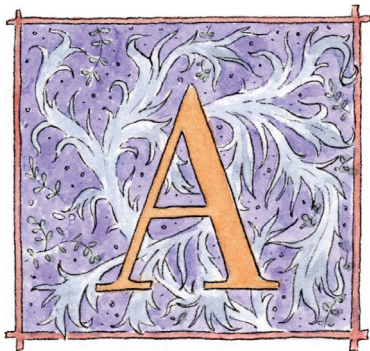ZVIKA KRIEGER

Jews and the Metaverse

T 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 com-

pany 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.

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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

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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 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.

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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

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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.

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