

S A P I R

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

THE ISSUE ON

TECHNOLOGY

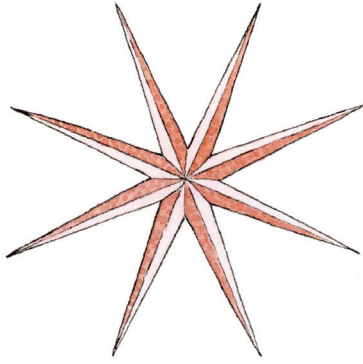


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Publisher's Note



HIS ISSUE was all but complete at the beginning of October. I now look back wistfully to days when our most urgent concern seemed to be the implications of ChatGPT. October 7 changed all that. SAPIR turned from a quarterly to a near daily, with one topic: the war in

Israel. We thought about shelving this issue, at least for a time if not for good.

Yet the story of the Jewish people is one of resilience. Tragedy is never forgotten, but it makes way for celebration. Destruction makes way for rebuilding. Once Hamas is defeated, our focus will turn back to our core mission: fostering a thriving Jewish community. We will begin that work with tears in our eyes, but begin it we must. We will have a new appreciation for the fragility of life, the value of friends, and the need for unity. But the challenges that we faced before the war will still be here. And technology is surely one of them.

In Genesis we read of the sin of Eve and Adam. The snake tempts Eve, who eats from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and

Evil. Why was that a sin? Isn't more knowledge — by definition — a better thing?

According to the biblical account, that early encounter changed us forever. It changed relationships between men and women. It changed the way we pursue a livelihood and put food on the table. It changed the way we saw ourselves, made us aware of our nakedness, and created the need for clothes. It banished us from the Garden of Eden. Our short-lived innocence was gone. (It didn't work out great for the snake, either.) A new era began and people had to adapt.

Today's apple is Apple. It's also Zoom and ChatGPT. The pandemic accelerated changes that were already happening. If I can attend services in my pajamas from my living room, why bundle up for synagogue? If I can ask ChatGPT a question, why seek out a rabbi? The larger issue for readers of SAPIR at this moment is whether we are objects or subjects in the new story of technology that is playing out now. Judaism must find its voice amid the cacophony and hysteria surrounding these innovations. Is it ethical to produce weapons guided by AI that will require no human intervention? Should we sacrifice privacy to monitor social media for hate and potential violence? Judaism has much to teach here.

Jewish leaders need to be on the forefront of crafting policies and modeling the use and limitations of technology. It's not easy to say "enough." Just because something is available doesn't mean it needs to be used. And yet, in a world that wanted to maximize productivity, the Jewish people introduced the weekend. In a world that is connected 24/7, we unplug on Shabbat and let our devices lie untouched for 25 hours. We can embrace technology and resist its siren call.

It's true that Adam and Eve never got to go back to the garden. But they learned that life in the suburbs wasn't all that bad. *

Tech 2040: Are Jews Ready?

From the SAPIR Institute



MAGINE it's December 2040.

It's early in the morning, and your alarm goes off—not to the sound of a staccato ring but to the synthetic voice of your deceased grandmother, gently encouraging you to awaken. Despite the slight discomfort, you appreciate the Hanukkah gift from your kids, who thought you might want to start the day with a bit of nostalgia powered by the latest voice-assistant device.

You sit up, instinctively reaching over to your nightstand for the virtual reality headset, and call your eldest son. You don't dial a number or voice a command. You merely think a thought, thanks to the electroencephalogram (EEG)-based brain-computer interface that enables anyone to communicate by issuing a prompt with his mind.

Your son is on his way to attend minyan in-person at a synagogue, a

rare departure from his daily practice of wrapping tefillin at home in his living room, where he uses the latest augmented- or virtual-reality interface to attend the same synagogue's virtual (and more popular) structure in the metaverse. He is being driven in a fully autonomous vehicle and gesticulates wildly about the newest technological breakthrough—an AI model so novel and advanced that it can mine scientific literature for insights in ways that humans cannot.

He's less sanguine about other developments: the mass layoffs in law and finance; the consistent decline in religious affiliation; the presidential election undermined by deepfakes; the democratic societies awash in disinformation; the AI arms race between the U.S. and China; the Start-Up Nation's lingering association with spyware. Like *Groundhog Day*, Congress is still debating how to staunch the baleful impacts of social-media platforms.

It's a lot for one morning. You take off your headset and take a deep breath.

You stroll down the hall to the home office and begin rummaging through a few prized possessions, ultimately stumbling upon a vintage issue of *SAPIR* on technology—in print, no less. Leafing through the once-crisp pages, you're taken by the seeming simplicity of life in the 2020s. You're also taken aback, wistful that community leadership did not, could not, or would not address the many pressing educational, theological, and mental health challenges from a generation prior.

Okay, pause. Now back to reality.

This prognostication may or may not portend our future. But if there is one undeniable takeaway from this issue of *SAPIR*, it is that we live in unprecedented times, on the cusp of transformative discoveries, and at an electrifying speed of change that humankind has never before experienced.

Of course, we're not the first to encounter the seismic impact of human invention; we may, however, be the first to experience it at scale and all at once.

It took a century, according to futurist Ray Kurzweil, for the

widespread adoption of the printing press; half-a-century for electricity; several decades for the telephone, radio, and television; a bit more than a decade for the PC and mobile phone; and several years for the World Wide Web (which, in April, celebrated the 30th anniversary of its public release). But it took only *two months* for ChatGPT to reach an estimated 100 million monthly users.

Ideas born today are implemented tomorrow, not decades from now. Today we have a choice, and a fighting chance, to tackle some of the major issues of our time before we are encumbered by their consequences for decades to come.

Comb through the pages of this issue of SAPIR and you will find a number of practical and pragmatic ideas where, blessed with the right vision, motivation, and resources, we can effect positive lasting change.

Here are three, for starters:

- *Jewish day schools should be at the leading edge on smartphones, social media, and mental health.* Social-media overuse and misuse might not seem particularly new. And yet, in May, the surgeon general issued a warning about the risks posed by social media to adolescent health. The American Psychological Association followed up with a health advisory. And in poll after poll—and here, in essays by Jacob J. Schacter and Rivka Press Schwartz—we see that it remains a top issue of concern for parents and educators.

What if Jewish day schools nationwide pooled their know-how and took the lead on addressing this gnawing challenge? What if leading educators, mental health professionals, and technologists convened, workshopped, and developed a central repository of information and resources for Jewish day-school communities—administrators, parents, teachers, and kids—to partner in stymying the worst impulses of social media while elevating its primary benefits? It might lead to the implementation of a curriculum on digital hygiene and internet safety,

Of course, we're not the first to encounter the seismic impact of human invention; we may, however, be the first to experience it at scale and all at once.

or the proliferation of community-wide pledges to undertake certain smartphone practices, or the introduction of regular trainings for parents and teachers on recognizing problematic media use and modeling good habits.

- *Let's get ahead of the curve and prepare for life in the metaverse.* The metaverse might seem like a distant galaxy or the figment of a science fiction writer's imagination. But, as Zvika Krieger and Mordechai Lightstone discuss, this immersive virtual world is already here, and likely here to stay. Unlike social-media platforms, the metaverse is in a nascent stage. Jewish educators and communal leaders still have the opportunity to help shape the contours of this new digital universe. Doing so doesn't require one giant leap but rather a series of small steps, including *education* (read up on it!); *immersion* (try one of the consoles!); *integration* (stake a flag in this virtual realm!); and *advocacy* (conduct outreach and develop relationships with companies, policymakers, and regulators!). Jewish leaders need to enter this digital landscape with a pioneering verve: wary of the hype, mindful of the pitfalls, and keen on creating a safe and meaningful space.
- *Jewish communal leaders and Jewish technologists walk into a bar...* This isn't the beginning of a bad joke. It's the image

of Jewish leadership in the 2020s and beyond, one where our best thinkers and doers grapple with the existing and emerging impacts of technology on Jewish communal life and the lives of the Jews. It can be at a bar or a *beit midrash*; the location matters less than the mere existence and eventual outcomes of a conversation that isn't yet taking place among people who work in Jewish organizations, tech companies, think tanks, and universities. As Andres Spokoiny envisions, what if we create a common space for leading rabbis and technologists, philanthropists, and venture capitalists to interact, wrestle with ideas, and tackle the towering issues of our day? And as David Zvi Kalman imagines, what if a new think tank or R&D lab were born that grounded these substantive discussions in policy prescriptions and community programs?

Peruse this issue, and you'll delve into the ethical dimensions of autonomous weapons systems and the privacy implications of surveillance technologies. You'll discover why the future of the U.S.-Israel alliance may be predicated less on short-term threats from the Middle East and more on long-term challenges from the Middle Kingdom.

You'll grapple with the impact of technology—*l'tov v'ra*, for good and bad—on synagogues and day schools; camps and Chabad; small rural Jewish communities and vast oceans of Jewish text online; end-of-week meaning and end-of-life mourning. You'll question whether the fabled golem was the first manifestation of artificial intelligence. You'll learn why the Talmudic art of listening may be the answer to our tech-induced polarization. And you'll read about why books, like the Talmud, have long served as the “technologies of transmission” in the millennia-old story of Judaism.

You, our valued reader, might be a technophile or a Luddite, a major philanthropist or a new donor, the CEO of a legacy institution or a pulpit rabbi, a concerned parent or an entrepreneurial

student. But whoever you are, you—rather, we—have a responsibility and an opportunity to throw our hats in the proverbial ring, and to fill them with ideas. Bret Stephens describes Abraham Lincoln as doing just that. I’m hard-pressed to find a more inspiring model.

“The best way to predict the future,” quipped legendary computer scientist Alan Kay, “is to invent it.”

Let’s sound the alarm before 2040, and get to work. *

PART ONE

TECHNOLOGY:
THE CHALLENGE



JEREMY DAUBER

Three Golems I Have Known



'LL START with a proposed equation: “Artificial” + “Intelligence” + “Jewish” = Golem.

Maybe, maybe not: In Yiddish, *golem* can be used, disparagingly, to indicate a lack of smarts, a real *stupidity*, if you will, which is precisely the opposite. Still, there's a nagging, fundamental instinct that the golem is something more than just a brute creature, something that worries at the most fundamental boundaries of intelligence, humanity, and, yes, technology. This, in many ways, is the definition of monstrosity; and, like all monsters, whether the golem is a thinking creature or not, he is certainly something we can think *with*, something that can help us define and explore those boundaries. A brief journey through the history of the golem might help us see how that's so.



The ur-golem starts in poetry.

Psalm 139:16 reads, in part, *Golmi ra'u eynekha ve'al sifrekha kulam*

yikatevu. The Hebrew's tricky. The good King James has it as "Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written." The JPS 1985 translation has "Your eyes saw my unformed limbs; they were all recorded in your book." *Glm*, the root, then, with its sense of imperfection, not-quite- or pre-human; but this sense of "unperfect" or "unformed" suggests a kind of necessary crafting, or, we might say, *techne*, in order to get us where we need to be. In the Psalmist's telling, that crafting seems to belong to Divine authority; but what kind of humans would we be if we didn't try to arrogate to ourselves the technical capabilities of God and nature?

Indeed, every golem story, in one way or another, is a story of humans seeking to imitate that Divine creative urge. When the golem next appears in Jewish literature, we find the rabbis doing just that—and, in so doing, encountering certain limits. This is from the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 65b:

Raba said: If the righteous desired it, they could [by living a life of absolute purity] be creators, for it is written (Is. 59:2) "But your iniquities have made a separation [between you and your God]." Raba created a man and sent him to R. Zera. R. Zera spoke to him but received no answer. Thereupon he said to him: "Thou art a creature of the magicians. Return to thy dust." R. Hanina and R. Oshaia spent every Sabbath eve in studying the "Book of Creation" [*Sefer Yetsira*] by means of which they created a third-grown calf and ate it.

We have here a Talmudic Turing test, basically: a fairly straightforward definition of perfect, divinely created humanity versus imperfect human technology. Following a line of argument most famously associated with Aristotle, the Talmud locates speech as the essential defining nature of personhood: If you don't have it, you're something else.

But it's also—as everything is in the rabbinic world—a moral argument. Raba here suggests that this sort of creation is a mark

of moral virtue, of human proximity to the Divine. It's sort of the rabbinic equivalent of tech-bro power: If you can do something, you should; and, what's more, if it gets done, it's a sign of something complimentary about you. Rabbi Zera, by contrast, focuses not on the technical achievement, but on the gap between the accomplishment and the ambition: Raba may have been able to convince himself he's created a human. He may even have been able to convince the *narrator* that it's a human, who refers to it as such. But, impressive as such an act is, Rabbi Zera reminds it — and us — that it fails in the most basic acts of humanity, and thus does not, in fact, belong. It is, perhaps, monstrous.



The programmed golem. Despite the cautionary aspects in the Talmud's account, there's a pretty clear sense of technology's benefit there, too: There's that calf the rabbis create every Friday night for Shabbat dinner, after all. And so, that "Book of Creation" mentioned in the last sentence became the germ, through works and commentaries attributed to personages as elevated as Abraham, Rabbi Akiva, and Saadia Gaon, of a kind of programmer's manual: High-performing golems are then the result of proper programming and instruction. As with today's technological golems, the formulas are the result of the proper inputting of letters (which, in Hebrew, are also numbers). Here, for example, is a 13th-century commentary on the *Sefer Yetsirah* ascribed to Saadia:

They make a circle around the creatures and walk around the circle and recite the 221 alphabets, as they are noted, and some say that the Creator put power into the letters, so that a man makes a creature from virgin earth and kneads it and buries it in the ground, draws a circle and a sphere around the creature, and each time he goes around it recites one of the alphabets. This he should do 442 times. If he walks forward, the creature rises up

alive, by virtue of the power inherent in the recitation of the letters. But if he wishes to destroy what he has made, he goes round backward, reciting the same alphabets from end to beginning. Then the creature sinks into the ground itself and dies.

Woe betide the creator who would recite the alphabet merely 441 times. Best-case scenario, presumably, the program wouldn't work, and the creature would not rise (or would die). Worst case? Well, here's a 17th-century account from a responsum written by Rabbi Tzvi Ashkenazi, better known as the Chacham Tzvi:

It has also been asserted concerning my grandfather, the Gaon, our master and teacher, Rabbi Elijah, chief rabbi of the holy community of Chelm [that he created a golem]...When the Rabbi [Elijah of Chelm] saw that this creation of his hands grew larger and stronger because of the Name—which, written on parchment, was fastened to its forehead—he became afraid that the golem might cause havoc and destruction. Rabbi Elijah summoned enough courage and tore the parchment with the Name from his forehead. Then it collapsed like a clod of earth; but in falling, it damaged its master and scratched his face.

In the Chacham Tzvi's telling, it's not that the programming is performed incorrectly, exactly; it just fails to account for the consequences of, let's say, too much computing power. Putting the Divine name on a creature's forehead might be like trying to wire a modern motherboard into a Mac Classic: You might get it to work for a while, but don't be surprised if it blows up. But it also suggests—predating Mary Shelley's novel by more than a century—that technology *inherently* holds within it the germ of its own catastrophic failure: You can't make a golem without using the Divine name, and you can't use the Divine name without loss of control, because it transcends your control to begin with. In some ways, the kabbalistic model—of controlling the universe

through its essential building blocks—is a fantasy. It will end in destruction, whether of the world around you or, failing that, of you, yourself (note the apparently extraneous end detail about the grandfather’s scratched face, which is in fact not extraneous at all).

It’s significant that this story comes in a rabbinical responsum, an answer to a legal question, about whether a golem can be a member of a prayer quorum, a minyan, and that the Chacham Tzvi answers firmly in the negative: It’s his belief that there’s an aspect of humanity that the golem cannot replicate. If a prayer quorum, as is famously believed, brings God’s presence to itself, that human capacity is not shared by what is, in the end, a tool.



The human golem. These earlier golems were creatures of a world in which humanity perceived itself in contradistinction to Divinity, so their attempts to emulate or echo that Divinity were doomed to condemnation—despite, as these stories also make clear, being capable of achieving some real success. But modernity, where that perception wavers along with belief, is a different story; and the lessons of the golem are trickier to draw. The great Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz, who wrote a short story called “The Golem” in 1894, ends his tale with the portrait of the figure lying

concealed in the uppermost part of the synagogue of Prague, covered with cobwebs that have been spun from wall to wall to encase the whole arcade so that it should be hidden from all human eyes....The golem, you see, has not been forgotten. It is here! But the name that could bring the golem to life in times of need, that name has vanished into thin air. And no one is allowed to touch the cobwebs that thicken.

Do something — if you can!

For Peretz, the golem is more than just a force capable of super-

natural protection of the Jewish from Gentile violence (though it is that), and more than just a creature that can go on the rampage (though it's that, too). It's a repository, potentially, of Jewish imagination and animation—all those letters and formulas and legal questions and Psalmic poetry taking something inert and bringing it to life. That's what Peretz wants us to do: animate the golem through our imagination. And to do so in the form of stories like the one Peretz is telling: works that bring together ancient ideas and modern sensibilities to illuminate contemporary concerns—in Peretz's case, the perils of a fragmenting, dissipating sense of national identity in the face of modernity.

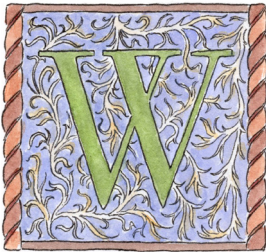
A lot to place on a golem, perhaps; and not even a golem, but a *story* about a golem. But if there's anything our contemporary anxieties about AI chatbots and large language models suggest, it's that words have power.

Power enough, it should be said, that they're the key to solving the problem of the golem, not just creating it. The stories tend to agree on what to do if faced with an out-of-control golem: Simply (if simply it is) remove the first aleph from the word *emet* engraved on its forehead, rendering the word as *met*, from “truth” to “death.” The golem, faced with a rewriting of its essence, has no choice but to obey its inscribed code, and it's rendered inert, as much a brick as that old phone.

Which is a significant difference from human beings, needless to say: You can tell an enemy to drop dead, after all, but it's a highly ineffective combat strategy. And so, in the end, it's not a lack of language that differentiates us from our modern-day golems, but our ability to sidestep, to dance around, to liberate ourselves from its commands: which is not only, as it turns out, what makes us human, but what marks the difference between the controller and the controlled. In the end, it's our flexibility of interpretation, of definition and redefinition, of story-making and boundary-setting and limit-determining, that's the best (and only?) means of dealing with our new creations, their enormities and our anxieties. *

MICAH GOODMAN

The Talmudic Cure for Our Technology Sickness



WHEN NEW TECHNOLOGY enters the world, it enriches it and pushes it forward. New technologies always add to people's lives something they didn't have before. But technology not only adds to people's lives; it also takes away from them, as Marshall McLuhan observed.

What it adds is always shiny; what it takes away is always obscured and practically impossible to see at the time. Technology gives quickly but takes slowly. Its advantages are therefore always widely seen and discussed, while its disadvantages remain largely hidden and unspoken. This asymmetry can create the illusion that technology is nothing but a blessing for humanity; in practice, it always comes at a cost. That is to say, technology is not the same as progress; technology is a trade-off.

The first technology that humanity invented was probably the stone hand axe. Humans took the stones lying around them,

knapped them, and transformed them into tools that allowed them to crush bones, meat, fruit, and vegetables more effectively. This helped them prepare food more quickly. They also had to chew their food less when eating, and this had evolutionary consequences. In time, human jaw muscles became weaker, and teeth became smaller. This, then, was the world's first technological trade-off. Humans acquired an external power, the hand axe, but eroded an internal ability: the power of their bite.

This process would repeat itself throughout history. When humans started using clocks, for example, they acquired a power they didn't previously have. Suddenly, they could accurately measure time and plan their days with extraordinary efficiency. The clock allowed them to boost productivity. But its use came at a price. The ability to sense the natural passage of time was eroded. The ability to feel the fine differences between the early and late morning, to sense the position of the sun in the sky and the length of the shadows on the ground, was damaged and almost disappeared. In exchange for our control of time, we paid with an atrophied sense of time.

Here is another example: Millions of drivers all around the world are reporting a decline in their navigation skills and spatial memory. The introduction of GPS devices in cars has hugely improved drivers' powers of navigation, but it has damaged their ability to navigate. There are many other examples, but the principle remains the same: Technology gives us powers and takes away abilities.

Around two decades ago, digital screens started entering our lives, bringing with them countless striking and familiar blessings. But what have they taken away from us? While digital technology has given us so much power, what abilities has it undercut? One is our ability, as human beings, to listen with empathy to opinions different from our own. Paradoxically, the technology that has opened our eyes to people far away is closing our ears to opinions different from our own.

How has digital technology atrophied our listening muscles? The answer lies in the dominant business model of the world's digital corporations.

We enjoy the services of platforms such as Facebook and Google for free. The reason has nothing to do with the generosity of the Meta and Alphabet shareholders. Economically speaking, we are not getting a product; we are *providing* a product in return for their services. And what is that product? That product is us. Our eyes, our attention, our focus, our gaze—all these are the product, which we are giving to mega-corporations in return for the ability to communicate and search the internet. What do they do with all this attention? They sell it to advertisers. This process, which Tim Wu calls the “monetization of attention,” is transforming the world. The major digital corporations' interest in keeping people glued to their screens is not so different from oil corporations' interest in drilling deep into the ground. Why do oil corporations try to pump petroleum out of the ground? Because it's worth money. Likewise, digital corporations try to pump more and more attention out of the human mind. Why? Because it's worth money.

When the average person logs into Facebook “just to check something,” how long does he stay there? In *Irresistible*, Adam Alter, a researcher of addiction, presents findings that show that people who do not plan to spend longer than a minute on Facebook get stuck there on average for more than 20 minutes. This is no accident. It's intentional. Thousands of engineers at Facebook have deliberately designed the platform to break its users' willpower. How? How is it possible that screens are more powerful than their users? The answer is that the users have psychological weaknesses that these companies are good at finding and exploiting in order to keep them glued to their screens: the need for recognition and feedback, the addictive power of random reward, social anxieties,

The technology that has opened our eyes
to people far away is closing our ears to
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and more. The result is that these companies pump ever fatter portions of users' valuable attention out of their minds.

Of all the psychological weaknesses the new industry is exploiting to invade our minds and pump even more of this new oil out of them, one has transformed our politics beyond recognition. This weakness is called confirmation bias. In general terms, this is what it means: We have a strong emotional relationship with our opinions. We tend to be blind supporters of our own opinions. One consequence of this tendency is that we perceive positions that are similar to our own to be more interesting and intelligent than positions different from our own.

