Education

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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.

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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 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, Jew-

ish 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.

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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. ✳