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WORSHIP IN THE CLOUD

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WORSHIP IN THE CLOUD
Worship Services Over the Internet

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As I was finishing up the research for this paper, workmen were scurrying around my synagogue pulling various cables through the walls and ceilings, connecting various parts of the building. As I begin to write this, they are in the sanctuary, testing out various locations for a couple of cameras, and hooking those cameras up to some of those cables which they recently put in place. Why? It goes by various names, but it's usually called webcasting, livestreaming, or just streaming. In short, it's using the Internet to broadcast events, as they happen.

In just the last few years, the technology to allow this kind of broadcasting has become widely available and extremely affordable. Almost all new computers come with the necessary technology built in. In other cases, it would cost well under $100 to add the basic capability to a computer. More elaborate, higher quality setups, which would have cost tens of thousands of dollars, not so long ago, have now come down in price to the point where many synagogues can think about installing them. They are installing them, usually for the purpose of live-streaming services. For the first time, many synagogues are offering their members, or in some cases, anyone who's interested, the ability to observe services, in real time, from another location.

In 2001, the Conservative Movement [1] examined this issue in a comprehensive responsum. Although our approach will necessarily be different from theirs, as will our conclusions, much of their thinking is extremely relevant to us. This paper owes a great deal to that responsum.

It is not the intent of this paper to be a responsum, itself, rather, an attempt to give an overview of some

of the halakhic issues surrounding live streaming services, and to raise some issues which must be considered by those who wish thoughtfully to evaluate this practice for themselves.

Why would a synagogue livestream its services and make its services available to anyone with a web connection? Based on anecdotal evidence, the dominant reason seems to be to serve those who are unable to physically attend, the hospitalized and homebound.

Clearly, those who are unable to attend services can gain substantial benefit, from participating through a webcam. Indeed, it seems to be a kind of *bikur holim,* probably not as effective or sacred as an in-.person visit, but still capable of countering some of the loneliness and capable of lifting the spirits of some of those who are saddened by their isolation.

There is some precedent for this kind of distance praying In a 1989 responsum[2] the Responsa Committee was asked whether it was appropriate to record services for Shabbat and holidays, and to then broadcast them to patients in a hospital. The committee allowed it, but not without reservations. As we will see later, they seem to imply that although this was an acceptable activity, it was not to be seen as " real prayer."

Also frequently mentioned as a potential target for this kind of technology are the relatives a *bar* or *bat mitzvah,* or of a participant in a wedding or other

simhah, who are not able to join their families for their loved ones big day. We live in a time where family is often spread far and wide, and unable to come together for the major moments of life. Without suggesting that it is as good as being here, this does allow people a kind of participation, even if passive.

Interestingly, in the RA's responsum on this issue, Rabbi Reisner suggests that this kind of connection over a distance may have a very ancient analog. In 1998, Rabbi Saul Berman argued that the *maamadot* service may have originally been intended to solve this exact problem. It might have been a way for persons living too far from Jerusalem to participate vicariously in the Temple service. As Rabbi Reisner says, "One cannot help but wonder what arrangement would have been made had our current technology for distant connection been available."[3] Less often cited as a motivation for making services available online is the hope that this will serve as an enhancement or promotion of Judaism. By allowing those who might not otherwise enter a synagogue be spurred into greater observance. It is true that fear and inertia have kept many a person from attending services. It's certainly possible, therefore, that an easy way to observe and learn could be the first step towards a life of larger observance and participation.[4]

There are other reasons, as well, for some synagogues to make their services available on the Internet. It can be a form of advertising, and outreach. What better way to judge a synagogue than by observing its services? Some synagogues, and non-synagogue communities, are exploring the possibility of promoting Internet services as an equally valid alternative to physical congregating. This last

possibility is, of course, the most controversial, and will be addressed later.

May a Service be Broadcast Over the Internet?

Very often, when this issue is raised, people immediately begin discussing whether or not it is a valuable, worthwhile endeavor, and whether or not we can consider this true participation in a worship service. But, in fact, there is a prior question which must be asked: are we allowed, in a Reform Jewish context, to livestream our services? Although we may not be used to thinking in terms of allowed on these issues, the *halakhah* does raise some interesting and important questions.

Although the question of live streaming services is new, there are relevant precedents within halakhic literature. The permissibility of microphones during services, especially on Shabbat, has long been debated within Judaism. We also have long had the capability to make a video and audio recordings of our services, and many issues which arise with live streaming are relevant to those technologies. Rulings around those issues can definitely inform us as we explore this new technology.