We've all experienced this before. We feel pleasure at the sound of others voicing opinions we already hold. Right-wingers enjoy lectures by eloquent right-wing speakers but suffer in lectures by equally charismatic left-wingers. Liberals enjoy watching clips that mock conservatives but suffer when watching clips that make a mockery of liberal positions. Why do we love our own opinions so much? For the same reason that we love our children: because they are ours.

Confirmation bias affects most people, and social-media companies effectively exploit it to capture our attention. How does this all work? When an algorithm sifts through information and decides what to push into our news feeds and what to leave out, it employs only one criterion: Which posts have the greatest chance of keeping us glued to our screens? Since people prefer their own opinions, the algorithms show them posts reflecting positions similar to those they already hold, thus keeping them for longer

There is no need to abstain from technology to avoid its costs. We can simply take up other activities to strengthen the abilities that technology has weakened.

in front of their screens and extracting more valuable minutes of their attention.

The mechanism underpinning brainwashing is *repetition*. A message repeated again and again over time will break our defense mechanisms and penetrate deep into our minds. A person who has been subjected to ideological brainwashing will believe in the truth of that ideology with such certainty that he will see anyone who disagrees with it as delusional and dangerous for disputing a self-evident truth.

The same mechanism used in brainwashing is also in play when people are subjected to extended exposure to their Facebook feeds. But this time it is a completely different kind of brainwashing, because the positions and ideas that people are exposed to over and over again are already their own. Unlike political parties and movements, which try to *breach* our defenses and plant in our minds opinions that are foreign to us, the algorithms work by *locking* us into positions we already hold. Browsing Facebook is, therefore, a campaign of self-propaganda.

What happens when someone who lives in a digital echo chamber, hearing his own right-wing opinions echoed back at him, suddenly meets someone who also lives in his own digital echo chamber that echoes back to him his own left-wing opinions? They both perceive each other as disputing a self-evident truth. They do not see each other as wrong, but as delusional. We live in a reality

in which the Right and the Left simply cannot understand each other and are shocked and alarmed by each other. Naturally, they lose any ability to listen to each other.

What, then, is the great trade that humanity has made for digital technology? All in all, it has given human beings powers they never had before, but it has also weakened the abilities they have always had—and one of the most important such abilities is the one that helps us listen to ideas with which we disagree.



In the 20th century, the automobile sped into the lives of the Western middle classes, giving them incredible freedoms and powers they had never had before. But because they could drive from place to place, people began to exert themselves less. Their daily step count collapsed, their bodies expanded, and their muscles atrophied. Yet even when people discovered the price they were paying for this trade, they did not give up their cars. Instead, many took up brisk walking, jogging, or working out. The middle class has given rise to a rich and impressive culture of sports and exercise.

The relationship between exercise culture and the automobile offers a useful model for the relationship between humans and technology. There is no need to abstain from technology to avoid its costs. We can simply take up other activities to strengthen the abilities that technology has weakened. Exercise culture is a “compensatory culture,” a culture that restores to human beings what technology has deprived them of.

What would a compensatory culture look like in the context of digital technology? What kind of culture would strengthen the muscles that digital technology is atrophying—including the key one that helps us listen to ideas we disagree with? It turns out that one culture that might strengthen our listening skills is that of the Talmud.

Jewish tradition has always sanctified study and scholarship.

And the book at the heart of the Jewish intellectual tradition is the Talmud. The Talmud is not a book of halakhah, or Jewish religious law. If you open a Talmud, you won't find laws; you will find arguments about laws. First the Talmud presents the position of a certain rabbi or group of rabbis; then it presents the contrary position, from a different rabbi or group; then it presents arguments supporting the first position and those supporting the latter. For the most part, the Talmud does not include any resolution of these arguments; it records only the arguments themselves.

Jewish tradition makes two demands of its members. The first is intellectual: Jews must study the sacred texts. The second is practical: Jews must obey the binding laws of their tradition. Since the main text that Jews study is the Talmud, the following occurs: Intellectually, Jews are required to recognize *all* sides of the argument concerning a particular law; practically, however, they must follow only the position that has become settled law. This synthesis of scholarship and practice gives rise to a lifestyle in which people's intellectual world is much broader than their practical world. Jews must study and familiarize themselves with positions that they are forbidden from following in their own lives.

It is as if an American liberal who holds progressive opinions and always votes for Democrats were obliged to learn about conservative thought. She might read books by conservative authors, watch clips sent by Republican friends, and listen to podcasts by right-wing broadcasters. She would be left-wing in practice, but her intellectual world would be much broader than her practical world. Her curiosity would spill far beyond the borders of her own personal opinions.

Listening broadens our world, but let's be honest: Listening has a price. Listening puts our opinions in jeopardy. By listening, we might end up discovering a spark of light in our rivals' positions, and we might even end up convinced and changing our minds. As it happens, that is exactly the price that the greatest heroes of the Talmudic tradition had to pay.

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During the fiery arguments between the rival schools of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, there were occasions when the scholars of Beit Hillel had second thoughts, changed their minds, and accepted their rivals' positions. And how does the Talmud react to Beit Hillel's inconsistency? According to the Jerusalem Talmud, this is exactly the reason Jewish law was settled in accordance with Beit Hillel, with just three exceptions among their many disputes.

Why did the judgment of the Beit Hillel become the basis for determining the law? Rabbi Jehudah bar Pazi said it was because they quoted the words of the Beit Shammai before their own words. Not only that, but if they were convinced by the words of the Beit Shammai, they changed their opinions, as recorded in Tractate Sukkah 2:8 in the Jerusalem Talmud.

It wasn't because Beit Hillel was always right that Jewish law was settled in accordance with this ancient school of thought. It was because Beit Hillel was conscious of the fact that it was *not* always right. According to the wonderful paradox of the Talmud, Jewish law was determined according to the opinions of those who were not locked into their opinions.

The kind of listening that the culture of the Talmud cultivates can be characterized by a term coined by the psychologist and feminist activist Carol Gilligan: radical listening. "Radical listening" is an interesting phrase, because these two words do not seem

to go together. Radicalism is typically associated with shouting, not listening. How is it possible, then, to listen radically?

Here is what our regular, non-radical listening looks like: When we hear people voicing opinions contrary to our own, we dismiss them automatically. What are we actually doing here? We are comparing their opinions with opinions we already hold, and when we discover a mismatch between them, we reject the new ones. That is, we use our own opinions as the yardstick for assessing the truth. The more similar a theory is to our own opinions, the more truthful we feel it to be; the more different, the more we feel it is unsound. Our opinions are the ultimate authority, and we use them to judge and evaluate everything else. Broadly speaking, we can say that non-radical listening means listening to ourselves. Radical listening—the word “radical” comes from the Latin *radix*, or root—replaces typical, superficial listening with a careful attendance to the roots of a competing opinion.

To listen radically, we need to free ourselves from ourselves. In that singular, refined moment of radical listening, we cast off our own opinions and choose not to use them as the yardstick for assessing the truth of the position we are listening to. Instead of judging the people we are listening to based on our own premises, we judge them using *theirs*. We start asking ourselves a different question while listening. Instead of asking why *we* think the other person is wrong, we ask why *he* thinks he is right. Digital technology’s algorithms feed us opinions and ideas we already have, and in an anti-Talmudic maneuver, they restrict our intellectual world to the narrow confines of our own existing opinions.

In sum, there is a clear principle here: Technology gives us powers and weakens our abilities. Digital technology massively expands our power to hear other opinions when they match our own, but it weakens our psychological ability to listen to different ones.

Culture has the power to strengthen the muscles that technology has atrophied. And perhaps here lies the conclusion: Our listening

muscles, the ones that are atrophying because of digital technology, can be reawakened by drawing inspiration from and perhaps even reviving the ancient spirit of the Talmud.

For those who think that introducing the study of Talmud back into the Jewish mainstream is a pipe dream, it's worth noting that we perpetually lament another lost ability that comes courtesy of a new technological power: In return for the power to multitask, to do a dozen things "at once," we appear to have lost the ability to pay attention to anything without becoming distracted. To this, too, the Talmud appears to be an excellent answer — perhaps because radical listening and respectful attention are, at root, one and the same. *

BRET STEPHENS

Lincoln's Lost Lecture: Can Democracy Survive Technology?



ALL CREATION IS MINE, and every man, a miner.”

So begins one of the least-known speeches by Abraham Lincoln, the “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” versions of which were delivered on at least six occasions between April 1858 and

April 1860. We generally think of Lincoln as an American prophet, a redeemer president who freed the slaves, saved the Union, and ennobled the cause of liberty with magnificent oratory. We only rarely think of him as a philosopher-statesman, a man who had enduringly relevant things to say about the hidden vulnerabilities of democratic institutions in the face of change: generational, ideological, and, not least, technological.

He was. And much of his thinking on the subject was deeply rooted—as it would have been for most Americans in the 19th century—in the Hebrew Bible.

Not that Lincoln saw himself as some sort of scholar. “I am not a professional lecturer,” Lincoln confessed. “Have never got up but one lecture; and that I think, a rather poor one.” What we have today of the lecture exists only in fragmentary form, lacks a proper conclusion, is redundant in places, and was probably delivered with a fair amount of extemporizing—probably the result of a writing process described by his law partner William Herndon as “noting down ideas on stray pieces of paper, which found lodgment inside his hat.”

Still, for all his engagement with pressing political and legal issues, Lincoln was repeatedly forced to reckon with questions that went beyond the merely contemporary. Was the United States founded in 1776 as a single nation with a unifying set of moral convictions, or in 1787, as a compact of states with distinct legal rights? Was the Declaration of Independence’s claim that “all men are created equal” a self-evident truth or, as John C. Calhoun put it, a “self-evident lie”? Could a republic founded by one revolutionary generation resist the revolutionary impulse of succeeding generations to overthrow it?

Lincoln also had a lifelong fascination with science and technology. In 1849 he received a patent for a mechanism to lift boats over shoals, making him the only president in history to ever get one. A legal acquaintance from the 1850s, Charles Zane, was with Lincoln the first time the future president saw a self-raking reaping machine. “He examined it with much interest,” Zane recalled, “and then I listened to him explaining, in the fewest words but with great clearness, how power and motion were communicated to the different appliances, especially to the sickle, the revolving rake, and the reel.”

But it was as president that Lincoln had the best opportunity, and the greatest need, to explore his technological fixations fully. He corresponded with Richard Gatling, inventor of the eponymous gun, and pushed the army to adopt it. He urged the creation of the Union Army Balloon Corps and appointed Thaddeus S.C. Lowe to its command: In June 1861, Lowe telegraphed the president, from a height of 500

feet, a message “acknowledging indebtedness to your encouragement for the opportunity of demonstrating the availability of the science of aeronautics in the service of the country.” A lawn south of the White House became an informal testing ground for new weapons, many of which Lincoln liked to try out or see for himself. “The inventors were more a source of amusement than of annoyance,” recalled John Hay, Lincoln’s personal secretary. “They were usually men of some originality of character, not infrequently carried to eccentricity. Lincoln had a quick comprehension of mechanical principles, and often detected a flaw in an invention which the contriver had overlooked.”

In all this, Lincoln was typically American: practical, curious, and enthusiastic about the capacity of science and technology to improve everyday life, ease suffering, and advance the common interests of mankind. But he also had doubts: Could invention itself, for all its potential benefits, sometimes pose a potentially fatal danger to the cause of human freedom?

Here is where the enduring interest of his “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions” lies. Americans tend to think that political freedom and technological innovation are not merely complementary but also mutually reinforcing; that is, that liberalism supplies the political and economic conditions in which inventive people are most likely to flourish, and that the products of invention strengthen the foundations of liberalism by making society richer and happier. This is the blasé confidence that leads us to believe that the benefits of technological progress invariably outweigh its costs, whatever turbulence it occasionally produces.

But what if that isn’t always true — if, that is, Lincoln’s doubts are well founded? What if certain technologies transform not merely the way we produce goods and services but also how we treat other human beings, relate to our government, understand our shared rights? Can a nation that sees *itself* as the greatest invention of all time — *Novus ordo seclorum*, “a new order of the ages” — preserve any sense of reverence for the ideas and ideals that came before it? Can a restlessly inventive people restrain their taste for the new, and

thus their eagerness to discard the old, even if the new threatens the foundations of their own liberty?

Lincoln begins his talk by observing that invention is a defining feature of human nature: “Man is not the only animal who labors; but he is the only one who *improves* his workmanship.” What follows is a catalogue, based on biblical references, of ancient inventions and inventors. Tubal-cain, seventh in descent from Adam, was, in the words of Genesis, “an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron.” Thread—suggesting spinning and weaving—is also mentioned in Genesis, as is the saddle. (“Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass.”) There is a mention of a chariot “upon the occasion of Joseph being made Governor by Pharaoh,” implying the prior invention of the wheel and axle.

Lincoln cites at least 24 specific passages from the Books of Moses. Other than demonstrating his deep familiarity with the Bible, there’s a hidden purpose to these references. “I think I can show, at least in a fanciful way, that all the modern inventions were known centuries ago,” he explained to Louis Agassiz in January 1865, when the great natural scientist came to the White House and asked about the lecture. Not everything that is new is necessarily better: The ancients, Lincoln is saying, weren’t our inferiors when it came to doing the sorts of things we value most about ourselves. In important ways, they might have been much better.

The full meaning of Lincoln’s remark to Agassiz becomes clearer in the second half of the speech, which begins with such a startling turn that, until the 1990s, historians thought it constituted a completely different lecture. “We have all heard of Young America,” Lincoln says. “He is the most *current* youth of the age. Some think him conceited, and arrogant; but has he not reason to entertain a rather extensive opinion of himself? Is he not the inventor and owner of the *present*, and sole hope of the *future*?”

Young America was the name of a cultural, artistic, and political movement, formed in the 1830s and connected to the Democratic Party, which believed that America had to make a decisive break with everything deemed old. “All history is to be re-written; political science and the whole scope of all moral truth have to be considered and illustrated in the light of the democratic principle,” wrote the magazine columnist John Louis O’Sullivan, a champion of the movement. “All old subjects of thought and all new questions arising, connected more or less directly with human existence, have to be taken up again and re-examined.”

The animating political spirit of Young America was a kind of self-confident jingoism that found expression in the policies that led to the Mexican–American War—which Lincoln had opposed on the grounds that it was both unjust and dangerous, since it opened up new lands for the expansion of slavery. Young America also believed in unfettered capitalism, including free trade, which Lincoln opposed in favor of a tariff system, and a kind of self-serving morality that disguised its greed in professions of faith in humanity. Its greatest political champion was Stephen Douglas, who defeated Lincoln in the 1858 Illinois Senate race and later lost to him in the 1860 presidential election.

“In knowledge he is particularly rich,” Lincoln says of Young America with obvious sarcasm. “He knows all that can possibly be known; inclines to believe in spiritual rappings and is the unquestioned inventor of ‘Manifest Destiny,’” the phrase for which O’Sullivan is most famous. “His horror is for all that is old, particularly ‘Old Fogy’; and if there be any thing old which he can endure, it is only old whiskey and old tobacco.”

Now Lincoln has a bit of fun. If Young America despises Old Fogy, then how does he feel about “the first of all fogies, father Adam”? Adam, Lincoln says, was probably “ignorant, and simple in his habits.” Yet he had certain advantages over his successors. He was “a very perfect physical man.” He had “dominion over all the earth.” He is the inventor of clothing, speech, and “the art of

Invention, after all, is not just about the making of devices but also the minting of ideas and the creation of institutions—in this case, the idea of racial inferiority, and the institution of slavery to profit from it.

invention” itself. And even then, there is a prior inventor—that is, Adam’s own creator. Lincoln pauses to marvel at “the great activity of the tongue, in articulating sounds,” and then “the wonderful powers of the eye, in conveying ideas to the mind from writing.” No modern machine, Lincoln implies, could possibly match these.

In other words, the greatest inventor is God, a point that would not have been lost on Lincoln’s pious audiences (whom he was tacitly courting as voters). This does not mean that human beings should not invent—otherwise, God would not have endowed human beings with inventive natures. But it does suggest that invention involves a form of gratitude to the Divine, and perhaps a conviction that the way He invented us is how we should invent in turn: lovingly, humanely, ethically.

For Lincoln, the ethical invention par excellence is the printing press, because it helped liberate human potential as nothing else before it or since. “It is very probable—almost certain—that the great mass of men, at that time” (before the invention of the press), “were utterly unconscious, that their *conditions*, or their *minds* were capable of improvement,” Lincoln says.

They not only looked upon the educated few as superior beings; but they supposed themselves to be naturally incapable of rising

to equality. To immancipate the mind from this false and under estimate of itself, is the great task which printing came into the world to perform. It is difficult for us, now and here, to conceive how strong this slavery of the mind was; and how long it did, of necessity, take, to break its shackles, and to get a habit of freedom of thought, established.

If the printing press is the paradigmatic good invention, what is the paradigmatic bad one? A single telling line gives away his thinking:

I have already intimated my opinion that in the world's history, certain inventions and discoveries occurred, of peculiar value, on account of their great efficiency in facilitating all other inventions and discoveries. Of these were the arts of writing and of printing—the discovery of America, and the introduction of Patent-laws. The date of the first, as already stated, is unknown; but it certainly was as much as fifteen hundred years before the Christian era; the second—printing—came in 1436, or nearly three thousand years after the first. The others followed more rapidly—the discovery of America in 1492, and the first patent laws in 1624. Though not apposite to my present purpose, it is but justice to the fruitfulness of that period, to mention two other important events—the Lutheran Reformation in 1517, *and, still earlier, the invention of negroes, or, of the present mode of using them, in 1434.* [My emphasis.]

The date appears to be a reference to the origins of the African slave trade, initially by Portuguese slavers selling their captives to Spanish buyers. But the power of the line—the only reference to American slavery in the entire lecture—rests in its argument that the idea of “negro” as a category has nothing to do with nature and everything to do with invention; that is, that racialized slavery, if not the very idea of race, is a contrivance of relatively modern times. Invention, after all, is not just about the making of devices but also the minting of ideas and

the creation of institutions—in this case, the idea of racial inferiority, and the institution of slavery to profit from it.

It would have been difficult for Lincoln to convince his listeners that nothing fundamental distinguished them from their black servants or slaves. That's probably why he touches on it only glancingly (“not apposite to my present purpose”). But the radicalism of what he is saying should not be missed: He is arguing that concepts of race and racial superiority are, to use the argot of 21st-century academia, “social constructs.” What appeared so completely natural to a white, 19th-century American audience was, Lincoln believed, an invention of the mind—and one that, within a few years of Lincoln's speech, would have to be violently undone.



What Lincoln called “the present mode” of using black people wasn't just a function of ideas about race. Technology was pivotal, too. One of the surprising omissions in the “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions” (though quite possibly because we don't have the full text) is any reference to Eli Whitney's cotton gin, invented in 1793, which transformed the economic incentives of the American South by making cotton plantations immensely profitable.

Even so, we know the cotton gin was very much on Lincoln's mind. In July 1858, shortly after he first delivered his “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” he gave a speech in Springfield explaining how his views about slavery had evolved over time. As a younger man, Lincoln explained, he had opposed slavery while believing it was on a gradual course to extinction. But with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, he concluded that his hopes had “been resting in delusion.” One point of evidence was a speech given by South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks, remembered by history as the man who caned Senator Charles Sumner, the Massachusetts abolitionist, on the floor of the Senate. “Mr. Brooks,” Lincoln said,

said, what I think, that the framers of our Constitution placed the institution of slavery where the public mind rested in the hope that it was on the course of ultimate extinction. But he went on to say that the men of the present age, by their experience, have become wiser than the framers of the Constitution; and the invention of the cotton gin had made the perpetuity of slavery a necessity in this country.

Simply put, the cotton gin gave wealthy white Southerners motives far more powerful than their moral scruples to perpetuate the institution of slavery: power, wealth, ease. The convictions that uphold a free society, which Jefferson named so memorably in the Declaration of Independence, simply collapsed in the face of those temptations. Because of the cotton gin, every political impulse in the South sought to entrench slavery; every economic instinct to expand it; and every ideological tendency to justify it. The fact that the justifications were ludicrous — “although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing,” Lincoln scoffed in yet another speech, “we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself” — did almost nothing to diminish their power. Technology and the perverse incentives it creates warp reason.

The cotton gin is a technology of the distant past. But it’s worth asking: What is our own cotton gin? What technology warps our relationship to other citizens, sows distrust in democratic institutions, atomizes the individual, polarizes politics, disseminates conspiracy theories, empowers bigots, and embitters personal relationships? And — in doing all this damage — reaps immense profits for its inventors, innovators, and investors?

There’s more than one answer, no doubt. But little compares to social media in its consequences for democratic norms. When Mark Zuckerberg took Facebook public in 2012, he told investors that his company would “rewire the way people spread and consume information” and “once again transform many of our core institutions and

industries.” As the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has pointed out, he was right—just not in the way he thought. The algorithms of social media “encouraged dishonesty and mob dynamics,” Haidt wrote a decade later in *The Atlantic*. They have “magnified and weaponized the frivolous” and are “almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves.”

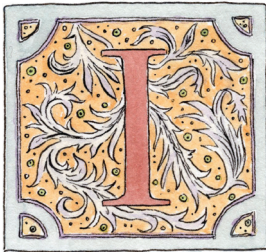
“It was just this kind of twitchy and explosive spread of anger,” Haidt adds, “that James Madison had tried to protect us from as he was drafting the U.S. Constitution.”

This isn’t the place to speculate about how much additional damage social media will do to the fabric of a free society. The central point, which Lincoln saw so clearly, is that technology is not merely a tool to be shaped by its users for better or worse. It is itself a shaper that can turn people into tools, whether as slaves or, in the case of social media, “users.” The idea that technology should or can be separated from politics—a central conceit of liberal-democratic ideology—is wrong: Technology is among the most fundamental issues in all of politics. To think otherwise is to perpetuate an illusion, if not a deception, that leaves us at the mercy of technological “advances” that we choose naïvely and, once they take hold, can scarcely control.

Lincoln is not asking us to resist the technological trend by becoming a society of Luddites, which would only harm the interests of a free society and its people. Nor is he insisting that we predict all the potential dangers of powerful new technologies or kill them in their infancy. He is, however, suggesting that a task of democratic statesmanship is to ask whether a new technology is likelier to lead to the emancipation of the mind than to its enslavement. And, should we answer in the negative, he suggests, we can put limits on those technologies, whether it’s through regulation or education or the deliberate cultivation of a habit of reverence for the old amid our infatuation with the new.

