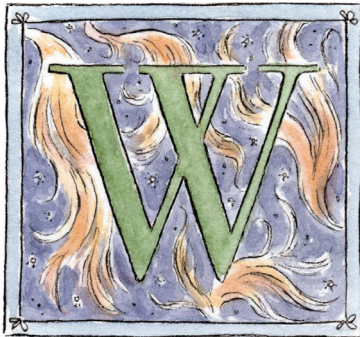DAVID ZVI KALMAN

Judaism at the Speed of Technological Change

HEN 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.

1

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 exis-

tential 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 technolo-

gies 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 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 policymakers 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 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. ✳