The question of livestreaming should not be restricted to Shabbat services; the technology is useful for any service, though currently most of our worship happens on Shabbat, and that is certainly what most others are most likely to want to observe. Even though livestreaming may be a new technology, it relies heavily on older technologies including the microphone. Many authorities across the religious spectrum have ruled on the permissibility of using microphones in worship, on Shabbat as well as other

times. It is generally assumed that, in the halakhic world, microphone use is forbidden without question. But, that is not completely true. Current normative Orthodox practice certainly forbids the use of microphones on Shabbat,[5] on two grounds: the use of electricity, and the creation of something new in this case, a sound.

In terms of electricity, it's obvious that all microphones, whether attached to a PA system or a webcam, use electricity. But, that does not automatically forbid their use on Shabbat; electric lights may be used on Shabbat, provided they are turned on before Shabbat begins, or via a timer. But, halakhic authorities do not apply this logic to microphones as they use more or less electricity depending on whether they are amplifying sound. So, speaking into a microphone, even if already turned on, would constitute "additional work," and therefore be forbidden. In recent times, there have been efforts to make a "Shabbat microphone"which use a constant amount of electricity and might therefore be usable, much as a Shabbat elevator.[6]

In our context, this would not be necessary, as Reform Judaism has long asserted our right to use electricity on Shabbat. We use light, heat, air-conditioning, etc. There is no reason to think that a microphone attached to a webcam should be treated differently.

The other main halakhic objection to microphone use on Shabbat deals with "creation." There are those who feel that amplification systems do not truly "amplify" sound, but "create" a new sound similar, but louder, than the original sound and from a technical point of view, they are surely correct. As such, even without involving electricity, they would constitute a violation of Shabbat.[2] Again, clearly this is not a concern from a

Reform point of view. We engage in many similar acts of creation and using PA systems is just one of them. There is no reason to be stricter with webcams than other similar systems.

As an aside, it is worth noting that Orthodox Judaism was not always united in its opposition to electrical amplification on Shabbat. Arguments were made that a sound system can be viewed like electric light, and could be used, if not turned on or otherwise adjusted once Shabbat began. if turned on before Shabbat, whether manually or through a timer, some synagogues allowed it. Indeed, several Orthodox synagogues used microphones on Shabbat, well into the mid-.twentieth century.[8]

Why is that no longer the case? Some who believe that, at least this is partially a reaction to Reform and Conservative Judaism leniency.[9] However, it's also important to note that there were other halakhic reasons besides *hukat reformim* to forbid microphone usage, and some Orthodox deciders directly refute this idea.[10] Whatever the motivation, clearly at one point, some halakhic authorities permitted the use of microphones on Shabbat. Currently, essentially none do. For those within our movement who try to keep electrical use to a minimum on Shabbat, it is worth noting that there has always been a *mekeel* position.

Photography and Videography

Long before livestreaming, synagogues had to face the question of recording services. Photography and videography are not new, and their appropriateness at Shabbat services has regularly been debated as has another older technology, very

similar to live streaming, closed-circuit television. Many congregations, especially on the High Holy Days, when seating is at a premium, have set up cameras and microphones so that others in distant parts of the building might observe services in real-time. "Distance praying" will be discussed later. Currently, we are interested in the question whether cameras and microphones should be allowed in the sanctuary, at all.

Both the Reform and Conservative movements have looked at this question over the years. Within the Conservative responsa, we can see an example of halakhic reasoning which probably does not apply in our context. The question of "writing." Several responsa debate whether recording on a videotape or audiotape, qualifies as "writing."[11] It is one of the thirty-nine *melakhot*, and therefore forbidden on Shabbat. Some argue that the technology is so different that it does not qualify,[12] while others state that the function of videotaping is essentially identical to writing, and therefore must fall under the same halakhic prohibitions.[13] Still others argue that videotaping s actually most similar to audio amplification (i.e. the use of microphones), and since microphones are explicitly allowed in the Conservative movement, there is no reason to prohibit video cameras, as well.[14]

Tech Support and Making a Tikun

The issue of *shema yitaken*, lest something be fixed. raised in an early Conservative responsum may interest us. Certain activities have long been prohibited on Shabbat not because they are themselves forbidden, but because engaging in them may necessitate a repair which would be a violation of Shabbat. Most famously, musical instruments may not be played on Shabbat for this reason (for

example, repairing a broken guitar string would qualify as a *tikun*, so playing guitar is a violation if *shema yitaken*). Rabbi David Lincoln[15] noted that the presence of a complicated recording system would almost guarantee, the need to make a repair during Shabbat services. Sooner or later, technology breaks down; there are no fool-proof systems. Anticipating the rejoinder "if it breaks/stops functioning, we will just leave it and fix it after Shabbat. Lincoln points out the unrealistic nature of this plan. Especially if these cameras are used for *bar mitzvah*, it is all but impossible to imagine that we would tell the family, sorry no recording for you.

