Messaging the Jewish Community: Intuitive Derivation or Empirical Validation?

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When the topics of outreach and inreach are broached, many invariably focus on the messages we convey: How do parents, rabbis, and educators relate to the young (and not so young) in our families, communities, and schools? What messages are we sending those we teach and those we guide? Respondents to these questions will suggest methods of communicating, educating, and inspiring our students and congregants that are intended to keep them within the fold, or bring them back if they are distant from our tradition. In truth, many of their ideas may be insightful, astute, and perhaps even effective. However, if our community's approach is based exclusively on personal intuition and experience, as valuable as those may be, we are handicapping ourselves. No matter how well-meaning the communicators, research repeatedly demonstrates that messages intended to influence, if not constructed based on empirically derived methods, often backfire.

Examples abound of well-intended communications that miscarried. For instance, one study of public service announcements aimed to curb substance abuse found that almost half had no beneficial effects at all, and 20 percent even had negative effects, actually increasing drug use intent among participants. Similarly disappointing results were revealed by evaluations of anti-smoking campaigns, as well as those aimed to encourage safe driving or healthy eating. By contrast, messages derived via empirically supported methodologies have successfully encouraged recycling, altered attitudes toward automobile speeding, and changed health behaviors linked to cardiovascular disease.[1]

Particularly relevant to the issue of crafting effective messages is psychology research differentiating injunctive norms from descriptive norms. The former involve perceptions of which actions are approved or disapproved, while the latter involve perceptions of which actions are commonly performed. For instance, when policy-makers emphasize that drug abuse is intolerably high and increasingly widespread, their statement contains two messages: that drug abuse is viewed as

undesirable (injunctive norm), but also the undercutting message that large and growing numbers of people are indeed abusing drugs (descriptive norm). Although they hope to discourage illicit drug use by informing the community that it is undesirable, at the same time, studies suggest, they are actually encouraging its use by implying that many people do, in fact, engage in this very activity.

A groundbreaking illustrative example stems from research focused on environmental theft, which demonstrated how an ostensibly anti-theft message may backfire, depending on how the message is crafted. The Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona is commonly vandalized by visitors who unlawfully remove pieces of petrified wood. Although any given tourist may take only a small souvenir, the aggregated result is that over a ton of wood is stolen from the park each month, significantly damaging this treasured natural landmark. Robert Cialdini and colleagues[2] tested two different signs aimed at discouraging such theft. In the first condition, they posted a descriptive norm sign stating, “Many past visitors have removed petrified wood from the Park, changing the natural state of the Petrified Forest.” This sign included pictures of several visitors taking wood. In the second condition, the researchers instead posted an injunctive norm sign stating, “Please don’t remove petrified wood from the Park, in order to preserve the natural state of the Petrified Forest.” In this case, the accompanying picture featured a single individual taking a piece of wood, and included “a red circle-and-bar symbol superimposed over his hand.” In line with the researchers’ predictions, the first sign, which implied the unfortunate fact that many visitors remove petrified wood, resulted in far more wood stolen during the 5-week study period, compared to the second sign. It is noteworthy that the sign previously in place by Park staff contained wording similar to the ineffectual descriptive norm sign used in the study.

A further elucidating example of the importance of empirically testing messages intended to influence comes from startling research into government regulation of compliance in such areas as tax evasion. Counter-intuitively, when authorities publicize increased penalties for tax fraud, this form of theft actually rises. Social psychologists have suggested two reasons for this surprising finding. The first is related to a phenomenon known as “reactance.” When people feel their free choice is threatened, they may experience resentment and become more likely to attempt evasion of authorities’ controls. Secondly, similar to the descriptive norm research cited above, people may conclude that if officials find it necessary to impose tough penalties, then others “like me” must frequently try to evade the rules in question, further increasing the likelihood of attempted violations.[3] In sum, communication aimed at discouraging behaviors, even when publicizing increased punishment of those very behaviors, may unwittingly have the opposite effect.

The implication of this form of research for Jewish leaders and educators is clear. When rabbis and teachers warn, for example, of the high rates of alcohol, drug, and tobacco misuse among youth (and others) in our community, and when they broadcast caution over other behaviors also seen as part of an “off-the-*derekh*” lifestyle, they unintentionally also publicize the sad fact that those who choose these harmful behaviors are part of a substantial group similarly engaged, thereby possibly encouraging the very behaviors they wish to extinguish.[4] For instance, when high school principals or Israeli gap-year yeshiva and seminary administrators come down exceedingly hard on students who violate dress codes, text on Shabbat, or visit “inappropriate” recreational locations, they may be planting the seeds of reactance and resentment, and they may make further rule violation especially attractive.

Some may concede that selecting the right messages to convey to our youth and community are crucial, but doubt that empirical methods are the only ones capable of revealing how an effective message should be crafted. After all, they will argue, experienced education and community professionals, if only through trial and error experience, will surely develop effective means of influencing the students and communities in their charge. The psychology literature, however, does not support the contention that motivated and well-meaning “experts” will necessarily chance upon the best approaches, as in the following research study.

