity, which allowed companies to sell one product to a larger number of people, to a 'Starbucks' economy, where the best companies sell products that feel perfectly tailored to our particular needs."

Whether we like it or not, many Jews see Judaism as a product or service to be consumed; and Jewish leaders—again, whether we like the situation or not--must be ready to explain to Jews why they *ought* to choose Judaism.

To make that case the next generation of Jewish leaders should learn from a valuable concept popular in the business world: "A Value Proposition." A successful business articulates value propositions that explain how its product or service benefits its users, keeping in mind that different value propositions will appeal to different users, as they have different needs. For example, Starbucks offers different value propositions that appeal to different customers. It might be consistent coffee for one person. For another, it might be convenience. Either way, the value proposition expresses what the customer gets out of the product or experience. Successful companies express their value propositions to customers, and no less importantly, they hold themselves responsible for delivering on their promise.

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<sup>1</sup> Pages 7-8

We Jewish leaders need to be able to articulate the value proposition of being and doing Jewish. We need to express the ways Judaism enriches the lives of Jews, in a manner that appeals to Jews today.

We know that to be healthy we need to exercise. I know that meditating will calm my mind and help sustain me. Yoga combines taking care of body and mind. Each of these activities has clear and known benefits to the user.

But are we able to answer the question: What are the tangible benefits to joining a synagogue? Or how does participating in Jewish life help me improve myself? Why should *I* be Jewish?

Can our congregants, our campers, our members, answer these questions?

We should not be scared of value propositions, they are nothing new to Judaism.

God presents Abraham with a value proposition that suits Abraham's needs. Three times in *bereshit* God promises Abraham that if Abraham follows God, God will make him a great nation, will bless him, will give his descendants the Promised Land and make him the father of numerous offspring.<sup>2</sup>

Why be Jewish? For Abraham, because Judaism ensures he will prosper.

We find another value proposition when the Israelites escaped 400 years of slavery and took their first steps as free people, as they approached the Sea of Reeds. The water parted, and the Israelites streamed forth onto the dry land, each step carrying them farther from slavery and closer to freedom.

Why be Jewish? For the Israelites, because Judaism freed them from slavery.

For previous generations of Jews, ensuring the survival of Judaism or the Holocaust were reasons to be Jewish.

It is time for us to rethink our value proposition. As Jewish professionals we need to be able to articulate what doing Jewish gives Jews.

I am compelled by three value propositions to be Jewish.

1. Judaism catalyzes my personal transformation. *Tfillah* supplies me with the space to reflect and be grateful. In striving toward its ethical teachings, Judaism reminds me my actions are just as important as my beliefs. The practice of *tshuva* emphasizes the continual process of personal growth.
2. Judaism is a source of relationship bridging. It teaches me to find the humanity and God in the face of every person. It calls me to see the whole world as a collection of You's not It's. At the same time, Judaism gives me a community and demands I reach beyond it
3. Judaism guides me in my quest for meaning. In the depths of the horrors of a concentration camp, Viktor Frankel argues it is meaning and the pursuit of a goal that

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<sup>2</sup> Gen 12:1-3, 15:18-21, 17:9-14

keep people going. He wrote, “the meaning of life is to give life meaning”. Judaism is the system of rituals and marking time that imbues my life with meaning. Judaism teaches me there are things I can only come to understand through doing, especially when those actions are inconvenient like Kashrut, keeping Shabbat, and *tfillah*.

Why be Jewish? Because for me, Judaism leads to personal transformation, relationship bridging and a quest for meaning.

But it is not enough for me to be able to articulate why Judaism is valuable in my life. As Jewish professionals, and in particular as rabbis, we need to see ourselves as guides for other people. If someone comes to us looking for community, or mindfulness, or a connection to God, we must determine how best to reach them, in order to show them how Judaism can help them find what they are seeking.

Value propositions provide us a tool to reach a population with different needs and expectations than previous generations.

Let’s run through an example to see how to use this tool. Picture your friend who grew up in a Jewish home and no longer practices Jewishly. What is something they are seeking in their life that Judaism can provide them?

Feel free to use your own example, but I thought of a friend who is starting a busy period of life and wants to be more present. I would suggest to her that Judaism has a lot to offer in that area. Judaism is a mechanism for personal transformation. I might invite her to listen to a guided meditation infused with Jewish ideas. Or I might invite her to carve out time each day to use the words of the *siddur* to give her busy mind a break.

Why be Jewish? Because Judaism helps her grow as a person.

A value proposition is a tool for showing people the meaning and power in being Jewish.

The Jewish value proposition, though deeply steeped in Judaism, must start with where people are, who they are and what they need. Only by knowing them, and knowing how to reach them, do we connect them to the depths our tradition offers us.

In order to reach today’s Jews, we need to use the best tools available. By employing value propositions and knowing our communities, we answer the question of Why Be Jewish.

Judaism catalyzes personal transformation.

Judaism is a source of relationship bridging.

Judaism guides us in our quests for meaning.

These are my value propositions for being Jewish.

Now I ask you: Why be Jewish?