While *shema yitaken* might not be a category with which most Reform Jews are familiar, or to which we pay much heed, it does contain an important lesson for us. We might be willing to allow simple "repairs" on Shabbat; indeed, we may not see these as a violation of Shabbat, at all. But, getting involved in complicated technical support is certainly not in the spirit of Shabbat. Is it fair that the known "techie" who is in synagogue simply to pray might be called on to suddenly troubleshoot a problem during services? What would happen if, in the middle of service, someone runs up to the rabbi and whispers, "Don't start the Torah service yet; the webcam has stopped working?"

One could argue that we already face this problem, since we regularly use sound systems and video recorders. But, the complexity of webcams and livestreaming is far greater than these simpler, better established technologies. It is reasonable to believe that a video camera can be turned on and left alone for the duration of the service. It is reasonable to believe that a sound system that works at the start of services can be counted on for the duration. It is probably not reasonable to believe, at least now, that

webcams, computers, and Internet connections will be as reliable. Synagogues who wish to use them on Shabbat had best be prepared, and willing, to fix them on Shabbat, as well.

Protecting the Sacred Nature of the Service

When in 1986, the Responsa Committee answered the question about videotaping services,[16] Rabbi Jacob answered in the affirmative, but took the opportunity to mention the importance of maintaining decorum and the sacred character of the service. Videotaping which was obtrusive to worshipers, or had an impact on the behavior of those present, was not acceptable and, indeed, not permissible. Those caveats seem to apply to livestreaming, possibly even to a greater degree.

The important question seems to be, does livestreaming change the service for those present? One could argue that there is no difference between videotaping, to which most worshipers are by now quite accustomed, and livestreaming. Indeed, one could argue that livestreaming is less obtrusive, since the cameras can often be permanently fixed out of the way, and be all invisible to the worshipers, while video cameras are most often placed on tripods in the back of the sanctuary. If video cameras are allowed, *al achat cama chama* webcams!

On the other hand, it's possible that the knowledge that this service is viewable across the world could be relevant, and distracting, to those who are participating. Will people feel less comfortable knowing that anyone could be watching? That discomfort may surely have a negative impact on their worship experience. More likely is the possibility that the presence of cameras, and a potentially

infinite audience, will affect the behavior of the Rabbi and the Cantor. The 1986 responsum addresses this, as well, and points out the inappropriateness of staging the service for the cameras. The clergy must not "play to the cameras." The cameras must be passive observers of the scene; any modifications that we make to the service for their benefit would be problematic.

In the end, it seems hard to make the argument that webcams are qualitatively different (or, possibly, even quantitatively) from video cameras. But, its worth keeping the question open, as we see the effect of more webcams in our services.

Recruiting and Hasagat Gevul

One potential issue which arises for livestreaming is that of institutional boundaries and recruiting, or "poaching" from each other. In all likelihood, none of the current congregations which are livestreaming their services, or which are considering doing so, are doing so in the hopes of attracting members from other congregations, but intentional or not, it is a possibility. Making services easily available to those who are not at your congregation, opens the possibility that members of congregation, especially one nearby, could observe your services and eventually decide that they want to change congregations.

Reform rabbis often invoke the principle of *hasagat gevul* (violation of a boundary) to talk about the impropriety of recruiting members from another congregation. The Responsa Committee looked at this question of solicitation,[17] and came to the conclusion that there is nothing within Jewish law which explicitly prohibits the

recruitment of members from another congregation, or Jewish organization. However, members of the Reform movement have signed onto a code of ethics which prohibits exactly this. So, even though "poaching" may not be, inherently, a halakhic violation, we have bound ourselves to a code of ethics, and so we have a halakhic obligation to obey those rules and restrictions.

That doesn't mean, of course, that livestreaming services is inherently a violation of those rules. Congregations are always open to non-members for services, and regularly advertise in local papers, community newsletters and so on. These activities are not "poaching." Offering easy viewing of services is not, either. So long as efforts are not made to explicitly target members of other congregations, there is not any real reason to think of livestreaming as poaching.

There is an important issue, likely to be overlooked, that is copyright law. Probably every service conducted in a Reform synagogue involves the performance of at least one piece (musical or reading) which is under copyright, and for which permission has not been granted. US law states that: the owner of copyright under this title has the exclusive rights to do and to authorize any of the following:

> (4) in the case of literary, musical, dramatic, and
> choreographing works, pantomimes, and motion
> pictures and other audiovisual works, to perform
> the copyrighted work publicly. (17 USC section
> 106).

