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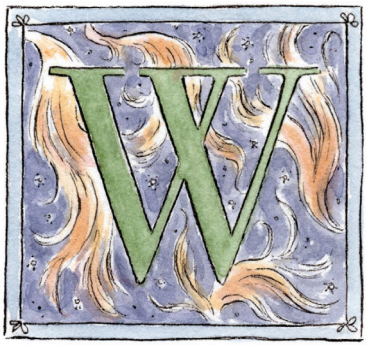
The Talmudic Cure for Our Technology Sickness



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, 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 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.

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 deter-

mining 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. ✳