The core of all of Lincoln’s teachings is that democracies fail when people become careless about what it means to be human. And the test of any technology is whether it makes us more human, not less. *

Israel's Snowden Moment



IT IS WELL KNOWN that smartphones can serve as mobile surveillance devices, leaving a trail of digital breadcrumbs that reveal much about our behavior and preferences. It is also widely known that the Israeli tech company NSO created a form of spyware called Pegasus, which enables remote access to mobile devices. It can operate on a “zero-click” basis, precluding the need for clicking on a link or opening an email. Once the spyware embeds itself within a device, it can access virtually everything: emails, WhatsApp messages, social-media interactions, photos, geolocation data, documents, notes, and metadata. It can even remotely activate the phone’s microphone and camera. Essentially, Pegasus provides an intimate window into our digital hearts and minds.

For years, the State of Israel has presented Pegasus as a kind of diplomatic gesture to various fledgling democracies and authoritarian

regimes. Observing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's diplomatic endeavors from 2015 to 2021, one could discern a striking correlation between his visits to countries such as India, Hungary, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates, and the subsequent deployment of NSO surveillance licenses. As one joke had it, Netanyahu rode to the Abraham Accords on the back of a Pegasus.

It's also no secret that Pegasus was deployed in the Palestinian territories: Traces of the software had been detected on devices belonging to individuals from various organizations, some of which are labeled by the government as terrorist organizations. However, like many others, I had rationalized that such measures, taken in the name of combating terrorism and ensuring security, occasionally necessitated compromising individual privacy.



Then, at the outset of 2022, came Tomer Ganon's startling revelations, in the Israeli business paper *Calcalist*, about the Israel Police's own use of Pegasus.

Ganon's explosive investigation—worthy of a Sapir Prize, the Israeli equivalent of the Pulitzer—prompted me to tell Israeli news platforms that this revelation was a watershed moment for the police and the attorney general entrusted with overseeing such operations. They needed to reconsider the legality of their actions. What neither I nor my fellow digital-rights advocates in Israel had anticipated was the momentum our efforts would gain when it was revealed that the spyware had been deployed against Shlomo Filber, one of the state's witnesses in Benjamin Netanyahu's trial.

During recent deliberations in the Knesset's Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee, proponents of privacy and civil liberties found themselves allied unexpectedly with committee members on the Right who were criticizing the police and the State Prosecutor's Office for illegal surveillance. By late August, the Israeli

government established a governmental commission of inquiry into the police's use of Pegasus, implicitly granting the commission the authority to probe Pegasus's involvement in the ongoing cases against Netanyahu.

It's certainly ironic: Netanyahu, who utilized Pegasus for political advantage, now contends that the very same tool precipitated his domestic downfall. He clearly now hopes that the revelations, adding another layer to the narrative, will turn his legal situation around, allowing him to emerge relatively unscathed by showing that his accusers engaged in unauthorized surveillance.

But the Pegasus revelations are not the only recent exposure of the remarkable surveillance powers of the Israeli authorities.

In the wake of the initial outbreak of the Covid pandemic in March 2020, Israel activated the Shin Bet surveillance "Tool," as it is known, to facilitate contact tracing by identifying potential virus-transmission chains. The Tool is a database populated with data on everyone who uses telecom services in Israel — data on the location of every device, the cell and antenna zone to which each is connected, the metadata for every voice call and text message each sends or receives, and each one's internet browsing history. Alarming, the health authorities provided the Shin Bet with the names and phone numbers of people who tested positive for Covid and asked to get a list of those who were nearby. Tasking the Shin Bet with digital contact tracing was a drastic and unparalleled step. Never before had the Shin Bet been utilized for domestic surveillance on such a grand scale. Regrettably, those in power deemed this encroachment upon the constitutional right to privacy entirely warranted by Covid. More than three years later, it remains the most intrusive surveillance measure adopted by Western countries throughout the pandemic.

The Tool became public knowledge when journalist Ronen Bergman published an exposé in the *New York Times* and *Yediot Ahronoth*. When I wrote about it some months later, I assumed that unveiling a surveillance apparatus arguably more invasive than the

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one brought to light by Edward Snowden would make waves. I was wrong. Perhaps this was because Netanyahu himself had authorized its use. Or perhaps, as Thomas Hobbes noted, the fear of death is an extraordinarily potent political motivator.

Now we have had our second “Snowden moment.” Will things change? However history judges the use, for good and ill, of the extraordinary technology powers Israel has developed, this series of events has made clear to the Israeli public that issues of privacy and surveillance transcend conventional political dichotomies.



To grasp the essence of Israel’s two Snowden moments, you have to understand the phenomenon of “function creep,” the expansion of a technology beyond its intended purpose. In Israel, we see three main kinds of function creep—from one kind of *territory* to another, one kind of *target* to another, and one kind of *user* to another.

Territorial creep. The most prominent example of this in Israel is the shift from using technology in the occupied territories to using it within Israel proper. For instance, in 2021, the *Washington Post* spotlighted Blue Wolf, a facial-recognition application enabling IDF soldiers to capture images of Palestinians, with which they populate a growing biometric database. By 2023, the Israel Police was contemplating its deployment to pinpoint disruptive soccer fans.

The right to privacy in Israel is shrouded in ambiguity, a situation exacerbated by the nation's open and informal culture and the prevailing sentiment of prioritizing security above all.

Target creep. Function creep also manifests itself when intrusive surveillance systems, ostensibly designed for combating grave threats such as terrorism and pedophilia, are rechanneled to suppress protestors, regulators, or human-rights advocates—as evidenced by the use of Pegasus in countries such as Mexico, India, and Hungary. A variation on this theme concerns the seep of security technologies into civilian realms—for example, when military intelligence-gathering techniques are utilized in the commercial world. Harvey Weinstein employed BlackCube, an Israeli investigatory firm, in an attempt to prevent the publication of a *New York Times* article that revealed the sexual-misconduct allegations against him that sparked the #MeToo movement. BlackCube's staff consists largely of Mossad alumni.

User creep. The most prevalent creep today is the transition from civilian applications to security or law enforcement. The Tool, for example, functions thanks to a confidential appendix within Israeli cellular-company licenses. Citizens sign contracts allowing companies to collect and retain specific metadata for a set period. But the Shin Bet can access and use this data for extended periods for security reasons. We also see this kind of creep when ancestral research services collect genetic data, or when companies utilize sensors for tracking athletic metrics and then share this information with intelligence or law-enforcement agencies. With the rise of what Shoshana

Zuboff has termed “surveillance capitalism,” which generates vast quantities of data on consumers, creep of this kind by law enforcement and security agencies has become a serious threat.

Obviously, there are overlaps among these kinds of function creep. What should be clear is that the two Snowden moments noted above are glaring examples of a slippery slope: It seems that any invasive technology sanctioned for use in the Palestinian territories will eventually be used against the Israeli public, and tools designed to protect the country’s citizens will inevitably turn upon dissenters and political adversaries.

When surveillance technologies meet privacy rights, the degree of privacy intrusion hinges on myriad factors. These include the nature of the technology, the data collected, how it is acquired and processed, who gets to access it, how securely it is stored, how long it is retained, and what it is collected and used for. A given technology’s application might be deemed appropriate in one context, but as it creeps into another domain, it becomes essential to scrutinize, regulate, and oversee its use.

Part of the problem is that function creep is gradual and incremental, occurring without full consideration of the inevitable problems that follow. Typically, a technology first makes its way into an unintended domain without a clear mandate, or based on broad legal interpretations, often of archaic laws ill-equipped for current technological advancements. Only when thrust into the spotlight—whether through media revelations, court decisions, or public outcry—does the march toward comprehensive statutory regulation commence.

But when function creep occurs covertly and goes undiscovered, this process is delayed—and, crucially, incomplete. It’s rare for powerful surveillance programs—especially ones the public doesn’t know about—to be scaled back. None of this relieves us of the challenge of establishing the right balance among competing values and ensuring that technologies are used in a proportionate and appropriately monitored fashion.

Israel's Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, from 1992, upholds the right to privacy. This law is Israel's closest equivalent to a Bill of Rights. But this constitutional foundation is only the start of any serious dialogue about privacy. The right to privacy in Israel is shrouded in ambiguity, a situation exacerbated by the nation's open and informal culture and the prevailing sentiment of prioritizing security above all. Today's Israel lacks an updated privacy-protection law akin to the progressive frameworks of California's Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) or Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Also absent are preemptive mechanisms to guide the acquisition and deployment of surveillance technologies before their actual implementation, a norm in cities such as New York and San Francisco.

Furthermore, internal organizational oversight invariably falls short. Examples include the Shin Bet's legal counsel, which legitimized the preliminary usage of the Tool for contact tracing, and the Israel Police's sanctioning of Pegasus. External oversight mechanisms are also flawed—whether they be the attorney general, the judicial bodies that increasingly act as a rubber stamp in approving surveillance orders, or Knesset committees that have demonstrated a reactive and superficial approach.



Now that the overreach of Pegasus has become public, we see the usual finger-pointing and assignment of blame. The focus is on who procured the spyware, who oversaw its use, whether that use was legal, whether judicial authorization was obtained, and whether the court orders were lawful. These are valid concerns, but they merely scratch the surface. The crux of the matter is a profound gap in understanding the intricacies of cyberspace. In 2011, Michael Hayden, a former head of both the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency, noted: “Rarely has something been so important and so talked about with less clarity

There are many digitally literate people involved in cyberspace activities, but they are generally the ones promoting new technologies, rather than worrying about whether and how to use and monitor them.

and less apparent understanding than this phenomenon.” Hayden wasn’t talking about specific technologies or tactical operations. He was lamenting the absence of a broader conceptual framework that would allow us to comprehend and therefore debate the ramifications of technological tools.

Cyberspace blurs conventional lines: between criminals and police, allies and adversaries, cyber offense and intelligence collection, private and public. Coupled with the resulting ambiguity is a shortage of historical and practical experience. This is not surprising, given the relative novelty of cyberspace and the fact that many decision-makers are “digital immigrants.” But that does not make it less serious. Further, this deficiency in understanding is evident across the board — among politicians, military leaders, law enforcement, judges, legal advisers, and more.

This digital illiteracy puts us at an extraordinary disadvantage in both grasping the implications of technological systems and envisaging their potential. There are many digitally literate people involved in cyberspace activities, but they are generally the ones promoting new technologies, rather than worrying about whether and how to use and monitor them. As we grapple with this issue, urgent social questions come to the fore. Should the police ever be permitted to engage in vast data-fishing expeditions? Should they ever view public domains as open playing fields for unrestricted

surveillance? Is there a case, in a free society, for the police to collect sensitive personal information, such as sexual orientation, even if it comes from data in the public sphere?

While technology often outpaces regulation, the core of the issue remains constant. Today's concern might be Pegasus; tomorrow, it could be artificial intelligence predicting crime based on ethnicity. The digital era has blurred the lines between intelligence gathering and police investigations: Both now harness similar tools within similar spheres. And current worries about law enforcement and its appropriate limits hardly begin to describe the problem: Why not make use of available technologies, simply for efficiency?

If we are to solve these problems, we need to understand that the primary argument is not about the legalities of any particular case. Rather, the key question is “Who should have access to these technologies?” Only once this is publicly clarified should we ponder the development of legal regulations.

I say *should* because there are moral and ethical considerations involved. Historically, the significant roles played by veterans of the IDF and other security entities in Israel's thriving tech ecosystem—an ecosystem in which Israel leads the world, enormously bolstering the nation's economy and prestige—have led us to be complacent about the murky waters into which we are wading. It is well past time to address the difficult questions involved.



It's a common belief that the genie is already out of the bottle. All our data is out there, the tech companies already know every detail about our lives—perhaps we have nothing left to hide. That may be true. But the implications are far graver when the police collect the data in question. Such data, whether collected “honestly” or via function creep, has potent consequences as they morph into evidence, leading to investigations, arrests, and penalties.

Israel's recent Snowden moments underscore the shift from the

privacy encroachments of commercial enterprises, driven by the logic of capitalism, to the state's overt and covert surveillance measures, evoking not Adam Smith's invisible hand but George Orwell's Big Brother. The terror of Big Brother is that its knowledge of every detail of our daily lives can be turned on any of us, at any time. The good news is that we have not yet quite arrived at a point where Orwell's vision is today's reality. If we are vigilant, it is not too late to maintain appropriate limits and even roll them back where they have overreached. To do that successfully, we must broaden the frame from questions of what is legal to questions of what is moral and ethical, and beyond—to broader issues of democracy and threats to democratic systems of justice. *

SHLOMO BRODY

Jewish Ethics in the Age of Autonomous Warfare



IMAGINE YOU ARE a head of state with the opportunity to kill in one strike the entire political and military leadership of an enemy terrorist group. Every. Single. One. All the leaders and commanders who have launched repeated attacks on buses, cafes, and shopping centers would be gone in a flash. Along with terrorists, however, many non-combatants would inevitably be killed by the massive bomb that would be necessary to topple the building.

In September 2003, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon faced this dilemma. Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin had gathered with all of his senior men in a three-story Gaza apartment building. This was Yassin's dream team. Intelligence officials, led by Shin Bet head Avi Dichter, saw a historic opportunity to cause irreparable damage to the terrorist group.

Yet Israel didn't strike. Fearful of dozens of civilian casualties and the local and international protests that would ensue, Sharon, at the urging of IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon, called off the bomb. An alternative plan was hastily proposed and approved: to fire a smaller missile that would destroy the third floor, where intelligence officials believed the meeting was taking place. They were wrong. The meeting was on the first floor. Immediately after impact, the Hamas men fled. Israel could have utilized drones to blast every screeching car. The defense minister, Shaul Mofaz, ruled out that option. Civilians were likely to be hurt, he said later.

It wasn't just the "CNN effect" that guided Yaalon. Yaalon was weighed down that day by a previous assassination of a Hamas leader, Salah Shahada, in which over a dozen non-combatants were also killed. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Yaalon asserted that two moral factors guided his thinking. First, any action taken had to pass the 'mirror test': At the end of the day, will he be able to look at himself in the mirror? Second, he learned from his mother, the sole survivor of the Holocaust from her family, that "Jews shouldn't be killed, but it also means that we don't kill others. You need strength to defend Israel, and on the other hand, to be a human." Dichter, by contrast, thought that given the targets, the strike was proportionate and ethically justified. The collateral damage would be extensive but not excessive. Dichter, whose father was the lone Holocaust survivor in *his* family, countered with a different moral lesson from the Holocaust: "I'm not going to let anyone kill a Jew just because he's a Jew."

Who was right: Yaalon or Dichter? The bombing would have wiped out the enemy leadership, but the collateral damage would have been extensive. Would it have been excessive, given the targets? Perhaps not. On the other hand, would new Hamas leaders—or some other terrorist group—have popped up to replace them, anyway? My guess is that SAPIR readers will be conflicted on this question because sound arguments can be made for either side.

Now, suppose, in these days of advancing AI applications, the strike *and* the decision could be made by an autonomous drone

system. The system would evaluate the probability of a successful strike, estimate the extent of collateral damage and public outrage, and decide whether to shoot. There would be no last-minute decision-making scramble by security and political leaders, and no emotional baggage from the Holocaust in the background. Would our decision-making be any worse for it? Might it even be better?

From the perspective of Jewish ethics, the broad utilization of autonomous weapons systems would be a terrible moral mistake. Even if we could develop such systems in a way as to result, routinely, in morally reasonable outcomes as reliable as those made by humans, we'd lose a critical component of military ethics. It's not just a problem of legal responsibility, i.e., a problem of who is responsible for decisions made by the autonomous system. That can be solved, as I discuss below. The irreducible problem is that the machine's decisions would lack an ethical reckoning—a moral accounting—critical to the moral life.

To understand why this is critical, it's important to appreciate that Jewish ethical discourse is driven by a plurality of voices and values. As I show in *Ethics of Our Fighters*, my forthcoming book on Jewish military ethics, several types of moral appeals are found in the Biblical canon, Talmudic discourse, and later Jewish legal and ethical writings. These include the following factors:

1) *Dignity of mankind*. All humans, friend and foe alike, are created in the image of God. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in His image did God make man” (Gen. 9:6). This requires us to grant basic dignity to any person and not cavalierly treat people as a means toward some desired end.

2) *Inherent wrong of illicit bloodshed*. The commandment “Thou shall not murder” is reflective of this deep theological principle and demands that we do not take a life lightly. In fact, the ability to avoid unnecessary bloodshed is one of the factors that make the Jews worthy of settling the Land of Israel, according to Deuteronomy 19:10.

3) *Individual responsibility*. Individuals bear primary respon-

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sibility for their actions and should ideally bear the sole weight of that responsibility. “The person who sins — he alone shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20).

4) *Vision of world peace.* The ultimate Biblical vision is for the cessation of all warfare, and represents a goal toward which humanity must aspire. “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war” (Isaiah 2:4).

5) *Warfare in pursuit of justice.* Until such time, the Bible calls upon its followers to take up arms for the sake of justice. This can be to defend oneself, to settle the homeland, or to rid the world of evil.

6) *Warfare, by its nature, is a collective affair.* This entails citizens and soldiers endangering themselves for their nation, alongside a willingness to kill members of the enemy nation. Accordingly, warfare creates a form of communal identity and responsibility. “When the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction.... For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth, the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people” (Deuteronomy 7:2,6).

7) *National partiality.* The primary responsibility of political leaders and citizens is to protect their own people. This is part of a general ethos that people have particularistic obligations to

To give a moral account of decision making is the ultimate act of ethical discourse. It forces the actor to justify, before and after the act, why he or she prioritized certain values over others in any particular circumstance.

their family, comrades, community, or nation. These “associative commitments” create a moral obligation not to shirk one’s responsibility to fight on behalf of the collective.

8) *Bravery and courage.* In warfare, bravery is a virtue and fearfulness is a vice. It is virtuous to worry about killing someone illicitly, but nonetheless, one must still fight courageously.

9) *National honor.* As with all actions, the honor of both God and His people is a factor. This requires not acting in an unethical manner that will disgrace our reputation, and not becoming a downtrodden people subjected to mass ridicule.

It pays to take a second look at this list. These values are readily comprehensible and will undoubtedly appeal to many people in various contexts. Several of them clearly played a role in the debate between Yaalon and Dichter, including the dignity of mankind, individual responsibility, national partiality, and national honor. Do you think that some should always take precedence over others? Or might you argue that it depends on the variables of any given circumstance? If the latter — as I think most people would claim — then the challenge for ethicists and leaders is to determine which moral appeals take precedence in any given case.

The methodology for sorting this out is sometimes called “casuistry,” a case-based process for applying ethical principles to resolve moral dilemmas. Here, we are dealing with what my late father, the

philosopher Baruch Brody, called “pluralistic casuistry,” i.e., the process of determining which of multiple values should be most prominent in any given circumstance. Some ethicists use multi-value frameworks to balance different values in determining which moral claim should outweigh others in a particular circumstance. Other ethicists express doubt as to whether we can create a hierarchy among competing values; after all, values are difficult to quantify. Instead, they suggest, we should deliberate intensively—and then make a judgment call as to which value or values should take priority. Either way, pluralistic casuistry leads one to take *all these moral claims into consideration* when making an ethical assessment in a given case, as opposed to prioritizing a single factor such as national victory (favored by ultra-nationalists), or a meta-value, such as human rights, favored by international law jurists.

Pluralists, as the philosopher John Kekes has argued, believe that there is *no absolute hierarchy* of principles that is operative in all situations. All these important values are conditional. No matter how precious a given value might be, it may be violated when it conflicts with another value with a stronger claim in a particular situation. A moral judgment call must be made based on a debate about the relative strength of all competing values—strengths that will vary based on the political, military, and social context of the situation in question. It follows that no algorithm can be relied upon to determine the right answer in all situations. Here lies the primary problem with autonomous killing machines: the inability to create and defend a moral argument for the decisions it makes.

As I suggested, the legal difficulty—who can you hold liable for an action no one planned or performed—is challenging but surmountable: for instance, we might agree, as a matter of convention, that the last human decision-maker bears responsibility. Yet, this legal dilemma reflects another moral problem. In the absence of human control, it may not be possible to explain, after as well as before a decision is reached, exactly what happened and why. To give a moral account of decision making is the ultimate act of

ethical discourse. It forces the actor to justify, before and after the act, why he or she prioritized certain values over others in any particular circumstance. It further forces them to learn from those experiences and apply them to future occasions. This form of continuous accounting, which includes but goes beyond Yaalon's "mirror test," is a critical part of the moral life.

Autonomous weapons systems are not so much immoral as amoral. That is to say, they don't allow for the type of moral deliberation and reflection necessary to pass ethical judgment. The actions taken by such systems may, overall, be as defensible as decisions made by humans, whose judgments can be deeply flawed. Yet, by replacing human deliberation with a machine, we stop using the moral compass that distinguishes our humanity. "To know good and evil," as Genesis 3:22 puts it, is to be human. Machine decision-making threatens us with the ultimate form of digital dehumanization.

In this respect, it is useful to compare autonomous weapons systems with autonomous driving vehicles. The latter technology remains far from perfect, as recent news reports have highlighted. Human driving, however, is also flawed, both on a technical and moral level. Nevertheless, many criticize automated cars for replacing human judgment when unexpected roadblocks emerge, and accidents are imminent. Some algorithm, the critics suggest, will make a moral decision about who lives or dies—something algorithms should not be doing. And yet, in these sudden, panicked circumstances, little human moral deliberation takes place as drivers make split-second, knee-jerk decisions. Algorithms built into automated cars might actually increase the degree of moral deliberation taking place in these frenzied moments. Accordingly, an autonomous driving model may be morally appropriate. Even if this is so, the same cannot be said for deliberations over whether to kill terrorists meeting in a crowded residential building.

Artificial intelligence can play a critical role in assisting our moral deliberations in such a situation. It can help us identify the

right targets, clarify the number of non-combatants in an area, and estimate the level of collateral damage. AI-controlled drones can be utilized for early, high-risk surveillance, and play a major role toward disabling enemy air defenses. These are cheaper ways to knock out missile targets that, critically, don't run the mortal risks of piloted planes. In these ways and more, technology can help us fight more efficiently, safely, and even ethically.

But moral decision-making with life-and-death consequences must ultimately remain in human hands. Otherwise, there is no moral accountability. And retaining moral accountability is essential for retaining our humanity. *

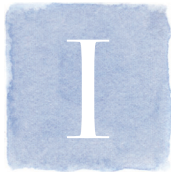
PART TWO

TECHNOLOGY:
THE EXPERIENCE





INTRODUCTION



IN FOUR pairs of essays—on synagogue life, education, social media, and AI—eight Jewish thinkers and practitioners examine the effects of technology on Jewish life.