The Responsa Committee has already looked at the question of copyright in the Internet Age.[18] They invoke the principle of *dina demalkhuta dina* in saying that it is against Jewish law to download material from the Internet without explicit permission. There is no reason to think that US copyright law is in any way a violation of Jewish law or principles, and therefore we are bound to it. But, the responsum goes on to look at the question not only through the lens of *dina demalkhuta dina*, but also as an inherently Jewish question: aside from any civil law: Does Judaism accept the idea of copyright, and intellectual property? In summary, we do. Intellectual property is a valid concept, Jewishly speaking, and possibly even a benefit to our people. However you look at it, the Responsa Committee taught us, we are responsible to obey the laws of copyright.

Al ahat kama v'kama, how much more so are we obligated when we are dealing not with entertainment materials, but rather with sacred texts and music? Participating in a service which violates US law through copyright infringement would seem to be a case of *mitzvah habaah aveira,* a mitzvah which is performed through a sin (such as performing *netilat lulav* with a stolen *lulav*).

Anecdotally, it seems that many congregations which are engaging in livestreaming are not aware, or perhaps are not admitting, that there is a serious issue here. It's possible that some kind of "religious fair use law" can be created, or that the law can be otherwise modified to allow webcasting of copyrighted materials. It's also possible that my interpretation of US law is faulty (although I spoke to a lawyer about this, my knowledge is obviously far from comprehensive, and I have heard from others who disagree with the legal opinion which I

was given. According to at least one knowledgeable lawyer, we are in an unclear area of the law here, and so there is no definitive answer, yet). But, unless and until its legality is firmly established, it would seem to be incumbent on our congregations, and our clergy, to ensure compliance with the law, especially during our most sacred acts.

Livestreaming   is it Real Prayer?

Again, this paper is not a responsum. It is not my intent to rule on whether or not a congregation is allowed to live stream their services. However, the above discussion makes it clear that it is, at the very least, reasonable for a congregation to choose to do so. Once they decide to livestream their services, what exactly are they streaming? Can we say that what is going out over the Internet, and what is being received by those on the other end, constitutes true prayer?

One close analog in the traditional literature can be found in a Talmudic discussion [19] about hearing the echo of a shofar. The sages rule that a person who hears only the echo of the shofar sound, but not the sound directly from the shofar itself, has not fulfilled their obligation to hear the shofar. In other words, there is a difference between direct sound and what we might call "secondary sound."That would imply that the sounds which are heard over an Internet connection are not the same as the sounds which are heard while sitting in synagogue, even if they sound the same to the listener.

The *halakhah* reflects this understanding when ruling about participating in a service from a distance. The *Shulhan Arukh*[20]

rules that a person may answer "amen" to a *minyan*, even if she/he is not physically with that *minyan*. Later authorities assert that listening via telephone is an analogous situation, so someone listening on a phone would respond "amen" upon hearing a blessing. However, if the blessing was to fulfill an obligation of his/her own, than the person does not say " amen" and they can not count the blessing as their own (as they could have, had they been physical, present).[21]

So, it seems that hearing a blessing via technology counts for something (we can/must respond to those blessing), but it doe not equal hearing the blessing in person. "Being there" through the telephone seems to count as a kind of lesser presence. As we'll see, this is a common theme in the *halakhah*, and one which is useful to us. Technology allows us to be there, in some sense, but not in the full sense.

But, a Reform halakhic approach requires that we do more than know what the traditional sources say, it also requires that we understand why, so that we can decide whether this is relevant to us. In this case, the tradition seems to be taking a somewhat philosophical approach to the nature of prayer.

Is "true" prayer defined solely by the perception of the person in question? By the effect that it has on the listener? Does prayer exist solely in the eyes/ears of the beholder? The tradition seems to say "no." Prayer has an independent reality, even if it seems just as good to the listener as the echo of a shofar might.

Interestingly, a 1989 Reform responsum about playing recorded services in a hospital. also seems to imply that "prayer via technology" is not the real thing. Although it allowed the activity, the committee never claimed that listening to the service on a recording was communal worship. Instead, they called it "a stimulus to individual prayer." The implication was that the prayer itself may not have been fully valid, but that it still had value. Both parts of the equation seem relevant here: prayer heard via the Internet may not rise to the "status of true prayer," but it may not be useless, either.

