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THE INTERNET: A REVOLUTION IN HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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A Jewish Perspective

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The purpose of this paper is Jewish philosophical musing, and I will discuss some ideas about technology, communication and the Internet. This paper will be a reflection on the impact of technology on our lives and Jewish perspectives on these lives. We live in a world of computers, cell phones, I Pads, I Pods, voice mail, faxes and email. Recently, my wife announced that the mouse was dead. I wasn't aware that we had a mouse problem but of course she meant the computer mouse. We live in a new era with basic and fundamental changes in the methods of communication. This will have an impact on our total culture but we need to understand how far-reaching this impact might be.

Of course, prediction is fragile. When I became a rabbi, pundits said our big problem would be what to do with all our leisure-time. If one wanted a guaranteed and successful career, one should go into any leisure time field. It has not worked out that way; we are all busier and more stressed than ever. We remember the prediction that micro-waves would replace ovens; cook books were published with instructions for micro-wave cooking of chickens and roasts.. It has turned out that the micro-wave is used for re-heating. We are now told that printed books will disappear and be replaced by e-readers. Maybe ! So raising issues about the future is fraught with speculation. Finally, this paper is more about meta-*halakhah* than *halakhah*, by which I mean the values grounding *halakhah*.

Let us begin with Marshall McLuhan, famous philosopher of communication, and convert to Roman Catholicism. He is known for phrases that have become part of our functioning vocabulary: *hot and cold media, global village, the medium is the*

message, and the idea that electrification will replace print media as the main vehicle of communication. What are hot and cold media? A hot medium gives you everything it has; a cold medium opens spaces for participation. A hot medium makes you cold; a cold medium makes you hot. When I started my career, I had a McLuhanesque epiphany. During a Saturday morning worship service, I realized that the congregation was irrelevant. If there were no congregants, the rabbi would read, the cantor would chant, the choir would sing and the service would be unaffected by the absence of any people praying. Our Reform services were a very hot medium; they were well designed to create "God's frozen people". But, we have learned and our worship now has become much cooler, opening spaces for people to participate and become warm. Now worship at conventions of the Union for Reform Judaism resembles revival meetings, with 3,000 people singing, reading and feeling.

The *medium is the message* means that media are not neutral transmitters of information. Rather, the medium enters into the communication and shapes what we receive. The content is not just an idea or information, but the information in the shape determined by the medium. The Protestant Reformation was Bible centered and affirmed the priesthood of all believers, requiring people to read the Bible. This theology could not have appeared before the invention of mechanical printing made it possible for every home to have a Bible. Protestantism was a phenomenon of print communication. Before mechanical printing most Jews did not own a Talmud; there might be one in the synagogue.

We Jews have successfully negotiated every revolution in communications media: oral culture, hand written manuscripts and print. If McLuhan is correct, the medium entered into the content being communicated. We can speculate on how this affected the

development of Judaism and we can speculate on how Judaism will be affected by the transition from print to electrification. But what kind of medium is the Internet? Is it a cold medium that involves us or a hot medium that makes us passive?

In order to assess the possible impact of the Internet on the development of Judaism, let us refer to the philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he introduced the concept of paradigm shift. The received wisdom about the development of science is that it is evolutionary, that each generation builds on the previous generation, extending knowledge one step further. Kuhn challenged this notion. He suggested that the new generation did not, simply build on the concepts of the past, but created a whole new way of looking at things. Thus it integrated the past into the new paradigm. In other words the history of science is not evolution, but leaps. New paradigms don't emerge from the previous paradigm; they are invented by the human mind. If Kuhn is right, perhaps more than science operates this way? Maybe, the development of all thought proceeds, not by evolution, but by leaps.

We know that the Talmud did not develop out of the Torah, but was a paradigm shift. If you start with the Talmud and work your way back, you would never arrive at the Torah. The Talmud integrates the Torah into its own paradigm through the use of its own methodology which suits the new paradigm. This, of course, would contradict nineteenth century liberal, Reform theories about the evolutionary development of Judaism. It implies that Reform did not evolve out of medieval Judaism; it was a paradigm shift. Perhaps, the secret of Jewish survival is not an evolution operating under intrinsic historical laws, but the mysterious, Jewish creative ability to recreate Judaism in every historical paradigm shift. So the Talmud was a paradigm shift and integrated the Torah into its

paradigm and not the other way around. The development of medieval Jewish law may not be, simply, an application of, or evolution of the Talmud. Post-Enlightenment Judaism was a paradigm shift and the creation of something new. Will the Internet result in more than simply a few adjustments to new technology, but in a paradigm shift that creates a flip in the way we conceive reality? And how will Judaism respond to this?

