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## Are you a 'freemium' or premium synagogue user?

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I recently learned a new computer term at a national conference of synagogue administrators that seems perfect to describe many of those who attend my congregation.

"Freemium."

It's a term used to describe those software or Internet programs that are free to use, up to a certain point, until one pays a fee for access to the "premium" version of the program.

Google is a freemium program that is free and accessible, unless you want to use some of its more sophisticated applications; then you pay a premium. The Pandora music website and Flickr photo website are examples of freemium products. Oovoo, the online video conferencing software (developed by an Israeli, by the way) is free when connecting up to six people in a video-conference, but requires the paid premium version if you want to add more participants.



*Glenn S. Easton*

Synagogues seem to have the same system. A member of the community can attend and participate in synagogue life for free, attend services, listen to lectures, study with the rabbi, enjoy onegs, say Kaddish for loved ones, and celebrate Shabbat and holidays.

Hundreds of these "freemium" users attend my congregation on a regular basis. No one can distinguish who they are, no one restricts their participation and their status does not make them any less welcomed in our congregational community.

Fortunately, we also have many "premium" users of our synagogue, our generous members, who ensure that the synagogue, our sanctuary, our clergy, our educators, our programs and our staff are excellent, available, creative, responsive and accessible.

Unlike software companies, synagogues have few, if any, outside sources of revenue besides their premium members. Unlike software companies, which can sustain and support their freemium users through online advertising, synagogues receive no financial support for advertising commercial or communal activities, receive no real income from community agencies to continue serving freemium users, and, unfortunately, lose many of their premium users (members) who no longer utilize many of the premium features of the congregation — such as the school or lifecycle events.

This phenomenon puts tremendous financial pressure on congregations, their lay leaders and their members.

Synagogues need to develop a new business model, need to retain more premium members, need to convert more freemium users to premium members and need to find new sources of outside revenue to support the congregation. Premium members need to realize that other premium members, who might no longer use all that the synagogue has to offer, continue to subsidize and support the members who do.

Freemium synagogue users need to appreciate that it requires financial support to keep the synagogue doors open and available to all, seven days a week in some cases, staffed and physically secured.

Some synagogues and communal institutions have adopted a "fee-for-service" model and some engage

in aggressive and constant fundraising. However, synagogues are not software companies, but sacred communities, where God dwells, where members work to perfect the world, where rabbis teach and inspire, where children learn to ensure the future of our people. Synagogues are the bedrock of our Jewish community, without which Judaism today would not exist.

It will take a far-sighted major donor, charitable foundation or communal structure to transform the synagogue business model, to fully engage all synagogue users, to remove real and perceived financial barriers to participation, and to elevate our synagogues from a religious "business" to a meaningful congregational community.

Until then, synagogues gladly and enthusiastically welcome all attendees — freemium or premium — through the many gates of participation and engagement found in congregations throughout North America.

**Glenn S. Easton** is the executive director of Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C., president of the Jewish Communal Service Association of North America and past president of the North American Association of Synagogue Executives. He wrote this piece for the Washington Jewish Week.