Much of the discussion surrounding the live streaming of services revolves around the issue of community and communal prayer. Does web-participation in a service count" as communal prayer? Is that a real community? Implied in that question is that communal prayer is important, or possibly even mandatory, in some way. It's worth mentioning that the Responsa Committee has directly affirmed this.[22] Although it counseled leniency, in general, and left open the possibility of flexibility with the definition of *minyan* (e.g. how many people are actually needed), it strongly held that communal prayer, defined as prayer with a *minyan*, was an integral part of our Jewish lives. So, can that need to be filled over an Internet connection? Can we say that one is fully part of a *minyan* which exists on the other side of a webcam? The traditional sources would seem to say no. The conversation begins with *Berakhot* 6a which tells us that the divine presence accompanies a group of ten people who sit together in prayer. As the text, which forms the basis of all the laws of *minyan*, uses the word "sitting" can be understood to imply physical proximity. Although it is obvious that the rabbis of old could not imagine praying over the distances that are

now possible, they did wonder what it meant to be " together," and whether distance had an impact on that.

The Mishnah (*Berakhot* 7.5) teaches that, for the purposes of *birkat hamazon*, groups of people who are in a separate room may be considered one group, provided that some members of each group are visible to some of the other. And, the Talmud expands on that[23] saying that, even if the two groups are not visible to each other, at all, they may be considered one group (for purposes of the *zimmun*) if a single attendant is waiting on both of them. Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 3.7) teaches that a person who hears a *shofar,* despite not being in the presence of that *shofar* (e.g. they were in the house next door to the synagogue) has fulfilled their obligation to hear it (provided they were attentive to the sound). So, it would seem that physical proximity is not an absolute requirement to constitute a prayer group, or to engage in ritual. However, the Talmud shows that these models are not applicable when it comes to statutory, communal prayer:

Mar Zutra says: This only applies to three, but as regards two, the law follows Mar Zutra. What is the reason? Since they wish to mention Gods name, less than ten would not be acceptable.[24]

Its one thing to overcome physical distance for relatively minor acts of ritual. However, when it comes to public prayer, a physical gathering of ten is required. So, once again we see that we have model of "lesser presence." Being linked by sight, or by a waiter, is good enough for some purposes, but not for others. This is made clear (Eruvin 92b) which shows that there are different standards in

different situations. Personal obligations might not require physical presence; *minyan* does. And, the codified *halakhah*[25] reflects this

We do have to ask whether it is appropriate to apply these texts in our situation. When thinking of what it meant to be out of physical proximity, our sages could not have imagined the virtual closeness which we are able to create. Is it possible that, had they known of webcams and video chatting, they would have had a different approach? Are we reading too much into an ancient text?

Its impossible to answer, of course, but, the fact that the Rabbis were willing to allow distance praying for some rituals, but not for communal prayer, does give some weight to the presumption that, no matter what the technological realities were, they would not have accepted anything less than physical presence for communal prayer.

Building off of these texts. Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner, in the RAs responsum, finds other flaws in the idea that it is possible to be present via the Internet. First, he points out that it has been decided, across the spectrum of Judaism, that online versions of sacred texts are not sacred..[26] How could we then claim that online texts are not sacred, but online prayers are? What, he asks, about someone in a different time zone? Can someone participate in *Kabbalat Shabbat* if it is still Friday afternoon in their local area? Can someone *daven shaharit* if its already evening where they are? What would happen if a person had two livestreamed services running at the same time? Would they be part of both *minyanim*? All of these quirks and contradictions act as a *reducto ad absurdum* for Reisner, showing that it is nonsensical to understand the

Internet as overcoming the issue of distance, when it comes to prayer.

When discussing the possibility of including a person not physically present in a *zimmun* , the Talmud raises one other issue: Abaya says that a person can so be counted only if they called and he answered.[27] Even in this "lesser ritual," two-way communication is essential. Once again, a halakhic point raises a relevant insight for us.

Being a part of a community is a reciprocal act. Being able to watch and listen in on a community is not the same as being a part of that community.

It is possible to have two-way communication via the Internet, but not the norm. Very often, that communication is of a very limited sort - sending simple messages in a chat window alongside the "video-feed," for example. True multi-user video- conferencing is still uncommon, although it is getting easier to access in the past few years. But, even if that is possible, that is not what is done with livestreaming No one, whom I know has suggested putting virtual-.participants on a screen, so that everyone in the congregation can see and hear them ! For now, and for the foreseeable future, participating in a livestreamed service is a unidirectional activity; you receive the service, but you do not give back. It would seem to be somewhat nonsensical to believe that someone can be a full part of a community, or a *minyan*, when they are only able to participate in such a limited way.