Synagogue life. Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove of Manhattan’s Park Avenue Synagogue describes how his synagogue turned the necessity of technology in the age of Covid into a virtue, blending online and offline interactions to create a richer liturgical, educational, and communal experience. Rabbi Rachel Isaacs offers a bracing counter-vision, explaining how she kept her small-town Jewish community in Maine offline and outside during the pandemic. For her, in-person is essential, because “Judaism is, at its core, an embodied faith.”

Education. Mordechai Lightstone recounts the history of Chabad’s embrace of technology, a project that began decades before the internet and that has expanded exponentially since then. Chabad’s enormous success, he argues, is based on the

Rebbe's insistence that the project is not about harnessing technology for holiness but about understanding that holiness is what technology is for. Sara Wolkenfeld of Sefaria is less sanguine. She examines the disruption from new technologies as the Jewish "paradigm of books" meets a world in which "searching is the new reading." There is, she suggests, no going back: "Digital natives do not find 15th-century technology to be the best way to experience Torah." So we must construct new pathways to Jewish knowledge and create a new understanding of the value of human intellectual labor in an age of machines.

Social media. Rivka Press Schwartz and Melissa Frey confront the question of the impact of social media on Jewish youth head-on. Schwartz identifies the challenge as one of "embracing new technologies and the opportunities they create without being swamped by them." We have met many other contemporary challenges while remaining true to Jewish values. Now, we must articulate "a Jewish ethic of technology" in a register students can hear. Frey offers one way forward: intentionally using overnight Jewish summer camps as a break from technology. "We teach kids that patience matters and that valuable things take time. Apps and the internet provide instant gratification, but real life and real people move at a different pace."

Artificial intelligence. Finally, Tiffany Shlain and Melanie Levav take on the question of AI. Shlain, a technology entrepreneur, is optimistic about the impact of AI on humanity, though she also relishes her practice of "Tech Shabbat," in which the screens are put away for a day a week. As she says, "all my best ideas come to me on Shabbat." Levav ends our collection, suitably enough, with a meditation on Jewish death in the age of AI, online kaddish and shiva, and life-extending technologies that might even lead to immortality. Are we entering "the death of death"?

—*The Editors*

The Synagogue

ELLIOT J. COSGROVE



DISRUPTIVE innovation,” a term heard more often in business school than in synagogue, has been at the heart of the Jewish project from the beginning.

Soon after establishing the covenant at Sinai, the Children of Israel reconstructed their religious life around a mobile tabernacle that carried their community and its faith through the wilderness. Upon arriving in the Promised Land, our ancestors adopted a centralized sacrificial system of worship, experiencing God’s presence in Jerusalem’s Temple. When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, the Pharisees transformed Judaism into a rabbinic religion of worship, study, and mitzvot. Faced with new conditions, our people always find new ways to express our inheritance, integrating new with old.

The arrival of the digital age marks a transformation as momentous as any of these earlier turning points. The internet has fundamentally changed the way we access information: Ask a college student the last time he checked out a book from the library, or a twentysomething whether she has ever used a paper map. More profoundly, it has changed the way we connect with others. We may be more interconnected than ever before, but our existence has also become atomized as communities and friendships now come by way of clicks and thumb swipes.

The challenges of our present moment are not particular to Jewish institutional life, nor are they only a by-product of the pandemic, although the pandemic has certainly contributed to the difficulties. Bookstores, movie theaters, and houses of worship have all been contending with the disintermediating and disorienting effects of our digital age.

Looking around my synagogue, I see that every aspect of synagogue life has been affected by technology. Our daily, Sabbath, and festival services still engage in-person congregants but now also include online participants from around the globe. Some of our adult-education classes still meet in our classrooms, but some meet online, and some are hybrid. Sermons, lectures, and music are available on our website, as well as on social media and via podcast and our Vimeo channel. The tutoring of b'nai mitzvah students now happens on Zoom as well as in person. We have become an entirely paperless community. A/V professionals are now established members of our team. To say my synagogue “is not my mother’s synagogue” is an understatement. It’s not *my* synagogue of 10 or even five years ago.

Fast-paced and far-reaching in its transformations as the digital age may be, it has also revealed itself to be a moment of great opportunity.

In the midst of the changes, I take comfort in the knowledge that we remain committed to our core mission of being a *beit tefillah* (house of prayer), *beit midrash* (house of learning), and *beit kneset* (house of community). But if the riches of our tradition are to be received with a sense of relevance and urgency by new generations, they must be communicated through the same channels as any other content our community members consume.

The discoveries of our moment have revealed hitherto unimagined possibilities. Our podcast lectures are enjoyed by far more people than would ever hear them in person. Our children learn to decode Hebrew far better online in their homes than in a Hebrew School classroom following a long school day. Our lay leaders are far more willing to volunteer time if not every committee meeting is in-person. Fast-paced and far-reaching in its transformations as the digital age may be, it has also revealed itself to be a moment of great opportunity.

It’s important to see, however, that this opportunity is by no means simply about going online along with the rest of our

culture—because the digital era has unexpectedly brought the *countercultural* value proposition of synagogue life into full relief. As so much goes online, our present moment reminds us of all that can occur only in person—and that must continue to do so. Online prayer will never match the power of in-person worship. Pastoral care is made sacred not only by physical proximity, but because of relationship capital accumulated over a lifetime of joys and sorrows—something extraordinarily difficult to build across screens. Be it a cantor’s concert, a *tikkun olam* project, or a kibbitz at kid-dush, there are riches of communal life that are enjoyed most fully in person. Counterintuitive as it may seem, our shift to digital has strengthened our in-person offerings, but only insofar as we have, in the main, answered these questions successfully.



The road ahead holds more questions than answers. “What stays in-person?” “What goes online?” “How can we best create synergies between the two, and build and sustain community together?” “How can the blessings of online Judaism be embraced without cannibalizing in-person communities?” These are not the questions I ever thought I would be asking, but I find them endlessly interesting and an affirmation of the classic task of rabbinic leadership.

Most of all, as a synagogue rabbi serving a financially secure synagogue in an area with the densest concentration of Jews outside Israel, I am well aware of the bubble in which I live. Success in today’s environment is expensive—in time, money, and personnel—in ways not available to every synagogue in America. The umbrella arms of American Jewish life—institutional, denominational, and philanthropic—must convene conversations that encourage a creative and collaborative sharing of resources across communities. No longer should we consider Jewish communities to be purely local enterprises. Any vision of the Jewish future must be one in which all ships rise, a dramatic rethinking of our American Jewish landscape.

Disruptive innovation has been at the heart of the Jewish project from our very beginnings — faced with new conditions, we find new ways to express our inheritance, integrating the new with the old.

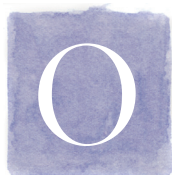
Small Towns

RACHEL ISAACS



Aneinu, aneinu b'yom koreinu —

Answer us, answer us on the day when we call.



ON SIMCHAT TORAH in the fall of 2020, 50 members of my community marched around the outside of our small synagogue in Waterville, Maine, singing together. We had made an ostensibly risky choice in this first holiday season of the pandemic: We joined together to pray in person. Even though rural Maine often felt removed from the worst of things, we knew individuals dying in local hospitals, and family and friends in major cities described a world that was terrifying. And yet, we too were suffering — from isolation, despair, and deepening depression. We decided to celebrate together, outdoors and in masks.

For our final *hakafah*, we crossed Main Street and made our way together to Johnson Heights, a nearby road that used to be home to many of our congregants. With a small *sefer Torah* in my right hand and my eldest daughter's hand in my left, I led the group toward the house of our synagogue's nonagenarian matriarch. She was waiting for us, sitting on a lawn chair in her driveway, waving a Simchat Torah flag, ready to behold the community she could no longer safely join. When her home came into view, my daughters ran to give her a hug. For a moment I tried to stop them, but instead I stopped myself.

There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, Ecclesiastes tells us. This was a time to embrace.

The previous April, this woman's eldest son had died. She watched me perform his funeral on her iPad. Unable to bear the thought of her sitting alone, two of the stalwarts of our synagogue sat next to her in her kitchen, against public-health recommendations. They knew that there are many things short of physical death that nonetheless rival its pain — like watching your child's funeral on an iPad as you're alone in the house where you raised him.

**You cannot achieve
harmony on Zoom; your
heart doesn't feel the
reverb of the person
singing next to you.**

In the early days of the pandemic, many of us tried to find the beauty and meaning in lockdowns. They would be like a sabbatical, we said, a time for reflection and resetting. There were promises of what technol-

ogy could deliver to Jewish communities, especially ours. An online Judaism would be the solution for the everyday challenges facing rural Jews, we heard Jewish leaders say. Now we could attend the *best* Jewish day school, connect to the *most* inspirational prayer services, and access the *top* Jewish scholars. However, we all knew that when this ended, urban and suburban Jews would still be able to access the basic privileges (or maybe the new luxury?) of a physical community. What would become of rural Jews if our in-person communities withered?

Although the Conservative movement soon made the decision that minyan could be made virtually to protect people's health and save lives, I nonetheless chose to mostly continue holding services and classes on our synagogue patio. If there was a storm, we'd move online, but I didn't make it a habit. Many of the more distant members of my congregation didn't have broadband and couldn't connect reliably. My synagogue couldn't afford the technology to stream well. And I didn't want synagogue to be something like

CNN that you could have on in the background while you chopped carrots for dinner.

You cannot achieve harmony on Zoom; your heart doesn't feel the reverb of the person singing next to you. You don't check on one another's kids on the way to the bathroom; you can't feel the release that comes when someone lays his hand on your shoulder after a tough week. My synagogue wrestled with policy fights and alienation like all other houses of worship during the pandemic, but we were not among those who struggled to bring members back in person when restrictions were lifted. The thread connecting us all had stretched, but it was still there.

Some of the technological adjustments that came out of the pandemic were positive for us. It is nearly impossible to access quality mental health care in rural Maine, and telehealth has been transformative, the demand for it high. Our synagogue board meetings are now online; members of my board live in a 150-mile radius around the shul, and we can access their talent and commitment even at a distance.

However, a big reason we have created and maintained such a dedicated community is that we stuck together, physically. The congregation still talks about our 2020 High Holidays, with that Simchat Torah march down Main Street and services held under a tent in a large open field. Congregants took pride in transferring hundreds of chairs and *mahzorim* in the back of their pickup trucks, and were delighted by the unexpected gift of apple cake that Julie, one of our members, baked for each member of the community.

Julie had come to Maine from New York with the back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s. She is emblematic of our community: people who chose to create, to cultivate, a life in Maine. They opted in to chopping wood on the weekends to heat their homes, and weeding rows of cauliflower and potatoes in the early-morning hours before work.

They also knew that being part of a rural Jewish community would require a sacrifice of time and energy—driving an hour to Hebrew

school and Shabbat services each week, with many more hours in the car taking kids to Jewish youth-group gatherings in major cities. If my congregants had wanted lives of comfort and convenience, they would never have moved here in the first place. As a matter of conviction and principle, they were always willing to put skin in the game.

Which is to say, in a fundamental sense, they were willing to live the values that a rich Jewish life requires. Ultimately, their commitment inspired me and my wife to make a life here, too, even if most of my congregants no longer observe the tradition in the way we do. Like generations before us, we bought a chest freezer for months' worth of kosher meat delivered on the bus from Boston, so we can have kosher brisket on Rosh Hashanah with the homegrown potatoes we plant each spring on our next-door neighbors' farm.

Judaism is, at its core, an embodied faith. A full Jewish life cannot be evaluated like a checklist of programs completed, conversations convened, or words uttered. The spirit of our faith lives in between the data points, in the interstitial spaces where we savor sweetness, meld our voices, and show up when we are called.

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.

Education

SARA WOLKENFELD



FAMOUS Talmudic story tells of Hillel the Elder, who could not afford the entrance fee to the local house of study. He clawed his way onto the roof and perched by a skylight in order to learn.

Jewish education used to operate within a set of constraints. Access to texts was limited in a variety of ways: by the identity of the would-be learner, by the availability of printed

books and the space to store them, by cost, and by the mediating role played by teachers. These limits no longer pertain. The digital age has blown wide open the gates to study: Websites, digital publications (increasingly available in translation), source sheets, YouTube and TikTok videos, podcasts, Twitter threads, and even Jewish video games proliferate. Anyone with a device and an internet connection can study nearly any text, any time, in any place, on his own or in a group. Digitization has also transformed our ability to draw connections among texts, a fundamental element of the process of trying to understand the meaning and purpose of Jewish religious literature. Texts that never met on a shelf can sit side by side on a screen.



These radical transformations, which have done so much to expand access to Jewish sources, also raise profound questions that those of us who care about Jewish education must contend with.

Learners in the digital age now swim in a vast ocean of content—but without necessarily having navigational skills. The sheer volume is overwhelming; having no set direction is confusing. An educational system based solely on the paradigm of books is not sufficient to support 21st-century students. We desperately need to cultivate educators who are fluent in the use of these new tools, and to help them develop sound and effective pedagogies to guide learners through these waters.

The democratization of knowledge also shifts the balance of power between teacher and student. Teachers are no longer the gatekeepers to knowledge, which some people find unsettling and others liberating. But the need for teachers has not gone away; they must adapt (and so must their training programs) to retain their vital role in education. Just as doctors now work in a world where patients can do their own online research about symptoms and diseases, so too must educators now teach students who can bring

nearly any source to bear on a topic. This is an incredible opportunity, and educators need support to rise to the occasion and shift their roles accordingly.

Moving away from the written page also disrupts cherished traditions of the material experiences of Jewish learning. Perhaps the strongest articulation of this value is the Talmudic story of Moses encountering God as He added crowns to the letters of the Torah, and being told, generations later, that in Rabbi Akiva's house of study, these scribal flourishes would carry legal weight and meaning. A modern analogue is the meaning ascribed to the layout of the printed Talmud, a tradition only a few hundred years old, but considered by many to be definitional to what it means to engage in authentic Talmud study. Texts need no longer look or feel the way they used to; educators need to make hard choices about when — and why — older formats matter for today's learners.

The unbinding of books means that searching is the new reading. It is hard to overestimate the impact of searchable Torah knowledge for teachers and students alike. Much of the core Jewish canon is not arranged topically. The Talmudic discussion of Hanukkah is in Tractate Shabbat; Maimonides's thematic categorization of his legal code takes real effort to master — and so on, ad infinitum. Jewish texts are a maze, and learners have heretofore had to invest serious time in developing navigational expertise. The skills demanded by digital learning are different: Teachers, nearly immediately, can now find texts that address the themes that they want to teach, and students can be reasonably

Study that includes time for exploration, for tasting different kinds of information on a journey to discovery, needs a much slower kind of reading and exploring than the instant gratification of online searches.

confident that they will emerge from an online search with Jewish sources that correspond to their interests. This changes the skills and habits of mind that we need to build; we need to cultivate human creativity and curiosity to empower today's learners and tomorrow's educators.

What is lost in the shift to digital? Possibly quite a lot—which I say as someone who works every day to further our use of digital texts. Numerous midrashic sources compare the Torah to a vineyard, and the act of learning to the sensual pleasures of eating sweet and delicious foods. Study that includes time for exploration, for tasting different kinds of information on a journey to discovery, needs a much slower kind of reading and exploring than the instant gratification of online searches. Digital natives do not find 15th-century technology to be the best way to experience Torah, so educators must face head-on the challenge of slowing the race to discover new information and constructing an appreciation of more deliberate pathways to knowledge.

Torah study has always been central to Jewish identity; it is more than a simple knowledge-acquisition project. As learning methodologies and goals shift, today's Jewish community must ensure that we understand how best to use, or when to resist, the learning technologies of the future. Our skillful adaptation as well as our principled decisions about which technologies to develop will guide students as they make choices about their Jewish knowledge and identity.



New developments in the capabilities of language-learning models such as ChatGPT and generative artificial intelligence sharpen the pedagogic and ethical questions that face us. These questions are relevant to our entire society, but they must also be tackled, thoughtfully and intentionally, in Jewish education. In this moment of rapid technological development, we have the opportunity to draw on the wisdom of our textual tradition to offer guideposts

that are distinctly Jewish. We must align our use of new technologies with our communal goals and values.

Although more Jewish educators and thinkers are considering these topics, we are still far behind where we should be. Jewish funders and communal leaders need to incentivize research and discussion and provide more venues for people who care about Jewish education to gather, learn, discuss, debate, and develop new policies. There is far more funding outside the Jewish world for scholars to address these kinds of questions than there is within the organized Jewish community. This needs to change.

Our work moving forward must be guided by the core question of the value of human intellectual labor at a time when machines can do more than ever before. In addition to developing goals for the content, values, and habits of mind we want students to gain and develop, Jewish educators must also be in dialogue with the research on how learners best absorb information and produce knowledge on screens versus on paper. We need to be intentional about when to deploy new tools in the service of our pedagogical and communal aims. For example, Corey Robin, a professor at Brooklyn College, recently argued for the value of continuing to ask students to write papers. Writing helps us to understand our world more deeply and to refine our thoughts, he says; producing an excellent essay transforms the learner. We need to think about when and where there is real value in failed attempts, rough drafts, and slow processes, and how to build those into the learning experiences even in an era of ChatGPT.



The Talmud tells us that the world is sustained by the breath of schoolchildren. Our communities need to understand that the questions that define Jewish education are the same questions that define our identities as Jews and as a Jewish people. If we want our children's learning to reflect our values, if we want them to help

build a world based on our commitments, then we must invest serious time and resources in developing our communal ability to understand and grapple with the radical technological transformations of our day.

Day Schools

RIVKA PRESS SCHWARTZ



THE FIRST TIME we tried to run educational programming on the use of social media and digital devices, it fell flat. Every grade at SAR High School in Riverdale, New York, has a Shabbaton—a weekend retreat—built around an educational theme. The 10th-grade Shabbaton had long been focused on a core question of Modern Orthodoxy: How do we live our religious commitments in engagement with the contemporary world? In 2022, we decided to update this Shabbaton to address technology and social media as a particular manifestation of that conundrum. Phones, computers, the internet, and social media are essential parts of our students' lives. It was time to bring Jewish wisdom and values to bear on their use.

And yet the kids did not, as a student of mine once said, pick up what we were putting down. They said they'd heard it all before; that the adults seemed hectoring (they already knew how negatively we felt about technology); that we spoke way too much about pornography. And they told us we were hypocrites: They see us and the other adults in their lives staring nonstop at our screens, or texting while driving, just as much (if not more!) as they do. We're all suffering from the same addiction.

Fair. But whatever the flaws of our first attempt, everything we

heard from the kids that weekend confirmed how critical it is to address this topic within the context of Jewish ethics. The typical teenage fears of finding oneself and one's place in the world are magnified when social media is omnipresent, when kids are subject to constant scrutiny and assessment across more time and space, and in front of more people, than ever before. And there are few rules to guide them. The line that we often said a decade ago — that we are digital immigrants unsure in this land, but the kids are digital natives, navigating more sure-footedly than we — proves not to be true. Native-born though they may be, in this new land where kids operate without adult supervision, they make serious mistakes, doing not-smart and not-nice things with their devices, harming others and incurring significant consequences themselves.

Kids see us staring at our screens, or texting while driving, just as much (if not more!) as they do. We're all suffering from the same addiction.

We realized that we had to find a way into the conversation that acknowledged both that technology is a valuable and indispensable tool in our students' lives, and that it has many aspects that are not only harmful to kids, but that *they don't even want*. So for this year's Shabbaton, we'll be asking students to actively reflect on questions like: In what ways do these devices, and the social-media apps you use on them, make you feel more connected? In what ways do they make you feel more alone? Which parts of this new landscape add joy and meaning and value to your life, and which make you feel emptier, more isolated, sadder, or angrier? Where do you want to recalibrate your use of technology, and where do you want to opt out of it entirely? As Modern Orthodox Jews, we want to be, as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks once said, borrowing a popular verse from the Gospel of John, "in, but not of, the world," using and even embracing new technologies and the opportunities they create without being swamped by them.

We have modeled this value—meeting head-on the challenges posed by the contemporary world in ways that are true to Jewish values and also honest about today’s realities—in other realms as well. We have invested significantly in educating about a healthy modern Jewish sexual ethic. We did so even though it is no small task to uphold halakhic norms and values, provide clear and accurate information, and engage kids where they are.

Now educators need to invest similarly in effectively developing and articulating a Jewish ethic of technology, again holding a dual commitment to our timeless values and to meeting young 21st-century Jews in their realities. It is not enough to simply clarify what we believe and what we think we should say; we must also ensure that we speak in a register that students are able to hear. There is too much at stake to sidestep this challenge, for the kinds of Jews and the kinds of human beings we hope our students will become.

Summer Camp

MELISSA FREY



AT THE JEWISH summer camp I attended in my youth, we created a sacred moment for our closing-night ritual. After we finished our campfire singing, we’d look up at the stars. The only sound was from the cicadas chirping in the live oaks. The stars were the same ones we’d see the next night, from our homes. We’d locate the North Star to guide us to the Big Dipper, and with the intentionality of a biblical covenant, we’d pinky-swear with our friends to repeat the ritual once we got home. It kept us connected in a time when mail was slow and long-distance calls were expensive. Simply looking up made us feel connected.

Campers today live very different lives. In a post-pandemic world, they have endured screen overload: Zoom school, tablets and phones (often handed to them by parents needing a break), texting instead of talking, and ubiquitous social-media platforms, which create connections but also enable cyberbullying and so many other dangerous behaviors. All of this has made a profound impact on the hearts, souls, and minds of young people.

Camp offers kids a break from all that, fostering in-person connections in screen-free, immersive spaces. Young people need us to help them make the most out of this radical departure from daily life—a countercultural experience that can help them reset, rejuvenate, and build the kinds of human-to-human skills that give life meaning. As a Jewish community, we need to embrace this invaluable opportunity, learn from it, and share its lessons widely.

At camp, we're giving kids and adolescents the opportunity to grow and develop simply by looking up: raising their heads away from their screens and into the eyes of peers, mentors, coaches, role models, and leaders who will help them develop and shape their identity. We teach kids that patience matters and that valuable things take time. Apps and the internet provide instant gratification, but real life and real people move at a different pace. We acknowledge and celebrate that real life is challenging, that people are imperfect, and that growth, connection, and meaning require serious effort and provide immense reward.