Now let us broaden our perspective to technology, in general. We are used to the idea that technology is neutral; we can apply it for good or for evil. But some disagree. Jacques Ellul, sociologist and theologian, in his book *The Technological Society*, says that technology is negative. It rules us and not the other way around. In our culture, it is a mitzvah (commandment) to do whatever technology enables us to do and to refrain from an action we have the technical capacity to do is a sin. We live in a Tower of Babel culture. Like a snowball gathering more and more snow as it rolls along until there is no snow left, technology will fulfill all its potential. Technical surveillance means that, ultimately, we will all be surveyed constantly with monitoring of our computers, tapped phones, cameras watching every street. A man is in a shopping mall and he is standing next to a map of the mall. On the map is an X., and it says "You are here." The man says: "How do they always know where I am?" If you have a car or Blackberry with a GPS, they always do know where you are. Does this seem a little paranoid? That doesn't mean it isn't true.

Presently in development are devices for digital face recognition and in December, 2009 the Israeli Knesset passed a law approving a data base of biometric information which could be placed on citizens' identity cards. I remember many years ago reading that the F.B.I had stolen the membership list of the Union of American Congregations. They got it back, but I suspect the F.B.I. copied it. Why would the F.B.I. want the U.A.H.C's membership list?

Several years ago, in a Purim edition of their bulletin, Holy Blossom Temple, Canada made a front page announcement, complete with pictures, that Prince Charles and Princess Diana were coming to visit Holy Blossom. They got a call from the R.C.M.P. saying that they should have been informed; because they had to provide security. Why does the R.C.M.P. read the Holy Blossom bulletin? If we are capable of total surveillance, we must do it. This is a very frightening look at an Internet world, although Ellul wrote before computers and the Internet.

The Roman Catholic paleontologist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin, in *The Phenomenon of Man*, takes a positive view of technology. He sees evolution as positive; it creates mind and spirit. We have reached a stage where mind is collective; humans must think and work together. No one mind can grasp all that is known. Thus humanity will rise to a point of necessary cooperation in a collective mind. This will lead to the "omega point" which is human salvation. In a similar vein, Jeremy Rifkin in *The Empathic Civilization* speculates that evolution can lead to a civilization of empathy. Just as for Teilhard de Chardin, there is a certain inevitability as technology requires cooperation and empathy. On the other hand, Rifkin, also, refers to Jean M. Twenge, in her book *Generation Me*, who says that research shows that young people born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, are the most narcissistic generation in history. A civilization of empathy may be coming, but, right now, our culture is filled with narcissism. In the book *Habits of the Heart*, a study of American culture by a team headed by Robert N. Bellah, they report a meeting with a woman named Sheila who referred to her religion as "Sheilaism", exquisitely designed to reflect her and meet her every need. How much of liberal Judaism's a-la-cart approach plays into Sheilaism, a religion, not about God, but about me, meeting my needs, self defined, with no obligations? This is a liberal problem that plays into the narcissism of our culture, and it is difficult to believe that

the Internet will reduce this phenomenon. It is, more likely, to increase it.

Martin Heidegger, philosopher and unrepentant Nazi, is quite negative to technology. He says we live in a culture in which everything is a tool; we relate to everything functionally. When we encounter the world, we encounter it as a resource for use. We are incapable of encountering the natural world as it is, in itself; everything is perceived and related to as a tool. In a notorious comparison, he compared the concentration camps to modern factory chicken farming. The one produces chicken meat in the most efficient manner with no regard for the welfare of the chickens, the other produces death in the most efficient manner with no regard for the welfare of the victims. It is the modern mind set that sees all reality and all truth in the same way. I hate to say it, but he might have been on to something. Let us remember that technology, in general and the Internet, in particular, have no values, but they do shape the way we perceive reality. Perhaps, we should say that technology does have one value, the efficient use of matter. A decision not to use matter in the most efficient way is a violation of political and economic wisdom, and in our culture is a sin. Maybe, it is the only sin.