In the end, discussing whether or not prayer via Internet is adequate is inherently a discussion about what it means to be "together" in a community. It is clear that a community (a *minya*n) is a required part of full prayer in Judaism. It is

equally clear that the traditional *halakhah* does not consider the Internet a sufficient way to create that community, or that *minyan*. But, once again, knowing the *halakhah* is not enough for us; we have to understand the reasons behind the *halakhah*.

Why do we need a *minyan* to pray? What is it about 10 people coming together that is so important? Until we know that, we can not really decide whether the Internet is a reasonable way to accomplish it.

In his responsum, Reisner explores the possibility that coming together was not only a required part of communal prayer, it may have been the entire point. It is possible that our sages required a *minyan* explicitly so that the community would come together, and public communal structures could develop. Prayer is a pretext for gathering, and so anything which interferes with that gathering could be presumed to be opposed.

Abraham Millgram also explores the reason for the requirement of *minyan*. While acknowledging the value of private prayer, Milgram believes that, "the rabbis felt that the Jew who worships privately treads a spiritually lonely road;"[28] coming together with other people has strong psychological effects. The weak and the wavering among us can draw strength and support from those who are stronger within the group. "Spiritual strength" is a communal quality, not an individual one. Coming together binds us more closely with the community of Israel.

Similarly, Isaac Klein discusses the compelling force of the public. The lessons which prayer is trying to teach us are simply not effectively conveyed when we do not feel the presence of others:

The compelling force of this moral training does not come about when man is in seclusion, but rather when he joins with his fellow men in communal life. *Therefore, the main point and purpose of prayer lies in the coming together of men* [Italics mine].[29]

This theme, that it is the creation of a sense of community, and a connection with our fellow Jews, which is the entire point of communal prayer, is also supported by Samson Raphael Hirsch:

The individual found his relationship purified and sublimated as soon as he conceived it as an essential part of the whole, thus regarding himself also as an active member of the community as soon as you regard yourself as a member of a whole, as a member of the community of Jacob, then all egotism, which selfishly knows only itself, is banished you will then feel yourself elevated and sanctified. You will regard your whole being and all the power within it as holy when you consider that you must contribute to the execution of the great and holy mission that was given to the whole House of Jacob at *Horeb*.[30]

All of these thinkers are expressing a powerful idea,[31] that coming together, as a corporate group, has enormous power. That we are transformed, on a deep, spiritual level, by the presence of other people engaged in prayer, as we are.

Of course, this says nothing explicit about whether this kind of transformation is available via the Internet. About whether people can truly feel part of a sacred group, when their presence is only virtual. But, it does at least sharpen the question. We are not simply asking whether an Internet connection can create a *minyan* (a fairly technical question). Now we are asking whether an Internet connection can convey the sense of compelling moral force, of which Klein speaks. Whether a webcam can create the nearly mystical union of individuals into a whole, as Hirsch suggests. Whether spiritual loneliness can be mitigated by a screen, or whether it takes flesh and blood to do so.

It seems obvious that different people will respond differently to those questions. Most, at least in this day, will feel intuitively that this kind of serious, deep connection is simply not available, or even close to available, via a virtual connection. That only physical presence can carry and convey the spiritual presence of which our sages speak. They will agree with Malcolm Gladwell who recently asserted that the Internet is highly effective at breadth of communication, but not at depth of connection.[32]

One real possibility, though, is that this sense that the Internet provides only partial, ersatz presence is true of this generation, but not necessarily of the next which will still be addressed.

One of the same sages unknowingly suggests a way in which prayer via the Internet could be *more* effective than an in-person *minyan*. Millgram suggests that, in coming together, we create a group focused on one prayer. That helps us keep our *kavannah* where it should

be.[33] One could argue, however, that the presence of others is often a deterrent to *kavanah*. We all have our share of kibitzers in synagogue, and these talkers are often a distraction not only to those to whom they speak, but also to those within earshot. By viewing a service over the web, a person could have a focus for his or her *kavanah*, without the associated distractions.

Of course, those making this argument would also have to account for the myriad distractions available to someone at their computer. its not clear if a person trying to talk while your are trying to pray is more or less distracting than the temptation to web surf during services !

There are obviously those who question the value of participation in services via the web. But, some go further and who actively oppose any attempt to livestream services, sometimes going so far as to consider it dangerous to do so.

The dominant reason for considering livestreamed services as "dangerous" seems to be the fear that this will be an "easy way out" for people. Those who might otherwise attend services will choose instead to participate/observe on their computer screens.[34] With nearly all of us having such busy schedules, so little free time, and so little energy to spare, even if we don't believe that Web services are "as good," might nevertheless prefer them,? Therefore our attempt to reach the unavailable, and the otherwise marginalized, we might be inadvertently contributing to marginalization and alienation of our own members.

