The Jewish Message as Medium:
Jewish Education in the Information Age

by Joel Lurie Grishaver

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His Master's Voice

When I was eleven or so, I visited Shlomo Pincas' living room and saw his father's wondrous device that we could only dream of using; we weren't even allowed to touch it. This amazing technology was a recording phonograph, one that literally cut records. Shlomo's father, known as Mr. Pincas, was the *bar mitzvah* tutor at the large Conservative synagogue in the neighborhood. His machine allowed him to "cut records" of *Torah* and *Haftarah* portions. A year later, my father borrowed a home tape recorder, one the size of a small suitcase, and my *bar mitzvah* tutor, Mr. Horowitz, recorded the pieces I needed on a reel-to-reel tape for me. Only a few years later, when I was working as a *bar mitzvah* tutor, I got to make cassette recordings for my students.

In the article "Making Your School a Technology Friendly Place" in the spring 2007 issue of CAJE's *Jewish Education News,* Terry Kaye informs us that the thing to do today is to post the *bar mitzvah* material on a website and attach an MP3 file. That reveals another progression. Mr. Pincas cut apart one (or perhaps two) *tikkunim* a year (books with the *Torah* portion with vowels and without vowels in *Torah* script), giving each student a printed version of his *bar mitzvah* material in a folder. My family, because Mr. Horowitz was not the standard tutor for my synagogue, bought a *Tikkun* that is still in my library. The other option was to go to the town library and pay a dollar a page for a white-on-black photocopy. Xerox has since entered the business and lent its trade name to a technological process, just like iPod. Since that time, generations of students have received CDs of their *bar mitzvah* portion, along with photocopies of all they have to learn, which were covered in endless pencil marks for pauses and became stained and rumpled from endless trips in backpacks, to mark the path to reach their majority. All this, we are told, is no longer "technology friendly."

Marshal McLuhan taught us that "the medium is the massage." (Yes, that playful pun was actually the title of his book.) He taught such simple lessons as "A typewriter is a means of transcribing thought, not expressing it" and the contradictory "Mass transportation is doomed to failure in North America because a person's car is the only place where he can be alone and think." The tool and the medium become a major part of the learning.

On one hand, a recording is a recording, a tool that allows a student to parrot and master the required portion. But the tool makes a difference. With Mr. Pincas' custom-made records, there was no going back. One listened to the whole thing, because at that time "scratching" was not yet an art form. The tape recorder allowed students to stop, start, and review, to learn the material as a series of smaller elements. When the *bar/bat mitzvah* moved to the iPod, a different change took place: the ear buds. Up to now, the recording media had essentially used speakers for reproduction. Headphones did exist, but the recordings were normatively played for everyone. Today, listening has become a private experience. When I prepared my *bar mitzvah,* my whole family could chant the entire thing, because they had been subjected to the endless repetitions. In an MP3-player world, students listen on their iPods, making preparation a private process.

One can trace the same progression in the printed text. Once, families had to own "the book." It became a permanent part of the family library. Then, for convenience, books were cut apart (and

could be written on). Photocopying further privatized and desanctified the text. The requirement of Jewish law to safeguard or bury any copy of the divine name extends to all of the *b'nai mitzvah* folders that have ever existed. In our new, privatized world we have had to adapt the old ways to meet the new. God's name on a computer screen is not sacred; otherwise, you would never be able to change the screen or turn it off if God's name came up. Several legal authorities have allowed the electronic destruction of a sacred name on our screens because they are no longer printed — they have been broken down to a series of dots, and dots can be erased.

"Sparks" and "It"
Kabalistic teaching suggests that the world is a combination of *nitzatzot* (sparks) and *klipot* (broken pieces of the containers that were supposed to hold the light that became the sparks). For a Kabalist, *tikkun olam* (world repair) happens when individuals find, collect, and share the sparks of divine light (wisdom). Martin Buber, a twentieth-century philosopher, took this model and recreated it as his classic *I and Thou.* He said that there are three kinds of relationships in the world. There is I-It, where I relate to things or relate to people as if they are things. There are I-Thou relationships, where people relate on a soul-to-soul basis. (Buber did write that people can have an I-Thou relationship with a tree, but that is another story.) Finally, Buber wrote that there is an I-Thou relationship in which, via our I-Thou relationships, we connect with God or whatever Greater Power we want to acknowledge. Buber's I-Thou is an expression of the *nitzatzot.* His I-It is another manifestation of *klipot.* And the gathering and sharing of sparks becomes the I-THOU relationship.

Let's ask a Kabalistic, Buberian question: "What is idolatry?" In this framework, it is actually easy to explain. It is mistaking a "piece of shell" for a "spark." It is thinking that an "It" is a "Thou." There is a great attempt in our society to deify technology, to believe that it is inherently redemptive. Simultaneously, technology is seen as evil. Educators often blame their own technology gaps for their growing exile from their students. The simple truth is this:
1. Technology is a set of tools.
2. Tools shape the way we create and communicate.
3. Technology is not who we or our students are. Technology is an "it."