The activities we create at camp build skills for conflict resolution, foster resilience and grit, and create communities that value teamwork and belonging. We share in one another's joy and offer support when one of us is in distress. We encourage sacred conversations about Jewish experiences, such as when young people learn to write an original commentary or blessing for *tefillah* (prayer), rather than turning to ChatGPT to write it for them. We create holy spaces. "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly," the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote, "God is the electricity that surges between them."

Yet we're not afraid of technology, nor are we creating insular spaces that ignore real-world experiences and emotions. The challenges young people grapple with at home don't fade when they come to camp. We tackle them head-on. For example, we devote tremendous attention and resources to MESSH—the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health of every person in our community. Developing and honing our staff's MESSH skills can help

We don't reflexively reject the benefits of technology at camp — we just use our values and educational goals to guide our choices about how it's used, with the goal of enhancing connection and meaning.

protect children from high-risk behaviors and tendencies that are often the result of distress in other areas of their lives, including from their use and abuse of technology. Campers arrive with more baggage than simply their duffels. As adolescent development has become more complex, we've become more attuned to campers' needs and more nimble in how we prepare to meet and exceed them. Sometimes prioritizing MESSH means that we

need to use screens to support well-being—whether it's by providing movies to kids spending a night in the infirmary, or using Zoom to facilitate weekly calls with their therapist.

We don't reflexively reject the benefits of technology at camp—we just use our values and educational goals to guide our choices about how it's used, with the goal of enhancing connection and meaning. The summer I was the education director at that same camp with the live oak trees, we brought "Torah Cam" to Shabbat-morning worship. While some campers and staff chanted from one Torah scroll, another team filmed a hand holding a *yad* (pointer), following along with the reader of a second Torah. I will never forget the sound of sheer wonder, the gasps of awe as the image came onto the screens in the *beit tefillah*—the Torah

reading had come to life, more accessible, relatable, and exciting than before. Torah Cam became part of camp culture that summer, increasing interest in preparing to read Torah and participating on the Torah Cam team.



I've yet to meet a camper who didn't think her camp was the most beautiful place in the world. The true impact of these places is not measured by the quality of the food or the heat of the summer. It's measured in the engagement of all of our senses—the beauty of the land, the authenticity of real relationships, the familiar smells of a spice box at Havdalah and chlorine at the pool, the sounds and rhythmic beats of song session and Israeli dance, the taste of s'mores at the campfire, the touch of a celebratory high-five or holding hands on a Shabbat walk, and the sense of safety and belonging that comes from knowing that all campers are affirmed for who they are. This is all enhanced by being immersed in a community that celebrates the joy of being Jewish. Camp is real life.

Study after study has demonstrated that Jewish summer camp has more impact on adolescents than any other peer-based Jewish activity. The fact that it now has the added benefit of being a largely screen-free place will only amplify this impact, if we lean into it. Community leaders and educators of all kinds should take lessons from the camp experience and apply them to other areas of Jewish communal life: lessons such as prioritizing time for outdoor play and independent free time; encouraging young people to explore new hobbies and activities that challenge their minds and bodies; practicing gratitude daily through journaling or meditation; and finding time simply to be together in undistracted conversation.

At camp we talk about “everyone” and “every one.” “Everyone” is the whole group; and “every one” of us is a unique, holy, irreplaceable member of our camp community, the most important person in the world to someone. We encourage every one of them to take

the time to look up—to look at their parents, peers, and friends in the eyes, to gaze at the stars in the sky, to make unfiltered connections wherever and whenever they can.

Shabbat

TIFFANY SHLAIN



TWO THINGS humans are great at: inventing new technologies and then worrying about the changes they'll bring. Prompted to discuss the creation of writing, Socrates worried that it undermined our ability to remember and fully grapple with ideas. The same fears accompanied innovations such as the printing press, photography, cinema, and computers. Yet instead, these new technologies have enabled and enhanced the flow of information, supercharged learning, and allowed other forms of art and intelligence to flourish.

The newest worrisome advent is artificial intelligence. The arrival of AI applications such as ChatGPT have led many to worry about a future in which people will no longer know how to read, synthesize, and write information on their own. Others think that generative AI holds great promise for science, for business, for culture.

Which is it? Will these new technologies be good or bad for humans? And good or bad for the Jews?

I think the answer is yes.

Two Jews, three opinions, the saying goes. But I'm mostly optimistic. What these new technologies require us to do is ultimately to become more Socratic—to ask better questions. As we learn how to write great AI prompts, we'll improve our own abilities to

iterate, dig deeper, probe even further. We'll partner with new technologies to advance our thinking, not to replace it.

As Jews, this concept—asking good questions—comes as second nature. What is our canon if not a series of difficult, complicated questions and the complex but vitally important rabbit holes that scholars have dived down over the ages? If ChatGPT leads us to ask more and better questions, all the better—for Jewish culture and for the world around us.

As a creator, I love having access to so much information. When I use AI-powered platforms to brainstorm ideas, artificial intelligence feels infinite, accessible, and buoyant all at once. Right now, I am working on a new film on the adolescent brain. I start by asking AI to summarize the existing research and then to refine its results, again and again. AI is a scope that lets me take in all the findings, then dial it all down to a micro level. I also love asking AI to look for larger trends in topics. Of course, I have to curate and synthesize the results myself, but AI provides a fun and useful way to volley ideas back and forth to stretch my own thinking.

While I worry about disinformation and the difficulty of distinguishing truth from falsehood in AI-generated content, I take heart from Neil Postman's advice from 1999: "As Jefferson did, and much later John Dewey . . . the best way for citizens to protect their liberty is for them to be encouraged to be skeptical." His first suggestion to aid in this was to "teach children something about the art and science of asking questions."

These questions can be hard to generate when we spend so much time online. A healthy skepticism often has to come from a place of balance and repose, which is usually a place without pixels. For all the benefits of digital technology, clicking and tapping through screens doesn't always encourage critical thinking and reflection. In order to gain from our devices, we need to be able to step away from them and into offline spaces where we can take a breath, collect our faculties, and put everything into perspective.

My family and I tap into this through a very Jewish technology: Shabbat.

We use this ancient Jewish invention in a way we call Tech Shabbat: no screens from Friday night to Saturday night. This respite, this break from the norm, provides presence, joy, humor, connection, and creativity. It brings a rhythm to my week that guides and sustains me. It makes me feel closer to my husband and my children—and my husband and I agree that it is one of the best parenting decisions we've made. The time offline, away from constant texts and notifications, gives our daughters space to think. Our screen-free day allows us to exist in a different and much-needed realm that offers the quiet and perspective we lose during the week. Freed from distractions, I have the bandwidth to ask bigger and better questions. Deprived of the ability to look things up online, I am reminded of the simple, lasting value of using the most complex organ we know of: the human brain.

After engaging in Tech Shabbat for 14 years, I've come to understand how my brain enjoys different modes of thinking and being. I love being offline—and I also love reentering the online world. Both are invaluable. I worry about those who never disconnect their brain from technology; I think they risk losing the perspective they need to ask the right questions. But I also worry about those who are shunning new technologies such as AI; they risk missing out on its truly astounding potential to access and advance human knowledge.

One of the best ways that I use Tech Shabbat to enable me to think differently is through journaling. I journal daily, but on Shabbat, without screens to interfere, I can do a three-hour review of the week by hand. I record what I am thinking about, what made me laugh, what I am struggling with, moments of beauty. It's a highlight of my week. It's also incredibly useful. All my best ideas come to me on Saturday. Turning off the outside and turning to the inside jump-starts creativity. As I explored in my book on Tech Shabbat, *24/6: Giving Up Screens One Day a Week to Get More Time, Creativity, and Connection*, there are neuroscientific reasons

for this. Activating my brain's default mode lets me link things together in a new way. I can stretch out and ask myself questions. And in the quiet of the day, I can, for once, hear the answers.

What idea isn't made stronger with a question?

End of Life

MELANIE LEVAV



IN THE EPIGRAPH of his book *The Death of Death*, Rabbi Neil Gillman quotes “Had Gadya,” one of the silly cumulative songs sung near the end of the Passover Seder: “Then came the Blessed Holy One and slaughtered the Angel of Death...” As with many catchy tunes, we often sing the song without considering the lyrics. But Gillman asks us to consider: How can it even be possible to kill the Angel of Death? Does this mean the death of death?

New technologies are making what were once merely exegetical questions like these quite real. “Dead” no longer means what it used to.

In 2021, we read about Joshua Barbeau, a Canadian man who used an early form of ChatGPT to interact with a chatbot simulating his dead fiancée, Jessica. Unable to move through his grief, he discovered Project December, a website where he could enter old texts and social-media posts from Jessica to create an AI version of her with whom he could interact on a daily basis.

Today, you can walk into a museum and interact with Holocaust survivors through holographic chatbots. Had my Auschwitz-surviving father-in-law lived just a few years longer, his grandchildren would have been able to speak with an AI version of him from their phones, not merely relying on seeing and hearing him through the

six-plus hours of video testimony he recorded before they were born, or through the stories my wife and I tell of him.

ChatGPT can write your obituary. You can host a shiva or say Kaddish on Zoom. Funerals are live-streamed across the globe, no longer requiring you to purchase a last-minute bereavement plane ticket to get to the funeral on time.

Judaism has always offered moral and ethical frameworks for understanding life's greatest conundrums.

Some of these innovations have become commonplace since the Covid pandemic; others are new.

Still others resemble things we've been doing all along—like consulting the dead, which we do every time we open a book written in a bygone era. But what is new, as Barbeau or those museumgoers will tell you, is that we can now ask AI to “hallucinate” *how the dead might respond*.

Maimonides wrote a significant body of Jewish laws about mourning. But until now, we've never been able to ask Maimonides a question and have “him” (or, rather, AI-Maimonides) “respond.” The answers provided by AI will likely be good guesses, generated by a very intelligent synthesis of what he once said and wrote. But would they necessarily be right? Should we take them as halakhically authoritative? How can we know what Maimonides, or Jessica, would say today, long after their minds—the product of their thoughts and experiences as living beings every day—have vanished from the earth?

Move from the mind to the body. Here the impact of new technologies seems a little simpler to grasp, but the questions are no less complicated.

Take “natural organic reduction”—aka human composting. For less than half the cost of a traditional funeral and burial package, you can now purchase a temporary spot in a climate-controlled pod and have your body covered with organic matter. Decomposition will take place in about a month, and your survivors will then receive approximately 3 cubic yards of human compost.

Is this alternative to burial kosher? In 2017, the Conservative movement said yes, with some limitations. Traditional Jewish law prohibits deriving benefit from human remains, so in addition to being disrespectful, utilizing composed human remains to fertilize the garden in which you grow vegetables to eat seems to be prohibited.

Thanks to emerging technologies, we may even be on the cusp of human immortality. Is this something we actually want? Scholar Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan argues that immortality represents “the highest form of human hubris...[a] rebellion against God, who created humans as finite beings whose life narrative has a beginning, a middle, and an end.” If we can live forever, Danny Schiff suggests in *Judaism in a Digital Age*, we may end up remaking ourselves into beings with longer but much flatter lives, living qualitatively impoverished existences that never end.

These questions, and so many more, must be pushed to the center of Jewish communal conversations so we can begin to develop answers. Judaism has always offered moral and ethical frameworks for understanding life’s greatest conundrums. Now is the time for rabbis, Jewish educators, ethicists, historians, and philosophers to wrestle, publicly and prominently, with these existential questions.

We must also find ways of bringing such questions to the forefront of people’s minds, in addition to all the other death-related questions that most of us avoid until it is far too late. If gathering in person for shiva is important to you; if you refuse to—or very much want to—be made into an AI chatbot; if you have strong feelings about how long you want your Facebook page to stay live after your death; if you want a human, or an AI application, to write your obituary—now is the time to consider these questions and communicate the answers to the important people in your life.

With apologies to the alternative rock band R.E.M., I’ll suggest that if it is the end of death as we know it, I think I feel *almost* fine about it. After all, we have more than 3,000 years of Jewish wisdom to help us find our way. *

PART THREE

TECHNOLOGY:
THE OPPORTUNITY



JACOB J. SCHACTER

Jewish Technophobia: An Old Story



IN JUNE 2023, 25 renowned Haredi rabbis signed a proclamation publicly banning the use of artificial intelligence chatbots. They asserted that the information such chatbots can generate is rife with heresy and abomination and that exposure to them will inevitably result in “falling into a minefield of danger.” This ban follows others promulgated years ago against use of the internet, then a new technological innovation deemed unacceptable for the ultra-Orthodox community. Yesterday’s internet has become today’s ChatGPT.

Are these rabbis on to something? Certainly, the challenges that new technologies pose to observant Jewish communities are manifold, and perhaps AI really is different, as we are often told—perhaps we may finally have created, or may be inexorably creating, a golem that will ultimately control us. I have my doubts and proceed on the basis that AI won’t transform human life out of all moral recognition. Jews have been confronting threats from technology for as long as there have been Jews and technology.

It is how technology is used that matters. History would suggest that rather than resist steel because it can be beaten into swords, we do better to embrace it and make plowshares instead—not least because we as a species have never proven able to choose *not* to create something that has been in our power to create.

If I am unfazed by the challenges of today’s technology, it is because this is not the first or even the second time that observant Jews have reacted with alarm to new technological developments.

More than 400 years ago, the invention of movable type engendered a great deal of consternation among Jewish authorities. My review of the historical record suggests that they had six major concerns: quality control, permanent error, the damaging of reputations, wasting time, the diminution of authority, and the easy accessibility of inappropriate material.

Quality control. The 17th-century sage Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo noted that manuscripts were extremely costly to write—and costly to copy. As a result, relatively few manuscripts were produced, and only those of genuine merit survived. In an elegant play on the words of Esther 8:17, Delmedigo complained that with the printing revolution, *rabim me’amei haarez mityaharim*—“many ignorant people become boastful”—and, in a desire to become famous, “make crooked that which is straight.”

Permanent error. The famous 16th- and 17th-century Talmudist Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, known as the Maharsha, noted the impossibility of rectifying an error, innocent or otherwise, once it was replicated many times in printed works. He pointed out that some who did not understand a passage in the Gemara, Rashi’s commentary, or Tosafot—the most fundamental of Jewish texts after the Bible, along with its two most important commentaries—“corrected” what they assumed to be a corrupted text in the margin of their copy, upon which a printer, thinking the correction

authoritative, substituted it for the original. Absent a later correction from a scholar with access to the original text, the error would remain forever.

The damaging of reputations. In 1619, the responsa collection of Rabbi Meir of Lublin was published in Venice. It contained disparaging remarks about one man involved in an acrimonious dispute in Mantua. His aggrieved children prevailed in an appeal to the rabbinic authorities, who ruled that the relevant page be reprinted without the offending passage and that anyone who owned a copy should have the offending page replaced with the new version. The dangerous, long-lasting power of the printed word was recognized and addressed—but only with very considerable effort.

Wasting time. A 1587 Ferrara enactment bemoaned the fact that the easy accessibility of mediocre books pushed worthwhile ones, “full of wisdom and knowledge,” to the margins. It would now be possible for people to spend their time in frivolous pursuits rather than with books that could bring them much benefit.

The diminution of authority. The much wider availability of printed texts undermined the hitherto exalted status of the learned elite who had, until that point, enjoyed a virtually exclusive monopoly on knowledge and its dissemination. Study with a recognized authority in a yeshiva, the traditional source of Torah knowledge, suffered a collapse as a new community of learners was created of all those who had access to printed books. (The problem was serious enough that Sultan Bayazid II, the most powerful Muslim ruler at the end of the 15th century, outlawed printing altogether.)

The easy accessibility of inappropriate material. In 1529, some 30 years after the establishment of the first printing press in Salonika, the city’s rabbinic leadership forbade Jews to print anything without the permission of six rabbis. They regarded stopping the activity of printers who “published a number of things that were not appropriate to print” as so important that transgressors were to be banned.

History would suggest that rather than resist steel because it can be beaten into swords, we do better to embrace it and make plowshares instead.

Despite all this, of course, printing flourished. This was in part because many in the Jewish community recognized how useful it was. Of Gutenberg's invention of printing, Rabbi David Ganz (1541–1613) wrote in the entry for the year 1440 in his historical *Zemah David* that “nothing as valuable as it is found in all the wisdoms and clever devices from the day that God created man on the earth,” and that, “were it not for printing, God forbid, Torah would have been forgotten from Israel.” Printing created what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community” of learners. More people were able to learn more deeply than ever before in Jewish history.

For a religion so thoroughly devoted to textual study, the internet, which proliferated the production and distribution of text vastly beyond anything we had seen before, was a world-shaking development even beyond Gutenberg. Not surprisingly, it was greeted with even greater alarm. In January 2000, a ban (not the only one) was promulgated by 29 Haredi rabbis, “declaring the internet to be the greatest menace ever to face Jewish culture.”

Once again, all the concerns raised by the arrival of printing reappeared. If quality control suffered with the arrival of mechanical reproduction, it may be said to have disappeared entirely

with the growth of the internet. Suddenly, you no longer needed to persuade a traditional newspaper, magazine, or book publisher that you had something worth saying. The range of publications on the internet quickly became so broad that almost anyone willing to offer his copy without charge was likely to find a publisher somewhere. Today, you can also publish and sell your own book through Amazon and your articles through Substack, and share your thoughts on any topic in long or short form on Facebook or X, as Twitter is now called. You can have your article up one minute after you have finished it. Almost no financial resources are necessary, and not even the tiniest measure of professional or scholarly expertise is required. As Clay Shirky, a student of the social and economic effects of internet technologies, notes in *Cognitive Surplus*, “the easier it is for the average person to publish, the more average what gets published becomes.”

As for the proliferation of error, innocent or otherwise, the internet is forever. In a 2010 *New York Times Magazine* article aptly entitled, “The Web Means the End of Forgetting,” Jeffrey Rosen wrote, “the internet records everything and forgets nothing. . . . Every online photo, status update, Twitter post and blog entry by and about us can be stored forever.”

As for the ease with which one may damage reputations (one’s own included), the story of the community that reprinted a single page of Rabbi Meir’s responsa and inserted it into existing copies of the book it came from now seems quaint. The terrible effects of speaking ill of another, *lashon hara*, have received enormous attention, because in Judaism (although not in Judaism alone), words have always been recognized as having enormous power. Today, bloggers, vloggers, Tweeters or Xers, Facebookers, Instagrammers, TikTokers and the rest can hide behind pseudonyms as they destroy a reputation with a click—far more broadly than was ever possible before, as physical communities are replaced by virtual ones, and much of the globe can be reached in an instant. We have become too habituated to gossip,

so it is useful to be reminded that the Talmud (Bava Metzia 58b) observes that “one who shames another in public is as if he is committing murder.”

And of course, the internet is a colossal temptation to waste time. A recent survey concluded that the average U.S. teen spends close to nine hours a day in front of a screen—with more of it devoted to gaming, social media, and surfing the Web even than to watching TV or videos. Less than half an hour is spent on e-reading or creating “content.” Low culture predominates at the expense of exposure to worthwhile information.

Finally, the rabbis noted of the rise of printing that suddenly anyone could be an expert on anything and that it was too easy to access inappropriate material. No one would dispute that there are vastly greater problems today than the ones that printing created, but they can be examined through the same framework.

When it comes to quality control, clients routinely walk into their lawyer’s or doctor’s office claiming expertise based on internet research. The challenge to Judaism is perhaps greater. Rabbi Hershel Schachter of Yeshiva University once pointed out: “Who needs a rabbi or rebbe to deliver a judgment about laws....Anyone who studied in a yeshiva can deliver a judgment or adjudicate on the basis of his own reasoning....It is possible for everyone to consider himself a scholar and halakhic adjudicator and arbiter even on weighty matters as if he knows all of the sources and all the opinions on his own.” Now that these sources and opinions are widely available and searchable online, one does not even need the yeshiva.

As for the accessibility of inappropriate material, what is available on the internet still has the power to shock most of us. Pornography of every kind is just a click or two away. When I was young, adolescents (let alone children) who wanted to get hold of inappropriate material had to interact in a public space with an adult bound by law to prevent them from achieving their goal. Even were the adult willing to sell the offending pub-

Social media have helped those of us in the richest countries in the world raise a group of teenagers who are more anxious and depressed than any generation in memory.

lication, the need to speak one's desires aloud presented a very embarrassing barrier that might itself have short-circuited the transaction. Today, my grandchildren can, if they wish, access all kinds of material I would not even have been able to find half a century ago, let alone acquire. A similar effect is created by the shift from the telephone in the hall, when everyone knew whom you were talking to, for how long, and often about what, to digital platforms of who knows what kind, populated with who knows whom, behind closed doors — for hours.

So the internet presented all the same challenges introduced by printing, multiplied a thousand times. And yet, with the exception of Haredi communities, we — that is, the Modern Orthodox, those belonging to more liberal denominations, and those identifying with no denomination at all — made our peace with the internet. Serious though its negative effects have been, we are obviously enjoying its remarkable blessings.

Certainly the internet has made it possible for Jewish learning to flourish on a scale hitherto unimaginable. The number of websites and apps with Jewish content available literally at one's fingertips is staggering. The easy access they provide for rabbis, teachers, students, and any Jew with any question at any time has revolutionized Jewish study and Jewish life, greatly broadening the community of learners and bringing Jewish practice to many who would otherwise have had difficulty accessing the tradition.

What, then, of artificial intelligence and early broad-access apps such as ChatGPT? First, it is clear that, just like the internet, they are here to stay. AI may seem new, but it has been in development for the better part of a century and in use in large organizations for decades. Rather than seek to throttle the exposure of the Jewish community to AI, which will surely prove futile outside the Haredi community and perhaps ultimately inside it, too, communities need to think hard about how to maximize its advantages and minimize its threats. These are choices. We routinely teach our children and students how to make choices: who their friends should be, what to look at and away from when walking in the street, what books to read, what foods to eat, and much more. The options available in each of these cases are many, and some are destructive, and our responsibility is to educate the next generation to choose those that will enhance their lives. The choices regarding technology are no different.

I believe that artificial intelligence—much like the internet and, before that, printing—will provide more benefits than harms. AI is likely to transform teaching, and Jewish education with it, by making the educational experience uniquely responsive to each student’s knowledge, ability, and preferred way of learning; by increasing access to the right resources; and by tailoring the choice of subject matter to engage the student as effectively as possible. AI is also likely to transform the world of learning as much as the internet did, and perhaps more. Might it dilute the human relationships crucial to good teaching, or deepen the “digital divide” between rich and poor? Might it isolate as much as it connects, just as social media appear to be doing today? Of course. But these are outcomes we can influence by the choices we make as a community. AI is here to stay, whether we like it or not. The Jewish community learned to live with every technology developed until now, and we will do the same with today’s technology, too.

