

Chabad

MORDECHAI LIGHTSTONE



THE INTERNET isn't what it used to be.

Back in those heady early days, it promised an information superhighway up and down which all human knowledge would speed. The titans of tech exalted their algorithmic social creations as benefactors of humankind. But, courtesy of a noxious mix of the profit motive and the ever-present *yetzer hara*, the “move fast and break things” utopia appears to have moved fast—and broken *us*. Users of the “social” networks created to bring us closer together are experiencing increasing rates of isolation, with the depression that accompanies it. And the internet’s ability to connect us has too often become a cudgel for some to intimidate others, or simply to express hatred. Logging off and unplugging have never felt more necessary—but simply to cut ourselves off from modern technology and its many benefits seems untenable. Too many of us are too addicted to our screens to consider it seriously, anyway.

There is a different path. Begun in the days before the World Wide Web, it provides a redemptive model for the technology in our lives.

In 1989, a woman in rural Texas asked Chabad’s Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Kazen to help her find a prayer book she could use — she was allergic to the ink used in most books. Kazen painstakingly began to digitize what became some of the first Jewish books on the internet, beginning by hand-typing a siddur and posting it to the FidoNet BBS. This pioneering labor of love to help one individual became Chabad.org, born in 1993 as one of the first 500 sites on the Web. Today, that work continues to grow, with a robust digital network and the dedication of thousands of Chabad-Lubavitch emissaries, men and women, around the world — in addition to many thousands more people who, inspired by the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson z”l, actively nurture positive human connection among the myriads online.

Historically, Jews have used technology to share information. Some scholars believe that the printing of a 15th-century siddur predates Gutenberg’s Bible by some 35 years. The Rebbe took this idea further. Harnessing technology for holiness, he taught, is not simply a practical innovation — it is technology’s *raison d’être*.

The Rebbe didn’t consider this radical, but simply a modern application of an ancient Jewish teaching. Take gold, the eternal object of human lust and greed. “The world was not worthy to use gold,” the midrash declares. “So, why was it created? For the Tabernacle and the Holy Temple.”

Like those golden sanctums of divine revelation, technology and all its scientific underpinnings exist to help us experience divine ethics and wisdom so we may journey ever higher toward the sublime. Torah can and must be shared, broadcast to all corners of the world and to the farthest expanses of space. Moreover, the Rebbe taught that a central tenet of channeling innovation toward holiness is sharing more goodness and kindness, with more people, at a speed and scale never before possible. It’s up to each of us to reveal the potential of this

golden gift by helping our fellow humans find serenity and discover meaning and purpose. It's up to each of us to fortify and inspire them with the knowledge that they were entrusted by their Creator to perform a mission no one else can. This act of helping and empowering others is the ultimate sublime, redemptive holiness.

Inspired by this perspective, Hasidim channeled technology for sacred purposes, from radio in the 1950s to advanced telephone relay in the 1970s to satellite broadcasts in 1980 and the early internet by the end of the decade. Each cutting-edge platform was harnessed to share Torah and unite humanity in a swords-to-plowshares transformation, turning Cold War technology into vessels of divine wisdom.

Today, Chabad.org provides nearly 60 million annual visitors with everything from the Torah to the Talmudic ethics of generative AI in eight different languages. Scholars and counselors at the internet's longest-running "Ask the Rabbi" service respond to more than 75,000 people each year. Some 215,000 students have taken Chabad.org's advanced ChabadU courses, and its Torah Texts platform integrates a library of classic Jewish texts with video and audio classes for self-guided learning. Hasidic lessons for life are shared on TikTok and the metaverse. The Nigri International Jewish Online School brings Jewish school online for children from Uganda to Uzbekistan. When schools in New York City closed on Friday, March 13, 2020, because of Covid policies, Chabad's CKids team applied skills from the movement's online learning initiatives to run an online Hebrew school for some 40,000 children worldwide—on Sunday, March 15.

Therein lies the redemptive power of technology: to bridge heaven and earth; to access and transmit the most profound spiritual mysteries; to help all in need, whether spiritually or physically; and to know that to do so is divine.

This approach is adaptable to our shared global digital future. But it requires us to change how we build and use tech. An algorithm is

only as good as the dataset it draws from, so we need a new, internal “dataset.” It’s no longer enough not to be evil, as Google once urged. Now, in choosing how we create and engage with online platforms, we must center sacred purpose and decenter pragmatism and—where necessary—profit. Transcendence is not achieved in isolation on the mountaintop, but through community. It can be reached where physical space intersects with the digital ether, by using online platforms to reach out to others, to uplift one another through our interactions, and to provide tangible relief to those in need. It is through helping meet the physical and spiritual needs of others that we reach our own greatest spiritual heights.

Small acts that build upon each other can go viral with goodness. For the internet to realize its original, transcendent promise, we must be galvanized by this mission of tipping the societal scales inexorably to the side of good and redemption for all. *