A simple story. I have a fine motor coordination problem. Strange problem for a cartoonist, but the truth is that I basically draw and don't write my letters. When I was in seventh grade, my parents gave me a great birthday present: a week at secretarial school to learn how to type. It had two benefits. First, I became a writer. That is something that could never have happened without the typewriter. By hand I could never get down on paper the things that were in my mind. My handwriting was too slow. The typewriter released the words. It made certain kinds of communication possible. It shaped the way I work. I began writing blank verse because of the carriage return, but the feelings, the words, the expression were all mine. The second benefit was spending a week surrounded by seventeen- to nineteen-year-old women. A perfect pre-*bar mitzvah* experience.

My process of writing changed with an electric typewriter and shifted again when I began word processing. The tool shapes the way I work, but it is not the work. "A typewriter is a means of transcribing thought, not expressing it."

Community as a Second Language
As I was reflecting on this article, I went to the graduation ceremony at the Los Angeles campus of the Hebrew Union College. There Deborah Tuttle, the student speaker, clarified my thoughts. She said: "…recent research by Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen observes that the 'first language' many Jews speak is one of profound individualism. Community, they say, has become a 'second language.' "

Our "mother tongue" has become a private one; we shop online, we dial in to conference calls, we have fewer business lunches and more home offices. In this brave new world we keep to ourselves. We don't know our neighbors, and our communities are too often virtual rather than

actual. We build individual realities where we control the environment, the content and the interactivity.

With this as our baseline, the question of learning a communal language seems as foreign as the grammatical structures of high-school Latin. How do we create and sustain courageous communities when much of the American Jewish population feels that their community connection is lost in translation?

Years ago, Christopher Lasch wrote *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations.* In it he says "Experiences of inner emptiness, loneliness, and inauthenticity are by no means unreal or, for that matter, devoid of social content....They arise from the warlike conditions that pervade American society, from the dangers and uncertainty that surround us, and from a loss of confidence in the future...now a desperate concern for personal survival, sometimes disguised as hedonism, engulfs (us)..."

If we are going to describe the millennial child, we know a few things. First come all the things we have said for a long time: under parental pressure, overscheduled, spending lots of time interacting with media, and the like. Some of the things that are new are a de-emphasis of dating and a replacement with group experiences. We have "friends with benefits" and sex has become a "casual experience". There is a down-spiral in group membership (kids bowl alone, too) and an upturn in service learning (read: social action projects), because life is now a résumé rather than a resume that reflects our life. All of this speaks to the truth that, like their boomer grandparents, like their boomlet parents, this generation has made another turn toward narcissism and isolation. Or, in the words of Deborah Tuttle, "Community is now a second language."

Here is what we know. Technology did not create the isolation and alienation we sense in the privatization that seems evident in our students today. It may well serve and amplify that loneliness, but it is not its source. Its source is in fear and uncertainty, in a shrinking of hope, in the rise of hedonistic, self-protective reactions. Texting does not destroy communication. TSNF (That is not fair). Rather, texting is a manifestation of less time to spend together. The electric guitar did not destroy the Grand Old Opry — rather, it took country music to a new level. Our students abandoned the news and focused on "surreality television" not out of laziness, not out of a collapse of intelligence, but as an act of survival.

Here are two simple truths:
1. Technology is not the enemy.
2. Technology is not the solution.

E-mail has moved from instant communication to a glut of Viagra ads. Once Torah Aura ran exciting list-servs for middle school and high school students. Then they moved to IMs, texts, MySpace, and a lot of other communication formats that didn't get bogged down in the tedium of advertisements. It wasn't only because it was faster; it was also less invasive, more defensive. As more Jewish schools move to e-mail, they will not only save paper, but they will also escalate non-communication.

The Twinkie Defense
I am doing a parenting session at a synagogue. In the midst of my talk a father stands up and says, "My eleven-year-old son has a busy week, he has school and sports, yada yada yada, he begs me to sleep in on Sunday, and I want to know why I should make him get up and go to Hebrew school." I have an epiphany, and I tell him:
1. Because Hebrew school is the only place he is going to learn how to heal death.
2. Because Hebrew school is the only place he is going to find his part in the redemption of the world.
3. Because Hebrew school is the one place where he is going to gain tools to turn himself into the best person he can be.

4. Because Hebrew school is the place he is going to find the connection between him, Israel, and the rest of the Jewish people.

The father sits down and says "Thank you." Another father stands up and says, "If this school taught those things, my son would be here every single week." I have never forgotten that morning.

Here are some of the things I think I know.

As Jewish educators we see our job as "Judification." We are not trying to inform our students about their Jewish skills or provide them with Jewish information. Instead we have taken the responsibility to create (or at least significantly deepen) their Jewish identification.
We use three or four tools in order to do this.
1. We start early, because we want to build Jewish feelings. That is why preschool is so big on the agenda.
2. We try hard to make our schools either short or fun or both — because we accept the guilt that the previous generation of Jewish schools is responsible for the level of assimilation caused by the previous generation of students not feeling good about going to them.
3. We emphasize home and family not as process, but as the core context. We try to train our students to hold *Shabbat, Passover,* and *Hanukkah* at home, and we empower them to have privatized life-cycle rituals like *Havdalah b'nai mitzvah*.
4. We worship at the altar of memory, rather than the altar of meaning. We operate on the assumption that if our students have enough photographs of enough positive Jewish moments, these good feelings will create the inertia needed to keep them moving in Jewish directions.