In recent years, hotels have begun leaving cards urging guests to reuse their towels, rather than request new ones each day. Large-scale towel reuse saves water and electricity and is thus beneficial for the environment. But more importantly for current purposes, hotel owners have a strong vested interest in encouraging such reuse, as it saves them substantial sums of money by reducing utility bills. Yet a team of social psychologists that studied the practice found that the most effective message to place on these hotel room cards was the one message that was (to their knowledge) never tried. Typically, such appeals take one of various forms: motivating guests to reuse their towels in order to sustain the environment, for the benefit of future generations, or as partners in the hotel's efforts to conserve environmental resources. While all of these messages were equally effective, compliance was significantly increased when researchers attempted a fourth (descriptive norm) message, which read "Join your fellow citizens in helping to save the environment" and stated that most guests indeed agree to recycle towels if asked. A simple change in wording would seemingly lead to substantial monetary savings for hotel operators. However, despite a strong financial motivation, neither intuition nor trial and error experience led hotel managers to the more effective persuasive method.[5] In sum, organizational leaders attempting to influence a relevant constituency should be wary of trusting their hunches or maintaining the operational status quo when crafting communications.

The concerned reader may wonder how psychologists' empirical methods could be adapted to creating impactful messages relevant to the religious Jewish community. In truth, though, the very beginning of such work is already being conducted, albeit in a somewhat different context. While mental health researchers have not adequately focused on treatment approaches aimed at substance abuse or oppositional and wayward youth specifically in our own community, recent investigations aimed at treatment of anxiety in the Jewish community could provide a necessary model.

Unlike in previous years when psychologists often believed that religiosity was pathological,[6] many currently recognize that religious faith and practices are associated with improved mental[7] (and physical[8]) health. Interestingly, this latter point of view was advanced by Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda in his classic eleventh-century work *Duties of the Heart*, where he wrote that trust in God leads to tranquility and happiness, whereas those lacking this trust suffer constant anxiety, distress, and sadness.[9] Based on such ideas and in partnership with Orthodox rabbinic consultants, a team of clinical scientists developed a treatment program incorporating rabbinic writings, prayers, and related exercises intended to inspire trust in God.[10] The dramatic results of the study demonstrated that Jewish volunteers with elevated anxiety who underwent the experimental treatment showed significant reductions in symptoms compared with comparison group participants who did not receive the intervention.[11] This research underscores the point that development of empirically supported methods is within reach for collaborating rabbis and mental health researchers who wish to treat the ills that challenge members of our community.

It is not my objective in this article to criticize the many devoted rabbis, teachers, and others who work tirelessly to tighten our community's bonds to Judaic traditions and religious practice. My suggestion, though, is that efforts of these professionals and volunteers might be more effective and efficient if they comprised empirically tested messages and methods. Organizations dedicated to strengthening and renewing Jewish identity in those affiliated, and those no longer affiliated, might devote more financial and other resources to outcome research aimed at determining specific programs, seminars, and activities that have lasting positive impact in synagogues, yeshiva and day school classrooms, and beyond. The only alternative is the current situation, where many teachers daily greet their classes, and rabbis weekly ascend their pulpits, without knowing if the words they use alienate the very souls they wish to bring close.

[1] Jessica M. Nolan, P. Wesley Schultz, & Eric S. Knowles. “Using Public Service Announcements to Change Behavior: No More Money and Oil Down the Drain.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. 39.5 (2009): 1035–1056.

[2] Robert B. Cialdini. “Crafting Normative Messages to Protect the Environment.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science.* 12.4 (2003): 105–109.

[3] Robert B. Cialdini. “Descriptive Social Norms as Underappreciated Sources of Social Control.” *Psychometrika*.72.2 (2007): 263–268 .

[4] Other potential applications of this research are common in the Jewish community. For example, when a pulpit rabbi condemns unnecessary and distracting noise in the synagogue with the message that “such frequent congregant talking disturbs prayer services” (a descriptive norm message), his words may actually reinforce the very disruptive behavior he is trying to halt.

[5] Cialdini, “Descriptive,” note 3. See also Noah J. Goldstein, Robert B. Cialdini, & Vladas Griskevicius. “A Room with a Viewpoint: Using Social Norms to Motivate Environmental Conservation in Hotels.” *Journal of Consumer Research.* 35 (2008): 472–482.

[6] For example, see Albert Ellis. “Is Religiosity Pathological?” *Free Inquiry.* 18 (1988): 27–32.

[7] For example, see Timothy B. Smith, Michael E. McCullough, & Justin Poll. "Religiousness and Depression: Evidence for a Main Effect and the Moderating Influence of Stressful Life Events." *Psychological Bulletin.* 129.4 (2003): 614–636.

[8] For example, see Eliezer Schnall et al. “The Relationship Between Religion and Cardiovascular Outcomes and All-Cause Mortality in the Women’s Health Initiative Observational Study.” *Psychology and Health*. 25 (2010): 249–263; and Eliezer Schnall et al. “Psychological and Social Characteristics Associated with Religiosity in Women’s Health Initiative Participants.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 51 (2012): 20–31.

[9] See the fourth treatise of *Duties of the Heart*, entitled “The Gate of Trust in God.”

[10] David H. Rosmarin, Kenneth I. Pargament, Steven Pirutinsky, & Annette Mahoney. “A Randomized Controlled Evaluation of a Spiritually Integrated Treatment for Subclinical Anxiety in the Jewish Community, Delivered via the Internet.” *Journal of Anxiety Disorders.* 24 (2010): 799–808; David H. Rosmarin et al. “Incorporating Spiritual Beliefs Into a Cognitive Model of Worry.” *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 67.7 (2011): 691–700.

[11] It is noteworthy that although most of the research participants self-identified with Orthodoxy, benefits of the intervention were evident even in those affiliated with other denominations of Judaism.