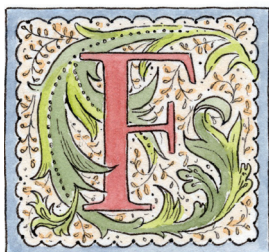
If I have one hesitation, it is that new technologies cannot always be adequately described through analogy. For instance, one thing fundamentally different about the internet from the world of books is that it is interactive—and insistently so. I noted before that the internet is forever; but it's not just forever, it's forever 24/7. The most painful example of this is the effect of social media on young people today. Whatever its upside, it's impossible to escape. Once upon a time, a child bullied in school could get some relief each day when she came home. Today, the onslaught is nonstop, with tragic results common enough that the term “cyberbullicide” returns 150,000 results on Google. Meanwhile, the majority of young people (particularly young women) who have the good fortune not to be bullied are nonetheless spending hours online day and night looking despairingly at photoshopped images that present impossible “models” to which they are encouraged to aspire. In their hyperconnected spaces, they're more isolated than ever before. It's a commonplace that social media have helped those of us in the richest countries in the world raise a group of teenagers who are more anxious and depressed than any generation in memory.

So, just as the internet has proved damaging in a way different from any technology before it, it is of course possible that the potentialities of AI are so great that we simply do not and perhaps cannot know what we are letting ourselves in for. I am not sure *anyone* knows what artificial intelligence might make possible. We are, to some extent, in uncharted territory.

But this, too, has happened before. In the early 1940s, the United States created the first fission bomb. Many were the predictions of utter global disaster—not unreasonable predictions, all things considered. And yet, in 80 years, the fission bomb has been used only twice, to end a world war that threatened millions of additional casualties had it not been used. Its vastly more

powerful successor, the fusion bomb, has never been used at all. I am optimistic that we will find a way to make the right choices, or at least avoid the worst wrong ones, with AI, too, as well as with all the technology at our fingertips. *

A Maimonides for the Age of AI



FROM THE MOMENT our hominid ancestors created stone tools and domesticated fire, technology has been changing the world and ourselves. Major technological turning points drive social, economic, and cultural change. They also fundamentally change our understanding of what it means to be human. And yet, faced today with technological changes from AI to genetic engineering to neuroscience, we seem to be walking blindly into a future we can't fully comprehend, without a conceptual and ethical framework to guide us.

How should we proceed? And do Judaism and the Jewish community have something particular to offer? In one of humanity's most fateful technological changes—the shift from hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural ones—Judaism provided what became the dominant theological, anthropological, and ethical guide to the new technological order. Can we lead again, providing a guide to the new world steamrolling toward us?

Agriculture—the domestication of plants and animals—first developed about 12,000 years ago, probably somewhere between Israel and Turkey. That technological transformation required, above all, a metaphysical leap.

Hunter-gatherer cultures would find agriculture and cattle farming—which treats plants and animals as literally *in-animate*, that is, without a soul—as close to inconceivable. Foragers believed that no essential gap separates humans from the rest of creation. They talked of trees, mountains, and animals as being in the same natural fabric that they themselves were part of. For farming to succeed, a new philosophical construct was needed. While many civilizations tried, it was Judaism that ultimately provided such a model.

The Bible is both a product of and a theological justification for the agricultural revolution and the accompanying change in humanity’s relationship with nature. Adam and Eve were foragers in the Garden of Eden. Expelled, they would eat bread by the sweat of Adam’s brow; that is, they would become farmers. Nevertheless, the Bible that set God above nature sanctified humans, for we are created in His image. In animist cultures, Man was one character among thousands. Now he was the hero, with animals and plant life radically downgraded. In the Flood, Man’s iniquity justified destroying the world. That millions of animals died because of Man’s sins is not seen as a problem by God or Noah. All life except humans became extras.

There’s a theology of separation—God transcends nature—and an anthropology of separation—humans transcend everything in nature except themselves. No more talking to animals, rivers, and trees and certainly no more praying to them. For good measure, there is the story of the snake: See what happens when you talk to animals?

Of course, not all the changes brought about by farming were positive, not even for humans. In his article “Our Biggest Mistake,”

Jared Diamond relates the many ways in which life became worse for humans. Diets became poorer and, as a result, life spans shortened. Society became highly stratified and unequal. Agriculture requires a lot of land and labor—and wars to capture both. More land means more grain, which can be grown and harvested by slaves, who are also needed to build storage shelters and even cities such as Pithom and Rameses, which were erected by our enslaved Hebrew ancestors. Farming transforms highly egalitarian forager cultures into societies in which exploitation becomes the norm.

Farming changed our conception of everything. God and man, of course. But also time and space. Time, because farmers need to plan beyond the short term. Space, because farming is only possible with land ownership.

The Hebrew Bible provided the most powerful theological and anthropological scaffolding for the new technology. But it also provided an *ethical* framework for it.

Man may lord over creation, but he must also accept constraints on his power. For example, the laws of *kashrut* minimize animal suffering—and so signal a limit to man’s power over animals. We may not yoke two animals of different strength together. We must feed our animals before ourselves. We must allow our animals to rest on the Sabbath. The new technological order required a new ethics.

Judaism also mitigates the effects of farming on social structure. Conscious of emerging inequalities, the Hebrew Bible created *shmita* “release” years and *yovel* “jubilee” years—reset mechanisms by which land returns to its original tribe and debts are canceled. The Bible also insisted that one leave the corners of one’s field unharvested to support the needy. Slavery could not be eliminated, but it could be humanized and limited, to the point that it became rare (and probably uneconomical) in Jewish society. Paid laborers were protected in ways unusually advanced for the time.

Judaism’s moralization of agriculture became ethical monotheism. Successful farming depended on the weather, so Judaism linked good harvests to good behavior: *If you will obey My*

The situation we face today will require us to go beyond a legal response into theological, anthropological, and philosophical territory, because it questions the very assumptions upon which the halakhic edifice is built.

commandments... I will give rain for your land at the proper time... and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be sated, and bless the Lord your God.

This rethinking of God, Man, Space, and Time didn't stop with agriculture: It responded to and shaped every major subsequent technological transformation. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber famously argues that capitalism as we know it would not exist without the Protestant revolution. Notably, the single most important factor in the success of the Protestant Reformation was the printing press. The Bible was the first book to be printed in the West using movable type. The Jews may not have been responsible for the rise of Protestantism, but our great book, the Hebrew Bible, played a crucial role: With thousands of Bibles in people's hands, people could read and interpret them on their own, which dramatically weakened the power of the church and opened the gate to a revolution in human agency.

In the following centuries a new human would emerge, a sovereign self who would challenge revealed authority and find truth through human reason and observation. That new understanding of humanity was the key to the scientific and industrial revolutions and the entire edifice of modernity.

The technological changes of the 21st century may be as transformative as the agricultural revolution. A vast corpus of utopian and dystopian literature describes how our world is about to change, from the way we work to how we interact. By and large, however, it leaves the transcendental questions unaddressed.

Artificial intelligence won't only automate "human" tasks; it will redefine what "intelligence" is. Meanwhile, genetic engineering, gene-editing techniques, and human-machine interfaces are ushering us into what the computer scientist and author Ray Kurzweil called "transhumanism." Once you have a genetically altered, robot-enhanced human, is it still human? At that point, what does it mean to be human? As Rabbi Danny Schiff notes, vulnerability is at the core of humanity. Can compassion and charity exist without vulnerability? If biotech creates "superhumans" invulnerable to disease and perhaps also invulnerable to pity for others (including us), will they still be human?

The problem goes deeper. Self-programming autonomous machines are changing the very definition of life. What does it mean for a thing to be alive? What difference does it make if a "body" is made of silicon or carbon, if it fulfills the same functions?

And what of consciousness itself? If consciousness is merely the result of chemical processes in the brain, then won't we sooner or later be able to replicate them? Would we then have created living, conscious beings? Would we then say that a self-aware, conscious computer has a soul? If a machine can develop feelings, is unplugging it murder?

And where is God in all this? Has He ceded His place to us, as Yuval Noah Harari claims? Is God now, *kiviachol*, so to speak, just an algorithm? If computer simulations like the ones in *The Matrix* are no longer inconceivable, could God be a teenage hacker eating potato chips in his basement in the universe next door? How long will it be until we are like Pandora with a "What have I done?"

expression on her face, her box wide open, struggling to understand, let alone confront, what just flew out of it?

Can we lead once again, theologically and anthropologically, as we led 4,000 years ago?

Current indications are not promising. To the questions that face us today, there are few Jewish responses, and they tend to be halakhic rather than theological—i.e., they focus on whether something is allowed or forbidden within the legal framework established by the Torah and the Talmud. But the situation we face today will require us to go beyond a legal response into theological, anthropological, and philosophical territory, because it questions the very assumptions upon which the halakhic edifice is built. We need a conversation about these assumptions and what the coming changes are likely to mean for our conception of Man and God. The problem is that we live in a time when ideas are devalued, especially in America. Alexis de Tocqueville said prophetically, “I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States.” Jews have their own reasons to avoid metaphysical conversations: In a community with low Jewish literacy, the focus is on low entry barriers to Jewish engagement.

Some say that Judaism always privileged action and was never fond of theological debates. That is inaccurate. The Bible and the Talmud contain an implicit theology articulated in midrashic debates. In addition, Judaism developed sophisticated conceptual constructs in response to philosophical changes: Philo of Alexandria responding to the ideas of the Stoics; Saadia Gaon responding to the Kal’am movement; Maimonides reviving and adapting Aristotelian traditions; Kabbalah Judaizing the Gnosis; Soloveitchik critiquing Kant. All these contributions required fluency across both Judaism and the zeitgeist.

Today, however, I can’t think of a single rabbi who knows, let

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revolution was a long, slow march:
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alone critiques, the different theories of consciousness defining the AI debate. And so we have been caught flat-footed by the changes we confront. We simply don't have the conceptual language to participate in the conversation. Many of the leading figures of the new world are Jewish, including, for instance, the creator of the first chatbot, Joseph Weizenbaum. But Jews who know the new technologies—some of whom, including Weizenbaum himself, have written important books on AI—had or have no relevant Jewish conceptual universe to draw on. And those who understand Judaism generally lack the scientific and technological expertise to grasp the consequences of the changes we confront. This is because Jewish techies and Jewish scholars live in a world that, for decades, has devalued deep conversations about transcendent questions. The halakhic approach—deciding technological questions one by one: Should it be allowed? Forbidden? Tolerated? Limited?—is useful. But it will not suffice.

Imagine being in a submarine but not knowing it: If somebody asked you whether he could open the hatch above your heads, you'd have no good reason to say no. Obviously, you must first establish that you're in a submarine before you even discuss opening the hatch. Just as the framing—boat or submarine?—guides the response of the captain, so the theological and metaphysical framing that Judaism is working within conditions the halakhic response.

A second challenge is that halakhah relies on precedent. We can

sense the strain when we find ourselves discussing whether robots should be considered human. The precedent concerns whether a golem can be counted in a minyan. The answer is no because the golem is incapable of speech. But what, then, when we have robots that can think and talk like humans?

The halakhic method has worked so far because its theological and anthropological foundations have proved equal to the changes we have dealt with. But the Torah provides a metaphysics for mankind. It has nothing to say about supermankind, which it couldn't even conceive of. So if we are to develop a metaphysics for AI, we will need a full refoundation of Judaism down to its most basic concepts. That refoundation need not break with or contradict the old foundation, but it must reevaluate it comprehensively.



Time is not our friend. The agricultural revolution was a long, slow march: In prehistory, advances took millennia. Today, we will be lucky if we get a generation. It behooves us, then, to know exactly what questions we need to answer. Human survival in the “transhumanist era” will depend on our ability to provide a three-dimensional answer to the coming challenge:

The metaphysical answer. What is Man? What is God? What is consciousness? What is freedom?

The ethical and moral answer. What should be permitted, forbidden, or encouraged in this new context for both human and artificially intelligent beings? And how would this be enforced?

The behavioral answer. This will require developing and modeling a positive framework of behavior for humans as well as intelligent machines. Examples of this abound, from software that analyzes CT scans without life-threatening errors to the work of Israeli researcher Kira Radinsky in using AI to predict flu outbreaks.

These three dimensions must be worked out in parallel, for all need to be in place for us to answer even simple questions. For

instance, Kurzweil argues that we should develop machine-brain interfaces to enhance our brains' abilities, not just to cure diseases. How can we agree or disagree without knowing what it means to be human and what, therefore, should be permitted and prohibited, encouraged and discouraged?

Who is going to answer these questions? We can, if we wish, turn them over to the experts. As I have noted at some length, however, halakhah deals only with the second and third dimensions, which is why we have a problem in the first place. I mean no disrespect to the intellectual and moral leaders of the Jewish world when I say we need a new Maimonides.

But one cannot conjure a new Maimonides out of nothing, because one can't conjure metaphysical and theological thinking out of nothing. They emerge out of an intellectual ferment, a social "mood" that encourages them. That means we need a Jewish community in which the type of work Maimonides did is valued. How do we create such a community?

First, comprehensive Jewish education is crucial. How can we reformulate Jewish thinking if we don't know the texts and history on which it is based? If Judaism is going to play a role in our new world, we must know what Judaism is.

Second, this expansion and deepening of Jewish education must take place in an environment in which metaphysical conversations are encouraged and rewarded. There was a time when being conversant with the realm of ideas was a prerequisite for leadership. We need to re-create that world. Jews famously value intellect and study; this is surely a cultural change that Jews can lead.

Third, we need a new "vascular" system that encourages communication between Jewish thought leaders, secular philosophers, scientists, and technologists. We need forums in which the best and the brightest in AI and biotech can interact with leading rabbis and other thinkers. Imagine putting Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph Soloveitchik, Sam Altman, Bill Gates, Rosalind Franklin, and Ray Kurzweil in a room—the living talking to the dead, something

that may actually be possible in a world not impossibly distant from now. Imagine Jewish leaders and scientists routinely trading places to consider the world from one another's perspective.

Fourth, through mechanisms such as impact investing and philanthropy, we need to encourage the development of AI tools that enhance communal life and human flourishing in areas where there's already broad agreement. We may disagree about whether AI should be making autonomous decisions about medical treatments, but surely we all endorse Radinsky's flu-predictor tool.

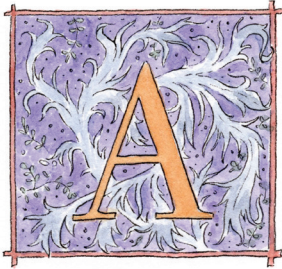
Fifth, we must recognize that none of this will work if we aren't intellectually curious, which means developing tolerance for marginal and divergent ideas. As Thomas Kuhn famously noted, paradigm changes come from the margins. Yet in our censorious environments — perhaps especially in America — conformism and dogmatism are replacing curiosity. We don't need a culture of "anything goes," but we do need radical thinking. Who would suggest that asserting that humans are made in the image of God wasn't radical 4,000 years ago? If we fear radical ideas, our reimagining will not be bold enough.



I have worked for many years in the Jewish philanthropic world, so it will be no surprise that I see a leading role for funders. They should invest in ways that encourage the development of the ecosystem I have sketched here. They must be ambitious. Jews, particularly young Jews, tell us they want experiences thick with meaning and content. After Covid, they are reevaluating many of the tenets of their culture. We should not be surprised to find contemporary young Jews motivated to tackle the biggest questions of the day. Can you think of a worthier and more exciting Jewish project than helping humanity confront the one-in-10-millennia challenge it faces today? *

ZVIKA KRIEGER

Jews and the Metaverse



AT THE END of 2021, I spent my final weeks at Meta briefing the company's leadership on the potential harms of the metaverse. For two years I'd served as the company's first-ever director of responsible innovation, leading a group that worked with product teams on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to help them anticipate and mitigate the ways in which our products might harm users, communities, and society.

My time at the company spanned the outbreak of Covid and subsequent battles over vaccine misinformation; the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement; Donald Trump's electoral defeat to Joe Biden and his subsequent ban from Facebook and Instagram in the aftermath of the January 6 riots; and many other crises that challenged the company to rethink how it designs and governs its products. So as Facebook rebranded to Meta and shifted the company's top priority

to the metaverse, my team and I had a wide range of experiences to apply to this new digital frontier.

The metaverse is generally understood as an embodied form of the internet; rather than scrolling through pages on a screen, you navigate a digital universe as if you are inside it. People can create worlds in the metaverse, but, as with the internet, no one owns the metaverse itself. You engage through avatars, digital twins of yourself that represent you in a network of virtual worlds. The 2011 novel and 2018 movie *Ready Player One* vividly illustrate how the metaverse might exist in the not-too-distant future.

Though a number of early metaverses exist today on the two-dimensional screens of computers and smartphones, the real promise of the technology is a fully immersive experience. Augmented- or virtual-reality technologies—today involving goggles, glasses, or headsets, but in the near future using contact lenses or even brain-implanted devices—allow users to feel as though they are actually in the metaverse, experiencing these three-dimensional digital worlds as they do real life. While today’s metaverses are largely limited to playing games, companies are building a future in which metaverses will host many of our daily activities, including shopping, fitness, education, and entertainment.

It is not surprising, then, that social-media firms like Meta are eager to plant their flag in this new digital landscape. The challenge, as I argued to leadership before I left the company, is that the metaverse is fundamentally different from social media, presenting vastly different risks and challenges. It will not be nearly enough to take our existing models of keeping people safe on social media and apply those to the metaverse.

The limitations of this approach were highlighted by *Buzzfeed* reporter Emily Baker-White, who built a digital world in Meta’s Horizon tool called “The Qniverse,” in which the skies were covered

in phrases that Meta had committed to eliminate from its platforms, such as “vaccines cause autism,” “COVID is a hoax,” and the QAnon slogan “Where we go one, we go all.” Despite being banned on Facebook and Instagram, the content was not caught by Meta’s own filters, had to be reported three times by the reporter to get it reviewed, and even then was deemed not to violate company policy.

When social media first rose to dominance, the mantra “Move Fast and Break Things” captured a willingness to introduce largely unprecedented technologies, see what damage they wreaked in the world, and then try to clean up the mess afterward. Companies are still playing catch-up on this cleanup job, with the true impacts of social media on individuals, communities, and society only now being revealed. Governments, NGOs, and community leaders—the usual protectors of vulnerable populations—trail even farther behind, struggling to understand the technology, let alone shape or control it.

We can’t make the same mistake when it comes to the metaverse. Rather than releasing powerful new world-building tools into the wild and crossing our fingers, metaverse companies first must prove that they sufficiently understand risks and that they have the safeguards in place ahead of time to prevent the kinds of harms we’re still grappling with on social media.

There are many reasons why keeping people safe in the metaverse will be exponentially more difficult than the already-difficult job of protecting people on social media. Most of the interaction in the metaverse is synchronous, meaning that it happens in real time: Once harmful experiences are caught, the damage has already been done. Communication will largely occur over audio, which is much more difficult to process than text or images. And harmful images are harder to detect in 3D than in 2D.

The immersive nature of the metaverse also makes its negative experiences—such as bullying, hate speech, and harassment—more traumatic for targets. As haptic technology and wearables become more widespread, users will have the ability to physically interact

The metaverse holds the promise of better interactions among people, but not if we default to re-creating the systems and structures that cater to society's lowest common denominator, as has been done with social media over the past two decades.

with one another through digital spaces, compounding the potential for abuse and assault. According to Stanford researcher Jeremy Bailenson, “a VR experience is often better understood not as a media experience, but as an actual experience, with the attendant results for our behavior.”

The immersive devices used to access the metaverse also collect significantly more data than do our computers and smartphones—including biometric data such as eye movements, heart rate, muscle tension, body temperature, and soon brain waves—which will give tech companies significantly stronger abilities to predict and influence consumer behaviors. According to Bailenson, “spending 20 minutes in a VR simulation leaves just under 2 million unique recordings of body language.”

In my many conversations with product managers, engineers, and designers working on metaverse products, I heard a common refrain: Let's make the metaverse as much like real life as possible. My response: Let's make the metaverse better than real life. Real life is full of toxicity, polarization, and exclusion. Real-life interactions can be awkward, alienating, and unfulfilling. The metaverse holds the promise of better interactions among people, better ways of building community and connection, but not if we default to

re-creating the systems and structures that cater to society's lowest common denominator, as has been done with social media over the past two decades.



One of the early design decisions of social media was optimizing for freedom of expression — elevating metaphors such as “open forum” and “town square.” But some of these companies, recognizing that toxic content was attention-grabbing and therefore good for advertising, have used these terms as mere fig leaves to justify their reluctance to take a firm hand in moderating content. It may be too late for social media, but the metaverse presents an opportunity for us to envision a new way of existing in digital spaces.

Despite the best efforts of social-media companies, many of the most successful metaverse experiences are not coming from them. Fewer than 200,000 people were using Meta's Horizon Worlds a year after its launch, which was less than half of the company's projected goal. On the other hand, metaverses that are coming out of the children's gaming world are enormous — such as Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite. (Fortnite reports over 70 million average users monthly, while Roblox reports 250 million active players monthly for the games on its platform.)

While social-media companies have imported their “open forum” model to the metaverse, which prioritizes freedom of expression over user safety and quality of interactions, children's gaming companies have been forced from their founding to create spaces that parents will allow their children to spend time in. Freedom of speech is nice to have in those situations, but safety and civility are fundamental. What have emerged are digital spaces that lack much of the toxicity we see on social media, a key factor in the growth of gaming companies as they have expanded access to their metaverse products beyond children. We've seen millions of adults willing to trade freedom of expression for a more positive experience, which

may help explain why metaverse experiences created by gaming companies have been significantly more successful than those with roots in social media.

The Jewish community has borne the brunt of social-media toxicity, as evidenced most recently by the conflict between X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, and the Anti-Defamation League. Jews thus have an interest—even an imperative—to ensure that the metaverse does not repeat the same mistakes of social media. The metaverse is early enough in its development that intentional engagement from the Jewish community now can significantly shape the trajectory of this game-changing technology in the future.

Jewish leaders and organizations must advocate a more cautious and thoughtful approach to the metaverse. As policymakers and regulators ramp up their efforts to put guardrails in place for these new digital spaces, affected communities must demand the implementation of appropriate safety measures before these products are released to the general public, rather than desultory efforts to clean up the mess afterward. Companies need to hear this directly from the Jewish community as well. The default assumption needs to be that metaverse products are *not* safe, and the onus needs to be on the companies to prove they are before they give open access to users.

Jewish communities also need to vote with their virtual feet. A few pioneering Jewish organizations are already piloting footholds in the metaverse. In the not-too-distant future, having a metaverse outpost will be as common as having a website or Instagram account is today. Jewish communities should choose which digital worlds to join based on which companies design products to foster civility and put in place adequate safeguards to protect their users.