The majority of our client families are consumers, but they have no brand loyalty. They will buy that which is most convenient, cheapest, or easiest. They are narcissists in the sense that Christopher Lasch described in *The Culture of Narcissism.* They are ruled by "The Sovereign Self," as described by Arnie Eisen and Steven M. Cohen in *The Jew Within.* It is much easier and less long-lasting to help them feel good about being Jewish. Most important, recent studies show that it is completely possible to "feel positive about one's Jewish heritage" and to completely disengage one's self from the Jewish future. To succeed we should start in preschool by building Jewish experiences and feelings, but if we don't make it to adulthood with a Judaism that is vocational — that offers positive contributions to Jewish life — little is gained. This next generation is not going to tell their children, "I went to Hebrew school and hated it, so you will go to Hebrew school and hate it." Instead it will be "Hebrew school wasn't worth my time, so we will not make you bother with it."

We are in an era of post-ethnic chic. Judaism is now a Protestant religion. The bagel is now "The Great American Bagel." "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's rye bread." Holocaust guilt is not going to motivate late-bearing Boomers, Gen X-ers and Gen Y-ers to send their children to Hebrew school. Neither is Grandma's Passover dinner. Judaism has got to make their lives richer, more meaningful. It has got to be vocational and productive, or it will drop away. We all know how to order Thai food, dim sum, tapas, sushi, Indian, Mexican, and the like. The deli is no longer our home, if we can even find one in our communities.

Here is my simple truth. Jewish education is going to fail unless:
1. We instill a Judaism and a Jewish practice that is meaningful to adults.
2. We build a bridge from *b'nai mitzvah* observance to college and then another from college to adult Jewish life.
3. We make sure that our students have Jewish friends, as well as Jewish memories. Unitarians can look at their old photos, too.

This means that just like teachers writing objectives, we must focus on the final behaviors we are seeking before we plan our lessons and activities. Good memories alone are a meal made of

Twinkies. The four questions — the ones about death, world repair, self-improvement, and Jewish connection — are the ones we have to help our students answer. These are questions of meaning, not resolved by facts, not really touched by good memories. Anything less, however, is empty calories.

Judaism as a Medium
My rabbi, Mordechai Finley, likes to critique Hebrew schools as places that train docents for the Museum of Former Jewish Life. They are like guides in the orchestra section who can identify the oboe, the viola, and the kettle drums, but cannot tune or play any of them. I suspect the same is almost equally true of day schools. We teach about Judaism; we don't teach Judaism as a life process.

The solution part of this article is simple, perhaps naïve. The best possible future is when we begin to teach Judaism and do so in a Jewish way. Judaism is lot of things that transcend *bar/bat mitzvah*, that have a greater life impact than a *kametz katan*, that are more transformative than being able to dance *Ma Navu*. The truth is that Judaism is a lot of three things that should be familiar: God, *Torah*, and Israel. They are inner meaning, a sense of direction, and a sense of connection. We make no impact until we get past learning "about" and get to learning "how." We need a Jewish education that makes a difference, that impacts the loneliness and alienation of millennial life. We need one that brings a sense of purpose and connection. That involves a lot more than knowing the festival *Kiddush*. To get there, how we teach makes a huge difference.

> Every person you meet deeply desires to be treated with respect. If you listen
> carefully, you will hear their cry: "Please consider me an important person."
> "Don't embarrass or insult me." "Please listen to me when I speak."
>   -Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz, *Da'at Hokhmah u'Mussar*, vol. 3, p. 68

Jewish teaching begins with listening. It begins with respect and caring. It begins with a commitment to building community. Technology and our students' technological nature have a possibility of being useful in this endeavor, but electronics will not do the job for us. Tools never will. No overhead transparency ever made the impact of a teacher listening to students with great respect and appreciation. The truth is that Jewish life takes a community, and community starts with individual friendships. And luckily enough, Judaism believes in teaching through friendships.

> A friend is someone you eat and drink with.
> A friend is someone with whom you study *Torah* (God's word)
> and with whom you study *Mishnah* (ethics and laws).
> A friend is someone who sleeps over
> or at whose house you can spend the night.
> Friends teach each other secrets,
> the secrets of the *Torah*
> and secrets of the real world, too.
>
>   *-Avot d'Rabbi Natan*

The secret to successful Jewish teaching hasn't changed much, and technology makes little impact on the fact that preschoolers sometimes cry when their parents leave them for the first time; that fourteen-year-olds are angry at not being old enough; that third graders like to get the right answers. We teach students with human needs, and, as we meet those needs, we build connection and begin community. The truth is that rather than believing we can use technology to open the heart of the Jewish tradition, we can use the Jewish tradition to open our students' hearts and heal their brokenness in a way that technology never can.