

Text Me: Judaism and Technology

As the month of Elul approaches and preparations for the High Holidays begin, I often think about the famous Hasidic teaching that one ought to keep a different verse in each of our two pockets: in one “for me was the world created” and the other “I am but dust and ashes.” Presumably this provides the right blend of spiritual humility and moral audacity necessary to begin the new year.

Analogously, I’d like to suggest that the contemporary Jewish educator ought to keep on her smart phone two instantly available video-clips as they think about their relationship to technology in the new year. One is for the times when out of business or tiredness she is anchoring her best educational efforts in the technologies of the 20th century. Click then on the [link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56x46QezJ9k) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56x46QezJ9k>) for Russel Neiss’s and Charley Schwartz’s prize winning Jewish Futures video portrait of a family of four, fully utilizing 21st century web resources for their own Jewish growth. The enormous potential of the digital world ought to tantalize all Jewish educators.

The second clip is the trailer for the film Connected by Tiffany Shlain. It begins with Tiffany, generally a fan of new technologies and in fact the inventor of the “Webby” awards, confessing to traveling three thousand miles to visit a dear friend but then faking having to go to the bathroom so she could check her e-mail as soon as the reunion begins. Click on this [link](http://connectedthefilm.com/)(<http://connectedthefilm.com/>) when it’s time to do a heshbon ha-nefesh and figure out how the digital age might be shaping our personal lives, our family and communal lives, and our student’s lives l’ra’ah (for the bad) as well as l’tovah (for the better).

Family educators in Cleveland have embraced this paradoxical stance regarding Judaism and technology through the work they have been doing

in Text Me: Judaism and Technology, a joint project of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland and the national Covenant foundation.

Inside the Project

Text Me: Judaism and Technology is a project of many dimensions. Among the web resources we have been creating and refining these past several years are

- 1. The results and interpretations of a survey done with several hundred Jewish parents about their own and their children's relationships to new technologies;*
- 2. A "suite" of seminal essays about the impact of technology on education ranging from Wendy Mogul's suggestions for parents, to University of Pennsylvania's Sherri Turkel, University of Pennsylvania Professor of Communication, TED talk sharing her rethinking of the impact of technology on family , to some reflections from Harlene Appelman, Executive Director of the Covenant Foundation, about "what keeps parents up at night"*
- 3. A power point and accompanying article developed by Professor Brian Amkraut, director of the Laura and Alvin Siegal Institute for Life-Long Learning, on seeing technology's impact on Judaism from a historical perspective.*
- 4. Four family programs piloted here by family educators in Cleveland to create dialogue between parents and children of various ages about good digital citizenry from the perspective of Jewish Values.*

By January 2015 we plan to have these resources available (on line and in hard-copy!) to the Jewish communities across North America . While the full-range of

the surround resources for the project will be of differentiated value to particular Jewish audiences, for the purposes of this article I'd like to take readers inside one particular activity. Above all else this project is about creating family dialogue.

So imagine then students and their parents each receiving a packet of 24 photos posted to the website Awkward Family Photos. Each person has a single, parallel task. They must sort the pictures into "ok" or "not ok" to post if they were part *of the photo*. They then share as parents and children how they have sorted the pictures, noting when they have sorted similarly and differently.

The second layer of activities include Jewish texts around *kavod ha-briyot* (treat all creatures with dignity) that leads to the families reviewing the photos once again from the perspective of this Jewish value. A second text introduces the families to the notion of a *siyag*/fence in Jewish law and explores whether some photos posted might be "ok" in isolation but "not ok" when one takes into account the consequences of their being posted. So at first glance a picture of a child inside a refrigerator with the mother smiling and holding the door wide open might be okay, even funny. What if, however, a young child sees this picture? Would they unknowingly but dangerously go inside a refrigerator? Is there an ethical/ Jewish value based reason for removing the picture as a precautionary measure.

Finally, the family is asked to contribute to a Jewish version of "Awkward Family Photos" a family picture that might help people laugh "with" but not "at" them. This becomes a community-building tool for the teacher of the class, a humorous portal to more significant learning shared between students and family.

Conclusions

The first two words of the project title, Text Me: Judaism and Technology form a double entendre. By noting both the world of social media in “text me” and the tradition of Jewish sacred wisdom embodied in Jewish text we mean to suggest a relationship between the two that can encompass both synergies and values-conflicts between the two worlds. The best way to explore both in our judgment is create frameworks that allow for family dialogues.

Why are these dialogues so critical?

The psychologist Rollo May once noted that the “taboo” subject for cultural conversation shifts dramatically from generation to generation. He argued that for Victorians the obvious taboo was sex, hence Freud. Writing in the 1969 in Love and Will that sexuality was a fairly easy topic to discuss and that “death and dying” had become the functional equivalent for his generation of what the sexuality taboo was for the Victorians.

I would suggest that we have moved into a new era. Both sexuality and death are fairly open topics. Deeper discussions about the psychological - ethical impact of technology on our lives is the new taboo. We fulfill Marshall McLuhan’s prophecy in The Medium is the Massage that technologies will shape us more than we will shape them. As a colleague once noted her twenty five year old son still views his smart phone as an extension of his hand. For her fourteen year old the smart phone is his hand.

The experience of our family educators here in Cleveland is that parents with the right support are eager to explore the potential mindlessness of being shaped by technologies given the opportunity to do so in an environment with supportive parents and skilled facilitators. They are desparately eager for these conversations with other parents and scaffolded opportunities to explore digital habits with their own children. . The energy and release we sense from parents when they have a forum

where they can talk about their worries about their children and technology has been moving and palpable.

Finally, we can also capture the importance of these dialogues by turning to a Jewish text. The aforementioned tradition of placing a “fence around the Torah” is referenced in Bialik and Ravnitzky’s Book of Legends

Enter not into the path of the wicked...Avoid it, pass not by it; turn from it and pass on (Prov :14-15) . Rabbi Ashi said: The verse may be illustrated by the parable of a man who guards an orchard. If he guards it from without , the entire orchard is protected; but if he guards it from within, only the part in front of him is protected, while the part behind him is not protected

We spend a good deal of our life “connected”, inside the weave of threads of powerful communications. It is enormously difficult to form judgments about the impact of these networks from inside them . (For a digital immigrant such as myself it is equally difficult forming judgments from without as I ploddingly explore new technologies). The best work of Text Me: Judaism and Technology is in helping parents and educators gain a perspective by stepping outside the boundaries of what sweeps over them daily.

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