Jewish leaders also have a responsibility to educate their communities about the potential harms of the metaverse. This is particularly true for children, to whom most current metaverse offerings are targeted, but who are at greatest risk in these spaces. Since most adults have yet to experience the metaverse, the

information asymmetry with their children (many of whom are already spending the bulk of their free time in these spaces) requires communal leaders to lead the way in terms of education and awareness. Parents can be effectively empowered in community, as we've seen with communal or school-based pledges pertaining to age limits for cellphones or social-media accounts. We can't rely on technology companies or wait for policymakers to make these decisions for us or our children.

Jewish communities cannot be passive consumers of the metaverse; they must actively shape it. More so than social media, the metaverse involves “world building,” where users create not just the content and aesthetics of their spaces, but also the behavioral norms and expectations in those spaces. Imagine a future in which Jewish spaces in the metaverse are known for their inclusivity and warmth, their commitment to constructive discourse — and where there is zero tolerance for bullying, misinformation, and other forms of toxicity. Judaism has a vast canon of wisdom to offer in terms of healthy speech, as well as millenia of experience in creating welcoming spaces. Jewish communities, organizations, and individuals have the opportunity to be leaders in setting the tone in the metaverse, rather than being its victims.



In light of these well-founded concerns about the metaverse's potential harms, it is important to remember the vast potential that it holds for the Jewish community as well. These immersive technologies will completely reconfigure how we gather and interact. As more people spend a significant amount of time in the metaverse, these digital spaces will largely erase geographical boundaries and the ways in which Jewish communities are currently organized. It will allow people to experience a wider gamut of Jewish expression, coalescing more around affinity than proximity. In a more decentralized world where physical buildings are no longer an advantage,

legacy institutions and communal power-holders will have less ability to guide Jewish identity and expression. Traditional Jewish forms of practice will need to be updated and evolved to be relevant in digital spaces, while Jewish conceptions of the Sabbath and unplugging may be poised to take on new significance.

The challenge—and opportunity—for Jewish community-builders is harnessing these unique immersive tools to create *new*, metaverse-native Jewish experiences, rather than just lazily grafting existing content from websites and social media onto these 3D canvases.

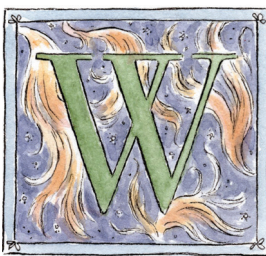
In working with most of the major social-media companies over the past few years, I've seen that spirituality is one of the topic areas with fastest-growing demand from users. In digital spaces that are often overrun with celebrity fetishization, unrealistic standards of beauty, and extravagant displays of wealth, people are increasingly searching for authenticity, depth, and meaning.

The metaverse is an opportunity to move beyond the cerebral, didactic nature of much of the current Jewish content on the internet and instead offer more experiential, immersive opportunities to spiritual seekers. This can be in the realm of person-to-person connection or more embodied spiritual experiences that would resonate, for example, with the growing masses of practitioners of yoga and meditation. While Judaism's intellectual currents may have been well matched to the first iterations of the internet, the metaverse seems uniquely suited to the more mystical approaches that are gaining traction in various parts of the Jewish community.

The metaverse will present us all with important questions about what it means to be human, what the role of community is, and how we define a life well lived. Jewish communities are well positioned to help shape the spaces in which those conversations occur, as well as mine our millennia of accumulated wisdom to help develop satisfying answers. *

DAVID ZVI KALMAN

Judaism at the Speed of Technological Change



WHEN CHATGPT debuted in November 2022, it split the world into two asymmetrical camps. The smaller camp was the one in the know: the developers who were aware for more than a decade that AI would be the next big thing; the reporters who had watched computers perform feat after once-human feat and had already begun to consider the big philosophical questions; the entrepreneurs and venture capitalists developing new AI capabilities with all possible speed.

And then there was—is—everybody else, caught by surprise: teachers forced to rework every assignment; students wondering whether they are preparing for obsolete careers; writers and actors fighting for their jobs; customers wondering whether they are interacting with other actual humans online; regulators forced to develop new rules at superhuman speeds.

AI is a big deal, but the feelings of impotence and worry it has induced in the public are nothing new. Most of us now live in a constant state of technologically induced anxiety. Tech companies pump out products that, without warning, upend different parts of

our lives and institutions. We want the pace of change to slow down, but it doesn't. We expect disruption and its positive benefits as a given, but we wonder whether anyone has considered the downsides, and who's responsible for addressing them. A self-fulfilling prophecy of inevitability quashes public objections before they start, and network effects make it hard to reject technologies after widespread adoption. Regulation is possible, but it's slow, because the public's concerns remain inchoate and most politicians and bureaucrats are on the same steep learning curve as everyone else. Witness social media, which has been around for almost 20 years and is only now receiving the regulatory attention it deserves.



The lag between new technologies and the development of moral and legal frameworks to address them is a symptom of a larger phenomenon. For at least two centuries, technological innovation has forced us to accelerate in ways that have no parallel in the history of our species, placing tremendous strain on societies. The sociologist Hartmut Rosa identifies our inability to catch up to the present as the central feature of modern life. In all our roles—as parents, friends, teachers, students, workers, professionals—we constantly find ourselves searching for best practices for new situations, with little to no useful guidance, forced to start from scratch every time the next technology comes along.

This is a global problem. It's also a Jewish problem.

As someone who believes that Judaism is supposed to be a moral force in the world, I find the pace of technological change to be of existential concern. Moral forces don't get to cherry-pick moral problems; it's incoherent to suggest that Judaism should have something to say about charity, abortion, and immigration—but not AI, virtual reality, or genetic editing. This does not mean that Jews must speak in one voice on any of these issues. They don't, and won't. But it does require Jewish leaders to start developing ideas at a pace

that allows them to do more than belatedly agree or disagree with positions developed by others, long after de facto norms for use have been established. We can't keep reacting, retrofitting, and resigning ourselves to situations designed by others.

In a world where leadership and speed are linked, Judaism can be a moral leader only by *accelerating*: by proactively providing guidance on moral problems as fast as the problems themselves are emerging. If Judaism fails to do this, it will become morally obsolete.

Accelerating Judaism is hard, but it's not conceptually complicated. The American Jewish community knows how to develop new ideas, build training programs for leaders and students, and go to bat for the things we want and need. The hard part is that the moral problems of the future are currently being treated as peripheral to the core topics of Jewish conversation: Israel, antisemitism, Jewish education, continuity. National and global problems are treated as secondary *even if* those problems directly affect Jews. This focus is now untenable.

I say this even though, as a historian of Judaism and technology, I know that it's natural and understandable. Our default mode is to focus on what seem like internal conversations. For hundreds of years, rabbis have showered attention on the issues that mattered to them, that felt central to Jewish life. Larger conversations were marginalized—even if they were so central to human life that Jews would inevitably feel their impact.

Compare the rabbinic response to two world-changing technologies that spread across Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries: the printing press and firearms. The rabbis adopted the printing press with great speed, publishing new books and printing old ones within a few decades of the press's invention. Rabbis trade in texts, and they correctly understood that the press would irrevocably change how they taught, educated, and wielded power.

Just as the press changed how ideas were spread, firearms were changing how wars were fought—but the rabbis were mostly silent on the topic. Although there is evidence of Jewish gunsmiths and

arms dealers as early as the 1420s, the occasional rabbinic comments on rifles or gunpowder were relatively late, sparse, and seemingly indifferent to the revolution in destructive power that these weapons were bringing about. The reason is obvious: The printing press challenged rabbinic power structures, so it was treated as an internal issue, while firearms had no particular bearing on Jewish communal dynamics, so they were largely ignored.

In modern times, rabbinic responses to new technologies have become more frequent, but they still tend to be peculiarly narrow and legalistic. One of the first rabbis to acknowledge the Zeppelin (airship) wanted to know only whether a sukkah could be built beneath one. When radios were invented, rabbis discussed whether it was permissible for a cantor to lead a congregation over the airwaves. A great number of technologies are addressed through only a single question: Can this be used on Shabbat?

It's fair to respond that minority religions *should* focus on their internal problems. If Jews don't care about Jewish issues, who will? Yet Jewish discourse isn't a zero-sum game: One more conversation about AI does not mean one less conversation about Israel. Instead, more is more: Expanding the core of Jewish discourse means opening up Jewish thought and Jewish questions to those who may not be motivated by internal Jewish conversations, but who care deeply about what Judaism has to say about the larger moral problems of the day. I'd even go a step further: The flourishing of the Jewish people was never intended to be an end in itself. The covenant at Sinai establishes that Jewish identity and moral action in the world are inextricably linked. One supports the other; one needs the other.

Even if you don't buy this argument, there's a pragmatic reason for Jewish leaders to engage with global problems: The lines between internal and external problems are getting blurrier. Firearms did, in fact, affect Jewish existence. Israel's future is tied up with the fact that the Middle East is warming at twice the global average. Most non-Orthodox synagogues are now partially but permanently virtual, and synagogue attendance itself has been deeply

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affected by the rise of the car and suburbanization. On these issues, Jewish leaders are most likely to see national and global trends as givens that inform their reactive internal conversations.

But what if it were the reverse?

If synagogues have been changed by virtualization, perhaps synagogue leaders ought to be contributing actively to the virtualization conversation. If Jewish schools and camps are seeing the negative effects of social media on Jewish kids, perhaps Jewish educators ought to be weighing in on the national discussion about social-media regulation. Jewish communities are entangled with the future already. Instead of waiting to be shaped by it, it's time to shape it ourselves.

It shouldn't seem so hard to believe that Jewish thought could be so influential. When Jewish leaders have spoken with moral courage and articulated a broad vision for human flourishing, they have had an impact disproportionate to their numbers. Think of Abraham Joshua Heschel on civil rights, or the Jewish Sabbath Alliance and secular Jewish labor organizers, or the many Jews and Jewish organizations involved in immigration policy. On these and many more issues, Jews have been effective by fighting against general cynicism about the possibility of change—a dynamic that plays out regularly on issues of tech policy.

When it comes to the technology issues that are reshaping human existence, such as AI or social media, we need Jewish leadership that

can think big and act fast. We need to disseminate ideas and prescribe policies that are optimized for speed and broad impact. If we are fast, we can change the world.

An accelerated Judaism requires engagement with the issues of today and the future. But acceleration isn't only about ideas—it's also about implementation. It requires a new type of Jewish organization, one that is constructed and optimized for speed and impact, that can fundamentally change the relationship between Judaism and technology.

Ideas perceived to be marginal have trouble building momentum. Jews have been writing about AI, for example, since the 1960s, and plenty of articles have been written in the past decade—yet too many theorists, observers, and critics reinvent the wheel with each book, article, or blogpost, writing about AI as though they were the first to consider it. Too often, Jewish thinkers on new moral problems are isolated, unable to sharpen their ideas through engagement with other scholars. The first Jewish responses to AI were largely forgotten by 21st-century thinkers. Jewish thought on environmentalism, which has existed for a century, has little record of its own history to guide future scholarship. This leads to bodies of work that have a thousand great questions but few well-developed answers, let alone well-developed policy recommendations.

The key to solving this problem is a new kind of think tank and research-and-development lab that will nurture collaboration among leading thinkers from a range of backgrounds and will legitimize Jewish discussions of big new moral problems. This will kick off a virtuous cycle whereby compelling new ideas and policy prescriptions in turn create demand from the community for more ideas and policies, which will then incentivize more thinkers to devote serious attention to these ideas.

The ideas themselves must be as future-oriented as possible. In

order to be effective, the think tank must move at the same speed as venture capitalists and tech companies, grappling not only with the new moral problems already before us, but also contemplating those that are still on the border between science fiction and reality. If this means creating ethical frameworks for technologies that never see the light of day, so be it. In a global environment with such a huge first-mover advantage, ethicists cannot wait for products to be viable or to demonstrate market interest to begin to think about them; this is a recipe for forever lagging behind.

Moving at this speed means reimagining which thinkers need to be in the room. If you want to move as fast as venture capitalists, then you need to include them in your discussions—alongside scholars, journalists, policy professionals, tech-sector workers, and Jewish communal leaders. This intellectual and professional diversity ensures that the ideas under development reflect a rich mix of historical, religious, philosophical, practical, and technical perspectives.

Good and timely ideas aren't enough—they need to intersect with levers of influence. We must be expansive in our thinking about how to package ideas so that they will be heard, and about the audiences that will need to engage with these new ideas once they are developed. There is already an effective playbook for reaching policy-makers and tech workers. But for Jewish communities, leaders, and students (consumers but not producers of ideas or policies about technology), we need to develop a new path: We must embrace the notion that technology's moral and ethical issues are a central element of Jewish discourse, practice, and education.



Society is regulated by the public's sense of morality. But moral intuition develops only over time, through countless experiences and conversations among family, friends, coworkers, teachers, students, and community members. Public morality can't be sped up, and it can't be nationalized. A thousand op-eds pontificating about AI in

Instead of developing moral intuitions, the public just learns to accommodate the status quo, whether they like the status quo or not.

the classroom cannot replace a hundred teachers experimenting with policies and assignments over several years. These on-the-ground, trial-and-error experiments are the seeds from which society's ethical stances on technology—or anything else—are built. Regulation may come from the top, but morality comes from below.

Local clergy, nonprofit professionals, and educators need to exercise real rhetorical and policymaking power, helping the public to frame the stakes and empowering local leaders to experiment and learn from real-world failures and successes. Smartphone adoption among kids, for example, is hard to regulate because kids don't want to be out of step with their friends. Governments, too, have struggled to create appropriate legislation, both because of the usual legislative sluggishness and because there's no consensus about what lines need to be drawn. But teachers, principals, and parent groups can create use-policies that work for their community, supported by network effects. If you don't need a phone because no one in your class has a phone, the rules are much easier to tolerate.

Most local Jewish leaders use none of these tools effectively. Outside of Haredi communities, rabbis have had little to say about the healthy use of social media. On this and so many other fast-paced issues, both technological and not—such as the normalization of cannabis and psychedelics, which has moved at tech-like speeds—local leaders seem overwhelmed by a sense of inevitability. Without local norm-setting that is bold and framed in confident moral terms, the public never gets to experiment with a full range of different behaviors and expectations, which makes it

harder to develop a communal sense of correct and incorrect use. Instead of developing moral intuitions, the public just learns to accommodate the status quo, whether they like it or not.

An organization devoted to Jewish acceleration would upend this process. Programs strategically designed to give leaders technical knowledge, thinking space, and peer support could create a Jewish leadership with the confidence to come to its own conclusions on local tech policy and the language to bring Jewish values to bear on new moral questions.

Sometimes this process will yield univocal responses to new technologies, which can exert direct pressure on politicians and tech firms. Sometimes it will yield a patchwork of approaches. Both results are successes, however, because both empower communities to use technologies on their own terms—and both provide crucial templates for communities of all sizes.



None of this work is easy. There is a lot of inertia and ignorance to overcome. But the world isn't going to slow down anytime soon, which means that an organization for accelerating Judaism must make acceleration part of the DNA of Jewish communal life. To do this, we must make Jewish technological ethics a core part of Jewish education.

For Jewish elementary and high schools, this requires creating curricula that bring Judaism and technology into conversation, piggybacking on Torah study's existing propensity to juxtapose texts from radically different technological contexts. The history and ethics of technology can also be integrated into Jewish history and Jewish philosophy courses, just as, for example, many schools now incorporate learning about environmental science or gender.

On university campuses, the opportunities are even greater. For more than a decade, humanities departments have seen major cuts to funding as undergraduates make strategic bets on careers in STEM

fields. Many of these students will never take a course in religion, ethics, or even the history of technology—which means that many of the people changing our world will have missed key ideas and valuable debates that might inform their work. This is a correctable loss. We can encourage Jewish studies scholars to think more deeply about the role of technology in their various disciplines. We can find ways to have them cross-pollinate with engineering schools or science and technology departments. We can bring conversations about technology and ethics to Hillel professionals and other campus educators. And we can provide guidance to future scientists and engineers, while also incorporating conversations about technology into the humanities.

An accelerated Judaism has the potential to provide a much-needed and well-distributed moral component to the modern tech cycle, and to bring Jewish religious conversations back into alignment with our most pressing moral concerns.



This acceleration and transformation of Jewish thought will be an unprecedented upheaval, but we are living in an unprecedented era of human history. Jewish leaders can continue to provide belated, incremental, and largely ignored thoughts regarding “what Judaism says” about new technologies. Or they can engage seriously in what it means to be a religion of the future, as the future is being created. This is not a departure from Judaism’s core ideas, but a return to them.

The rise of AI over this past year has made it clear that Judaism is facing an existential question—not about whether it will continue to exist, but about whether its existence matters. There is no middle ground: Judaism can either address the problems of our new world, or it can ignore them and fade into irrelevance.

For me, there is only one answer. The Torah’s deep concern for the welfare of human beings mandates that we build the structures necessary to move at the pace of the world—and, perhaps, even a little bit faster. *

China and the Future of the U.S.-Israel Alliance



AS THE USS *Gerald R. Ford* rushed to the Eastern Mediterranean in response to Hamas's October 7 massacre, it sailed in the figurative wake of its predecessor, the USS *Independence*. During the Yom Kippur War, the *Independence*—followed by hundreds of U.S. planes laden with munitions and supplies—streamed toward the Jewish state to safeguard its security. Then, as now, a rattled, reeling Israel confronted an existential threat. And then, as now, Jerusalem depended on Washington to help beat back its foes.

For the United States, however, the comparison between 1973 and 2023 is less clear. After 10/7, the United States rallied to Israel's side in kinship with a longtime friend and in revulsion at Hamas's savagery—but with a strategic case relying less on U.S. interests in the Middle East than on a tenuous link to Ukraine's fight for freedom. Perhaps sensing this ambiguity, in the weeks after the

war began, despite Americans' overwhelming sympathy for Israel, a majority of Democrats and independents opposed sending U.S. military aid to Israel, with only a modest majority of Republicans supporting it. And Washington's embrace of Jerusalem is as much a bear hug as a shield, meant to avoid a wider Middle Eastern war as the price of restoring Israeli deterrence—precisely the opposite of U.S. policy in 1973.

The U.S. government's approach to the Hamas massacre reflects the fact that the attacks did not reorient the long-term trend in American foreign policy. With the Cold War and the War on Terror over—conflicts in which Israel served as a crucial U.S. ally—Washington now faces a new struggle: great-power competition with China. In that fight, the ramparts in need of manning are in East Asia, not the Middle East. Cultural ties and lingering U.S. interests in Israel's neighborhood may compel some continued cooperation, but the partnership will not thrive without a core strategic purpose. The U.S.-Israel alliance was born out of strategy, not moral or religious considerations, and without any such foundation, it will decline.

How, then, can Israel ensure that the USS *Ford* will return in the event of a future crisis? The key is to make Israel matter to America in the fight against China. Failure to do so risks relegating Israel to the role of a niche player—and sometimes nuisance—on the fringe of the maps that matter most to the United States.

At first glance, through the China lens, the strategic logic of the U.S.-Israel relationship appears uncertain. East Asia is the central military arena of the superpower rivalry, oceans away from Israel. China remains far from obtaining Soviet-level military influence in the Arab world. And Israel lacks the kind of intelligence experience and capabilities regarding China that it possesses for threats in its own region.

But the U.S.-China challenge isn't simply about geography. At its core, it's a contest for innovation superiority, with the winner seizing the commanding heights in technologies crucial to the 21st

century, from artificial intelligence to biotechnology, and thereby becoming the world's preeminent power. To counter China, which commandeers its private sector and invests billions in strategic areas and industrial espionage to leapfrog American innovation, the United States must work closely with its partners. Only a tightly knit network of tech allies, combining their respective expertise in particular fields, can win the innovation race. And in that regard, if Israel is not on the geographic frontier of this next great U.S. foreign-policy struggle, it *is* on the technological frontier, thanks to seeds planted long ago by the United States itself.



Since Intel opened its first R&D center in Israel in 1974, the United States has played a key role cultivating Israeli innovation, and Jerusalem has long shared its pathbreaking military technology with Washington. But the technologies central to the U.S.–China competition extend far beyond defense matters, into areas with broad applications such as AI, semiconductors, advanced materials, and biotechnology. Israel generates pioneering innovations in these fields, with the latent human capital to create many more. It dominates cybersecurity, attracting nearly 20 percent of global investment. It is developing leads in several foundational technologies, including AI and microelectronics; quantum sensing, a groundbreaking advance in the accuracy of measurements; and bio-convergence, the synthesis of biotechnology and engineering that can produce advances in medicine.

The United States also has much to offer Israel. Just as Israel depends on U.S. power as a keystone of deterrence, Israel's start-up ecosystem has depended on American capital and customers. U.S. venture firms are the largest foreign source of funding for Israeli start-ups. Hundreds of Israeli companies base their offices or headquarters in the United States, including more than 40 percent of Israeli unicorns—privately held companies valued at over \$1

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billion. Israel's ability to spearhead innovation in next-generation technologies will depend even more on American investment and scaling. Many of those technologies blend software, an Israeli strength, with hardware, an area in which Israel lacks advantages and in which fundraising often proves more challenging. Start-ups in these spaces require early and sustained financing and markets that Israel cannot alone provide. Moreover, to lead in fields that require foundational research and development, such as synthetic biology, Israel cannot rely on the army and its alumni networks to lead. Instead, it must harness its academic institutions—which in turn would benefit from access to America's universities and research laboratories to bolster its own capacity.

These synergies should form the basis of a new logic for the U.S.-Israel alliance: a technological partnership, in which Israel, once an American surrogate in the Middle East, becomes its R&D center. The partnership should begin with establishing ground rules for technology relations with China. Since the U.S. government began raising concerns about Chinese investment in Israel a half-decade ago—an abrupt shift from a generation of U.S. officials celebrating greater engagement—Israel has taken steps to quarantine Chinese investments, such as creating a foreign-investment-screening committee and requiring cabinet approval of investments above certain thresholds in key fields. Even so, the Knesset has not passed these mechanisms into law, and they do not

apply directly to Chinese investment in private high-tech ventures. These factors, among others, contribute to lingering perceptions in Washington that Israel is not aligned with its views on China. To alleviate these fears, Israel should offer itself as a model for navigating Chinese engagement, including research security, export controls, and investment screening—questions also bedeviling the United States and other Western governments.