Is this a realistic fear? On the one hand, it seems like our movement might be the least susceptible to this kind of web centricity. In a halakhically bound community, the devout are under a binding obligation to pray regularly (especially those who are, for instance, saying *kaddish* for a loved one). Attending services serves not only a spiritual purpose, but also a technical one, to be *yotzei* so, its entirely conceivable that a busy person might log on to a web-service to fulfill his/her obligation, whereas he/she would find a way to attend services in person, were the virtual option not available.

But, that is not our reality. For all intents and purposes, there is no obligation to pray communally, in Reform Judaism. No one would ever log on to a livestreamed service simply to make sure that they were *yotzei*. The only reason that someone would participate in a service was because they got "something" out of that service. What that something might be is certainly highly variable. It could be spiritual uplift, it could be communal connection, it could be alleviation of guilt, or anything else But, most of the reasons that our members pray have to do, on some level, with how praying makes them feel. Therefore if some version of prayer does not create that same subjective experience for them, it is unlikely that they would choose it. To put it differently, for what reason would a Reform Jew who might otherwise attend services in person, decide instead to stay home? Clearly, it's not impossible to imagine such a situation, but it's hard to imagine a widespread movement toward this, but not impossible. It's certainly true that our society is moving, more and more, towards a focus on the individual, and on individual spirituality. The idea of community having inherent value, and inherent power, is less and less

current, especially with younger members of our society. Maybe people will indeed find that live-streamed services offer them everything they want - structured prayer, beautiful music, interesting sermons - without any of the concomitant hassle. All the benefits of synagogue services; all the pleasures of privacy, and individuality.

Is Livestreaming the Future ?

We have now looked at whether we should be allowed to livestream our services. We have looked at whether those services have a religious/spiritual benefit, and to what degree. We've even looked, briefly, at whether this is a dangerous idea, which needs to be avoided, at all costs.

However we decide to answer those questions, though, one thing seems clear: good or not, livestreamed services are going to be part of our religious world. More and more synagogues will offer this option to their members, and to the community. As more offer it, more of our members, and prospective members, will begin to expect it. Also with other synagogues providing livestreamed services, there will be less reason for us to resist. After all, someone who wants a livestreamed service will get it; we might as well make sure that they get "ours." They may become more accepted as equal, or perhaps even better than in-person worship.

This trend can already be seen., for example, through the effort of "Punk Torah," one of the few all online Jewish communities. It offers learning, worship, and community, entirely in an online setting. In a recent interview, cofounder and Executive Director Patrick Aleph said: "Just because

participants don't meet face-.to-.face doesn't make that community any less real."[35] They are not only interested in changing how we think about prayer; but explicitly in changing how we think about community. Aleph says that, "If you log on to our site or send us an e-.mail, you're part of our community." Some find this an exhilarating approach; as we all talk about lowering the bar to entry into our communities, "Punk Torah" has taken it to the extreme, and opens up its virtual doors to anyone and everyone. Others, however, may wonder if this is an open community, or simply a community only in name. When only a click on a link is the only requirement to be part of the community, then what value does this community have? Can this kind of community create the bonds which have sustained our people for centuries?

The questions are obvious; the answers are more difficult. It is easy to dismiss such a community as shallow, and ultimately irrelevant. In all likelihood, it is exactly that to the majority of those already involved in the Jewish community. But, what is true now, perhaps, will not always be true.

Some recent research implies there may be a qualitative shift in how younger generations see online interaction.[36] Those of us over a certain age tend to see the Internet, and similar technologies, as useful ways to facilitate communication. Communication can be used to further enhance our communities. But, the technology is a tool; the paradigm remains, essentially, the same.

For the younger generations, however, there may be a shift underway, and they may be seeing these technologies as community itself. For them, Facebook, Twitter, Punk

Torah, and so many more services are not enhanced versions of the telephone, but rather virtual versions of the community.

Those who do not hold such a positive view of the potential of the Internet are likely to respond that these kids and young adults only *think* that the community in which they participate is just as good as a real community. But, they are fooling themselves; they do not know what they are missing. Our job, the argument goes, is to convince them of the inadequacy of online community, and to try to draw them, instead, into the physical synagogue.

It's impossible to know what an experience means to anyone else. It is impossible to say, with any kind of certainty, that the community experienced by our youngest cohort is inherently worse, or better, than the community which has been part of Jewish life for millennia. It is possible that, with time, research will emerge which does shed some light on this issue in an objective way similar to the work of Gladwell. We may show that the Internet community is not as deep as traditional communities, or that Internet communities are even more engaging, and more sustaining than others.