Let us now look at Ferdinand Toennies. He coined the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft*, or community, is an organic world in which people relate to one another, speak the same language, share values and care about each other. *Gesellschaft*, or society, is a world in which people relate functionally, and it is held together by business. *Gemeinschaft* is the medieval world; *Gesellschaft* was created by the Enlightenment and we live in it. When we read Toennies on *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, we think of Martin Buber's distinction between the I-Thou world and the I-It world and his philosophy of community. The I-It world is a world in which we

relate to everything functionally. This is not, per se, immoral, but is the realm in which immorality happens, where we treat people as a means. Buber, contra Heidegger, posits another world, an I-Thou world, open to human beings, in which we relate person to person and not person to function. Yet, attempts to change a Gesellschaft culture to a Gemeinschaft culture have resulted in Fascism and Nazism. Does this mean we can only live in a Gesellschaft world, an Ayn Rand world? Can there be I-Thou possibilities in the midst of the I-It world?

Reform Judaism teaches community, which is a Jewish value. But it also believes in individual choice. It looks with nostalgia at a Gemeinschaft world, but would not exist without a Gesellschaft world. We teach Jewish tradition, but we came in to existence in a post-Enlightenment world in which we had to negate tradition to make progress. We want to negate and preserve tradition at the same time. We want to teach an attitude of reverence for tradition while we eliminate and transform traditions. No easy task! We want to create community in our congregations, yet we teach our congregants to make individual choices. Our values, many times, clash with each other. We yearn for Gemeinschaft but we know the individualized, narcissistic, consumerist, anti-tradition, technological, Internet-connected world in which we live epitomizes Gesellschaft.

Does the Internet make all this worse? Are people less and less connected in any meaningful community? My daughter was at a wedding where no one at her table spoke to anyone else at the table. They were all on cell phones talking and texting. What does this mean? Will communities in the future be virtual communities? What will this mean for Judaism?

Joseph Soloveichik, Orthodox theologian and Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, in his book *The Lonely Man of Faith*, talked about Adam I and Adam II. Soloveichik was Orthodox. We would talk about Adam and Eve I and Adam and Eve II. The typologies of the two first couples are his interpretation of the two creation stories in Bereshit (Genesis). I quote Soloveichik: "Adam the first who was fashioned in the image of God was blessed with great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal, the most outstanding of which is the intelligence, the human mind, capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings... God, in imparting the blessing to Adam the first and giving him the mandate to subdue nature, directed Adam's attention to the functional and practical aspects of his intellect through which man is able to gain control of nature." (Soloveitchik, p.12) Adam/Eve the first is technological humanity.

Again Soloveichik, "Adam the second is, like Adam the first, also intrigued by the cosmos. Intellectual curiosity drives them both to confront courageously the *mysterium magnum* of Being. However, while the cosmos provokes Adam the first to quest for power and control...Adam the second responds to the call of the cosmos by engaging in a different kind of cognitive gesture. He does not ask a single functional question. Instead his inquiry is of a metaphysical nature... He asks: 'What is the purpose of all this?'" (Soloveitchik, p.21) Adam/Eve the second is spiritual humanity.

Both aspects of the human being are legitimate and Adam/Eve must fulfill both natures. If the pre-Enlightenment world made a great deal of room for the spiritual, the modern world becomes more and more technical and functional. In universities we see science, engineering and business departments expanding while philosophy, literature, art and music departments shrink and even close. Our world is in desperate need of the spiritual and people.

seek it; it is human nature to fulfill the spiritual aspects of our being. Perhaps, here, we can see a counter-cultural role for the synagogue that people both want and need, if it is made available to them. The synagogue should be a center for preserving the humanness of humanity, a place for community, moral values, service to others, reflection, *berit* (Covenant), *mitzvah* (commandment), and *talmud torah* (the study of Torah).

What does the synagogue have to offer? We offer God, Covenant, spirituality, inwardness and Torah. The Internet will not go away and neither will technology because this, too, is human nature. Our role, I believe, is to offer a strong religious message; to cultivate the spirit. It is my belief and my experience that people do want it. We do not live in a pre-modern house and people are, now, educated by our culture to see, and sometimes only to see, the technological aspects of humanity. I suggest that our response to the Internet and the world it creates should be in the spirit of Buber and Soloveichik. We teach the values of Adam/Eve II in a world that, frequently, finds them irrelevant to technology and efficient management. We have our work cut out for us, but we are not trying to get blood from stones. The desire for Judaism, for spirit and religion, are built in to human nature and we should have confidence in the Judaism we offer.

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