More important, the United States and Israel should expand pathways for tech cooperation. They can begin by harmonizing a series of promising but disparate efforts already under way. In 2021, for example, Washington and Jerusalem established the U.S.-Israel Operations-Technology Working Group, a joint body meant to draw on each country's innovation ecosystem to develop technologies and identify shared military needs. A year later, the United States and Israel launched the Strategic High-Level Dialogue on Technology to catalyze expanded cooperation in certain areas.

New initiatives to allow the United States to access Israeli ingenuity and Israel to access American scale could also include establishing joint innovation incubators in each nation; opening outposts of U.S. government innovation arms, such as the Defense Innovation Unit, in Israel; and creating new connections at the level of basic research. Such ties could involve launching joint fellowships to develop human capital, linking national labs to permit scientists from both countries to access one another's facilities, or creating pathways for joint U.S.-Israeli ventures to receive R&D grants. The U.S. and Israeli governments should especially encourage private-sector "track 2" efforts, such as a network of investors, major companies, and start-ups that could identify technological challenges in need of cooperative solutions and that would then coordinate investment opportunities.

Finally, the United States should include Israel in its efforts to forge alliances with other techno-democracies. Early efforts in this regard—such as the Quad dialogue among the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, and the AUKUS pact with the United

States, Australia, and Britain—offer models for expanded networks that could include the Jewish state. Eventually, the United States could make Israel a charter member of a Major Allies Industrial Base patterned after the National Technology Industrial Base meant to lower barriers for industrial cooperation among vital U.S. partners. Washington and Jerusalem should also leverage the Abraham Accords, which will need rejuvenating if they survive Israel's war with Hamas. Although U.S. officials harbor concerns about Chinese penetration of other Accords countries, Israeli leadership could help anchor the Accords in the U.S. orbit, allowing Israel to play its traditional role as a frontier bastion.



In the wake of Hamas's assault on Israel, more than 800 U.S. venture capital firms declared their solidarity with Israel. They were joined by scores of U.S. companies, from Nvidia, the U.S. graphics company powering the global AI revolution and operating one of the world's fastest AI supercomputers in Israel, to Anduril, one of the new-age defense tech companies powering the revival of America's industrial base. With Israeli start-up founders departing their companies for the front, and given the economic and political challenges of war, the support of these companies signifies that America's tech superpowers prize Israeli innovation.

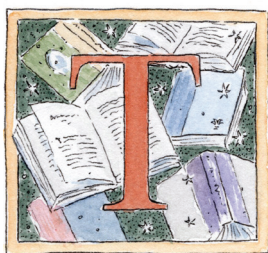
Supporters of the alliance should translate that commercial instinct into a strategic one. To build a strong bedrock for the U.S.-Israel alliance in the coming generation, Washington and Jerusalem must combine forces in the contest for technological superiority. *

DEPARTURES



DANIEL BONNER

Jewish Masterpiece: The Book



HIS PAST JULY, a curious photograph began circulating on social media. The photograph was of Ayman Odeh—leader of the Knesset’s Joint Arab List—holding a book in the Knesset chamber. Looking closely, you can see that Odeh is thumbing through a volume of the Talmud, prompting the photographer to wonder, according to a reporter: “Who will be Ayman Odeh’s *chavruta*?”

Amusing and ironic as the photograph seemed to many, there is something fitting about an Arab (or any) member of Knesset coming across such a book in the very room that most represents Jewish sovereignty. The Talmud and books in general have long played a central role in Jewish life, learning, and leadership.

Ever since the widespread proliferation of books began in the 15th century, Jewish culture and book culture have heavily overlapped. Books, and the manuscripts and scrolls that preceded them, have long been technologies of transmission in Judaism, communicating the great ideas and debates of Jewish heritage.

But books are more than that. For the People of the Book, they have always been a quintessential and enduring technology for community-building and, perhaps less intuitively, fully fledged members of the communities they help to build. When Jews are persecuted, so are their books. When Jews thrive, so do their books. They are fellow travelers on the epic journey of Jewish civilization.



In 1946, a quarter-million survivors of Hitler's genocide found themselves living in Displaced Persons (DP) camps across Europe. All along the spectrum of religious observance, many who had grown up in Jewishly literate homes began to clamor for the Jewish books that had been at the center of their lives before the war. Chief among these books was the Talmud, the primary text of Jewish study for centuries. This longing is reflected most beautifully in Elie Wiesel's 1994 memoir, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*:

Most of all I needed to find my way again, guided by one certainty. However much the world had changed, the Talmudic universe was still the same. No enemy could silence the disputes between Shammai and Hillel, Abayye and Rava.

Many survivors were, like Wiesel, eager to get back to the warm familiarity of Talmud study. There was only one problem: No complete sets of Talmud could be found in what was, until recently, Nazi-occupied Europe. As historian Gerd Korman explains, "in post-war Europe complete sets were hard to find because in the previous ten years the Talmud had been hunted as of yore, in the centuries when, as an embodiment of heresy, Christians had burned thousands of volumes at the stake." How goes the Jewish book, so go the Jews.

In order to remedy this situation, a group of rabbis—including Abraham Kalmanowitz, Samuel Rose, and, most important,

Samuel Snieg, a survivor of Dachau and the Orthodox Chief Rabbi of the American zone of Allied-occupied Germany, had an inspired, audacious idea: to print “an entire Talmud...in the land that had tried to destroy Jewish life forever.” Snieg and Philip Bernstein, a Reform rabbi and Army adviser, sought the support of General Joseph T. McNarney, commander-in-chief of United States Armed Forces in Europe. In pleading their case, the two rabbis noted the historic potential of this project. As Korman observes in his 1984 article on this dramatic story: “No Gentile ruler had decided ever before to print and publish a Talmud for the Jews. It would be a distinctly American event, for it is impossible to imagine a European commander in 1946 doing what McNarney did.”

It took more than a year for the U.S. government to provide the necessary paper, which was in short supply, to print these Talmuds. Eventually, the U.S. Army printed 50 full sets of the Talmud at a Heidelberg printing plant that had formerly produced Nazi propaganda. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) funded the printing of several hundred more. These came to be known as the *Survivors’ Talmud* and contained a most moving dedication on the inside:

DEDICATION

This edition of the Talmud is dedicated to the United States Army. This Army played a major role in the rescue of the Jewish people from total annihilation, and after the defeat of Hitler bore the major burden of sustaining the DPs of the Jewish faith. This special edition of the Talmud published in the very land where, but a short time ago, everything Jewish and of Jewish inspiration was anathema, will remain a symbol of the indestructibility of the Torah. The Jewish DPs will never forget the generous impulses and the unprecedented humanitarianism of the American forces, to whom they owe so much.

In the name of the Rabbinical Organization

RABBI SAMUEL A. SNIEG
Chairman and Chief Rabbi of the U. S. Zone

The sets found their way across Europe, Africa, the United States, and, of course, Israel, where the yeshivot of Europe—with names like Telz, Mir, and Lublin—were reconstituting in the fledgling state. Upon receiving his own copy in 1951, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, wrote the following letter to the JDC’s Moses Leavitt:

The Babylonian Talmud, our Oral Law, which goes hand-in-hand with our Written Law (the Bible), represents our greatest and most sacred spiritual heritage, the very soul of our people, and the light of our exile. The reprinting of this vast treasure would have been an occasion for rejoicing at all times. In our present day, after the Hitlerite hordes had destroyed a great many of our living Talmudists together with their holy books and the famous European Hebrew presses, the reprinting of the Talmud is not only a fitting monument to our great tragedy, but it fills an urgent need. That it was printed in the very country which had set out to spread a blanket of darkness over the whole world, adds a touch of Divine justice.

In their indefatigable efforts to print the Talmud, Rabbis Snieg and Bernstein, not to mention their partners at the JDC, enacted a basic Jewish precept first spelled out in the Torah (Deuteronomy 31:19): “Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness against the people of Israel.” The rabbis of the Talmud interpret this verse as a literal obligation on every Jew to write a Torah scroll. If unable to write one, a person should buy one, or alternatively participate in its writing in some way, including by writing a single letter.

Commentators over the generations developed this precept, extending it beyond the creation and purchase of Torah scrolls to the purchasing of *any* Jewish books. Other texts bear this out, including the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (1:6): “Joshua ben Perahiah used to say: Appoint for thyself a teacher, and acquire for thyself a friend and judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor.” Pre-dating Thomas Carlyle’s “My books are my friends that never fail me” by at least seven centuries, Rashi, the 11th-century commentator, interprets this rabbinic adage this way: “Acquire for yourself a friend: You could read this as books, or you could read this as literally ‘friend.’”

One detects in Rashi’s comment a preference for the figurative interpretation in this case, and it might very well have been the inspiration for the following statement written a century later by Rabbi Yehuda ibn Tibbon in an ethical will to his son Samuel: “My son! Make your books your companions.”

And more recently, in an instructive homage to Hillel's famous ethical Talmudic aphorism "What is hateful to you, do not do to others," a bookshelf marker at a Jewish library was spotted by tweeter @YehudahMaccabi offering the following revision: "What is hateful to you, do not do to books."



Jews have sensed the life in books from the first centuries B.C.E. to the present, a near personification that might be the Jews' distinguishing feature. It is exactly what Harvard scholar Harry Austryn Wolfson intended when he responded to a colleague who asked him "Why do you Jews think you are so special?" with the memorable answer: "As far as I know, we are the only people who, when we drop a book on the floor, we pick it up and kiss it."

Over the centuries, our sages have spilled much ink discussing how books ought to be treated. Can one use a holy book as protection from the sun? Is it disrespectful to lean one book on another while studying? Is one permitted to place a book upside down? If one finds a book in such a position, is one obligated to stand it upright? What kinds of books may be read in a bathroom? Is it forbidden to borrow a book without permission? If books bring us

When Jews are persecuted, so are their books.
When Jews thrive, so do their books. They are
fellow travelers on the epic journey of
Jewish civilization.

joy, is it appropriate to buy books during periods of Jewish communal mourning? The list goes on.

In the Jewish tradition, books are not merely our friends and companions; they also serve to build friendship and companionship. Take, for example, the following Talmudic passage from Ketubot 50a:

The Sages likewise expounded the verse: “Wealth and riches are in his house, and his charity endures forever” (Psalms 112:3). How can one’s wealth and riches remain in his house while his charity endures forever? . . . One said: This is one who writes scrolls of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, and lends them to others. The books remain in his possession, but others gain from his charity.

What is charity? The Talmud answers: lending books to others.

Write books. Buy books. Lend books. The tradition seems strangely preoccupied with the lifecycle of books. Why?

What emerges from these practices is a mandated bibliophilic marketplace in which books become the currency of community and social cohesion. We find a strikingly explicit example of this in a responsum penned by Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein, a contemporary halakhic authority in Israel, who wonders whether one can fulfill his obligation of sending food to others on Purim — to

bring joy to them—by sending books instead of food portions.

That books nourish is something that all bibliophiles know, but in this bibliophilic marketplace, sometimes the pleasure is as much in the pursuit as in the acquisition. Rabbi Andy Bachman recently related a personal story on his excellent Substack newsletter about his search for a particular book, *Menorat HaMaor* (*The Illuminated Lamp*), by the 14th-century Spanish scholar Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham Aboab. Bachman set out on his bike to various Jewish bookstores in Brooklyn:

My first stop was at Seforim World on 16th Avenue. . . . Alas, it would have to be ordered from the warehouse. It would take a few days. So then I rode over to Eichlers on 13th Avenue but struck out there too.

But I still had fun. Because as a non-Hasidic, non-Orthodox person shopping for Jewish books in Boro Park, I suppose I could feel out of place. Between my bike helmet serving as a yarmulke and clean-shaven look, I do stand out. But a Jew in search of a book is a Jew in search of a book and for the more than 30 years that I have been going to these two booksellers, I am always heartened by the feeling of inclusion, respect, and love for learning that is shared when I show up in search of something.



The Jewish injunctions to write books, buy books, lend books, and gift books reveal a unique—and uniquely Jewish—faith in the power of books. As the observations of Rabbis Zilberstein and Bachman attest, books and Jewish book culture offer more than knowledge. They are, as our tradition teaches, mechanisms for fostering community, unity, and joy—even before they're opened.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who revolutionized Talmud study with the publication of new editions of the Talmud beginning in the 1960s, was often asked whether the people who buy his Talmuds

in fact read them. His response, as recorded in Arthur Kurzweil's memoir of 25 years of travel with the wise rabbi: "Just having a beautiful Jewish book on the table or on the shelf in one's home enhances a Jewish home."

Anyone who has ever been in a Jewish home library, surrounded by volumes with formidable bindings and impressive gold lettering, can attest to this. They affect the atmosphere; they effect the atmosphere. As Leon Wieseltier put it several decades ago: "The spines of books. Books and spines. Books are spines." Books form the backbone of a Jewish home.

This sentiment is likely what led the Lubavitcher Rebbe in the 1970s to initiate a campaign called *Bayit Malei Sefarim* (A House Full of Books), encouraging Jewish families to stock their shelves with Jewish texts. For Rabbi Schneerson, better known for his Shabbat candlelighting and tefillin campaigns, the Jewish love affair with the book hinted at what social-science researchers would later confirm and *The Guardian* would one day report: "Growing up in a house full of books is a major boost to literacy."

A similar instinct inspired Fanny Goldstein, a Russian Jewish immigrant and librarian at the Boston Public Library's West End Branch in the 1930s and 1940s. While the Nazis were rounding up the Talmuds of European Jewish communities, Goldstein sought to revive Jewish literacy in the United States, displaying Jewish books for the library's immigrant-dominated community. Her simple display evolved into Jewish Book Week, which transformed into the Jewish Book Council (JBC) in 1944. Among many other activities to support the ecosystem of Jewish books, JBC continues to support Jewish book celebrations in Jewish communities across the country.

The Jewish philanthropic community has admirably taken up this charge in other ways as well. The Keren Keshet Foundation seeded and supports Shavua Hasefer — an annual, weeklong book festival — in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. During its 25 years of grant-making, The AVI CHAI Foundation experimented with a variety of book-distribution programs, including sending a basic "Jewish

Follow in the footsteps of our rabbis —
and Fanny Goldstein — and work tirelessly
toward the making, reading, gifting,
and lending of books.

Bookshelf” to Birthright Israel alumni and new Jewish day-school students. And although philanthropist Harold Grinspoon credits Dolly Parton with having inspired PJ Library, which distributes free books to Jewish children and their families around the world, I think it is fair to think of PJ as a worthy twist on Rabbi Schneerson’s *House Full of Books*, itself a novel expression of our age-old commitment to books as the building blocks of Jewish homes and communities.

That Jewish literacy was and is considered by Jewish philanthropic organizations to be a feature of Jewish welfare is a testament to the community’s commitment to the preservation and proliferation of Jewish books as the communal technology that they are.



Among the great technological innovations of our time is Sefaria, the free online digital library that proudly refers to our texts as “a collective inheritance”:

For thousands of years, our culture, our traditions, and our values have been transmitted through our texts. From an oral tradition to handwritten scrolls to a vast corpus of printed books, each new medium democratized knowledge, and brought more people into the great Jewish conversation. We are the genera-

tion charged with shepherding our texts from print to digital in a way that can expand their reach and impact in new and unprecedented ways.

The Jewish digital revolution—Sefaria, AlHatorah, Otzar HaHochma, and more—has transformed Jewish life and learning. But as much as we acknowledge the promise of digital Torah, one can't help but wonder: Even if I can carry and access more Jewish texts than ever on the tablet in my hand, what might I also be losing in the process?

One thing at risk is the Jewish literary space. In “Voluminous,” a 2012 piece for the *New Republic*, Leon Wieseltier gave voice to the danger:

The library, like the book, is under assault by the new technologies, which propose to collect and to deliver texts differently, more efficiently, outside of space and in a rush of time. . . . A book is more than a text: even if every book in my library is on Google Books, my library is not on Google Books. A library has a personality, a temperament.

That libraries are an act of self-definition is true both for the libraries of individuals and the libraries of nations—especially the Jewish nation. When Israel's leaders, most recently Prime Ministers Netanyahu, Bennett, and Lapid, broadcast messages to the country and the world at large, Talmud sets and other Jewish books often sit on the shelves behind them.

No one appears more aware of this than the founder of Sefaria himself, Josh Foer. He is also among the founders of Lehrhaus in Boston, described as “part Jewish tavern, part house of learning.” Given Foer's connection to Sefaria, you might expect to find iPads along the walls and stacked on tables, making the full spectrum of Jewish literature available to all. But the walls of Lehrhaus are filled with books and portraits of great Jewish authors.

Digital revolution aside, Jews still revel in their oldest technology. In the age of Sefaria, it is quite a wonder that the Codex Sassoon, the world's oldest intact Hebrew bible, not only fetched a record-breaking \$38 million at Sotheby's but also attracted thousands of spectators to a building on Manhattan's Upper East Side hoping to glimpse just one of its folios.

The widespread interest is a form of Jewish celebration. The throngs of viewers came to pay homage to this precious artifact, to celebrate its existence and to bask in our rich, collective inheritance. It was not a foregone conclusion that our tradition, manifest in this brilliant book, would make it down to us, today. It was almost as unlikely as Jewish survival itself.

As the paratext of the *Survivors' Talmud* recounts:

We all remember well the bitter days...in the ghettos...when the evil Nazis would demand that we gather all of our books in one place, in order to destroy them, and the life threatening danger involved in hiding just one Jewish book.

Remembering the books burned on the altar of Jewish history reminds us why we should treasure them today. They have been entrusted to us, and we are beholden to them. Our fates are intertwined and inseparable. Again: How goes the Jewish book, so go the Jews.

How might we tap into these incredible stories, and this recent interest, to inspire greater commitment to membership in the People of the Book?

To today's philanthropists and leaders and educators, I suggest: Follow in the footsteps of our rabbis — and Fanny Goldstein — and work tirelessly toward the making, reading, gifting, and lending of books. Fund authors to write them. Buy them in bulk and send them to everyone you know (enclose a handwritten note if you really

want to hammer home the point), and encourage others to do so as well. Fill your libraries and offices with books. Assign them to your staff and students. Resist the urge to go fully digital.

If we are interested in meeting the new technological age with wisdom and confidence, we need only to consult our friends, our companions—our books. The famous tagline for Patek Philippe, the luxury watch brand, is instructive: “You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation.” That’s how I think about my volume of the *Survivors’ Talmud*. I turn to the back of Tractate Avodah Zarah, where the text of Pirkei Avot is tucked away. Joshua ben Perahiah reminds me: Acquire a friend.

And in my hands, I realize, I already have one.

*

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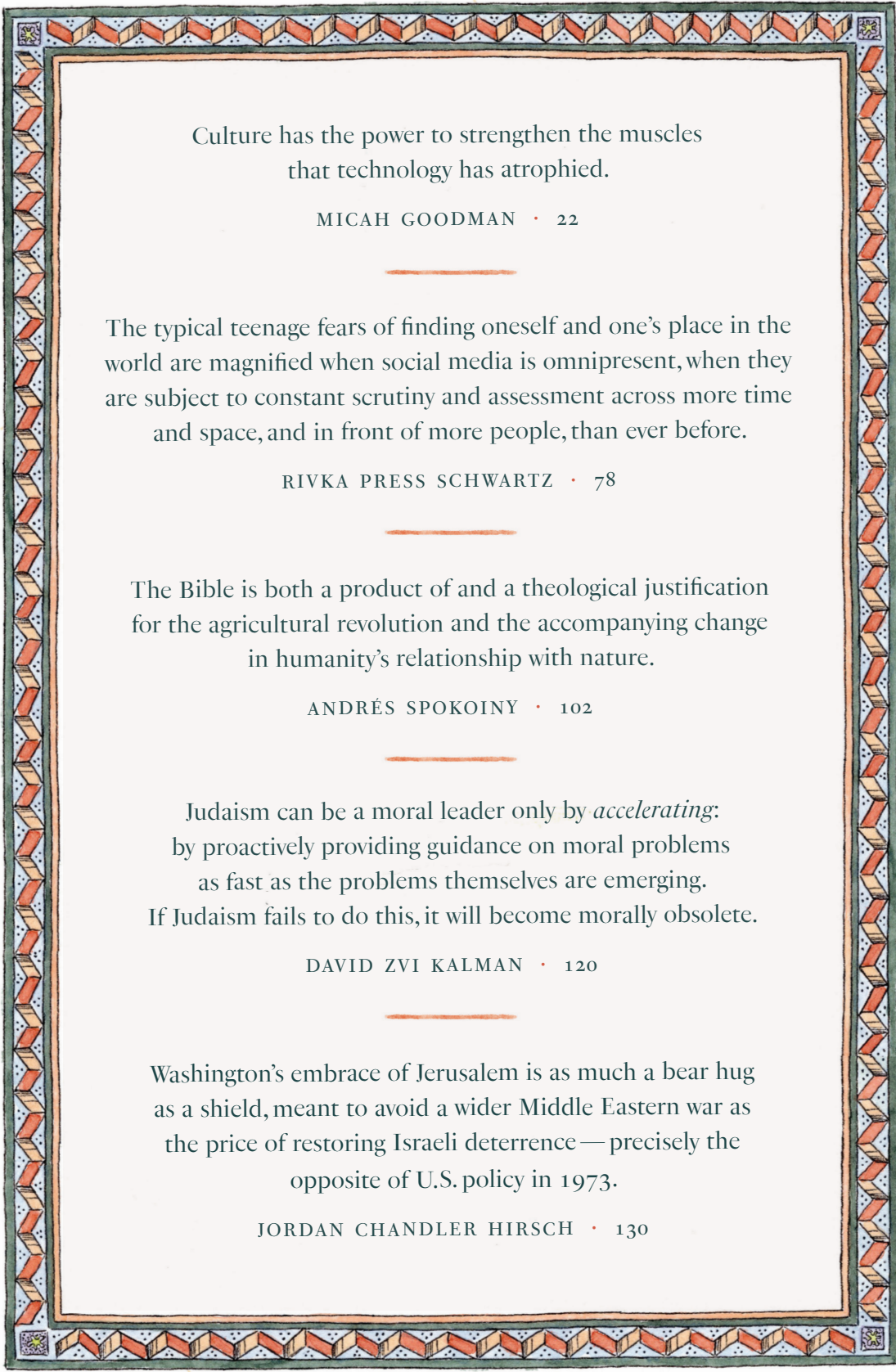


MAIMONIDES FUND

Maimonides Fund is a private grantmaking organization inspired by our namesake's commitment to Jewish faith, Jewish peoplehood, citizenship, and science.

וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת
רַגְלָיו כָּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבַנְת הַסִּפִּיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטֹהַר:

— שמות כד:י



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by proactively providing guidance on moral problems
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