As frustrating as it may be, important for now is the centrality of the question. The effectiveness, the goodness of the Internet worship is inherently tied to the reality of Internet community. The more we see a virtual community as equally valid, the more we will accept virtual worship as equally valid. The more that virtual community can move

us on the deepest levels, the more that virtual worship will be able to do the same. It is worth noting that what many dismissed as disproven, such as the value of Twitter, has been shown as wrong in the wake of the recent Egyptian uprising.

Notes

1. Avram Israel Reisner, "Wired to the *Kadosh Barukh Hu: Minyan* via Internet, OH 55:15.2001."

2. Walter Jacob, "A Televised Jewish Service in a Hospital," *New American Reform Responsa*, (CCAR Books, 1992).

3. Reisner, *Op.Cit*.

4. Mayer Rabinowitz, "An Addendum to Videotaping on Shabbat, OH 340:3.1982b" in *Responsa: 1980-1990*, edited by David J. Fine (The Rabbinical Assembly, 2005)

5. J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halachic Problems*, vol 5 (Targum/Feldheim, 2005) p. 226.

6. Drzewiecki, Tadeusz M., "Acousto-.Fluidic Sound Augmentation for Orthodox Jewish Worship Spaces," prepared for *The Acoustical Society of America 132nd Meeting Lay Language Papers*, 1996.

7. Op. cit., Bleich, p. 227.

8. Shlomo Brody. From Our Archives: May One Use a Microphone on Shabbat? http://text.rcarabbis.org/from-.our-.archives-.may-.one-.use-.a-.microphone-.on-.shabbat

9. Shlomo Brody. "Polemics and the Orthodox Prohibition Against Microphones on Shabbat."2010 http://text.rcarabbis.org/polemics-.and-.the-.orthodox-.prohibition-.against-.microphones-.on-.shabbat-.by-.shlomo-.brody/>

10. Op. cit., Bleich, p. 225.

11. Rabbi David Lincoln, Videotaping on Shabbat, OH 340:3.1982a (among other responsa) in *Responsa: 1980-.1990*, edited by David J. Fine (The Rabbinical Assembly, 2005).

12. Ihid., p.213.

13. Op.cit., Rabinowitz, p. 215.

14. Rabbi Gordon Tucker, T*he Use of a Remote Audio/Visual Monitor on Shabbat and Yom Tov*, OH 340:31.1989a. In *Responsa: 1980-1990*, edited by David J. Fine (Society of America 132nd Meeting Lay Language Papers, 1996).

15. Op. cit., Lincoln, p. 213.

16. Walter Jacob, "Video Taping in the Synagogue," *Contemporary American 16 Reform Responsa*, (CCAR Books, 1988).

17. Unpublished Responsum, 5763.1

18. Unpublished Responsum, 5761.1.

19. Rosh Hashanah 27b.

20. *Shulhan Arukh*, Orah Hayim. 55.20.

21. "Does One Answer to Kaddish Heard Over the Telephone or a Simulcast?" http://www.dailyhalacha.com/Display.asp?ClipDate=5/10/2010.

22. Unpublished Responsum 5752.17

23. Berakhot 50b.

24. Berakhot 45b.

25. *Shulan Arukh*, Orah Hayyim 55.

26. That is a good thing; otherwise, a computer displaying a sacred text could never be turned off, or even have its window scrolled or minimized, because all of these things would constitute destroying a sacred text!

27. *Berakhot* 45b.

28. Abraham E. Milgram, *Jewish Worship*, Philadelphia. 1971. P. 29.

29. Isaac Klein, *A Guide o Jewish Religious Practice*, New York and Jerusalem, 1979, p. 15.

30. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, London, 1962, pp. 505-06.

31. And, as an aside, none more beautiful than Hirsch, whose few pages on this topic merit being read.

32. Malcolm Gladwell,"Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted ," *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010.

33. Op.Cit., Millgram, p. 31.

34. For example, see Op.Cit. Reisner, p. 5.

35. Jill Fishkoff, "Turning Judaism into Online *Minyan*," http://www.ijn.com/ijn-.news/national/1886-.turning-.judaism-.into-.online-. minyan. *InterMountain Jewish News*.

36. http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/does-.your-.website-.push-.information-.or-.facilitate-. community-.building/. "Does Your Website Push Information to Facilitate Community Building?"

37. And which it >s worth noting, many have already dismissed as disproven, in the wake of the use of Twitter 28.