Jewish Education in the World of Web 2.0

by Brian Amkraut

Snapshots of Contemporary Culture:

1. For the Super Bowl in February 2007, Pepsi Cola took the unprecedented step of outsourcing, or more accurately "crowdsourcing," the creation of an advertisement for Doritos tortilla chips to be aired during the game. Consider for a moment the company's willingness to put a 30-second spot, for which they paid $2.5 million, in the hands of amateurs, or more shockingly, in the hands of you and me. Not only was the creative content generated by a non-professional end user, but the decision regarding which ad to run was put in the hands of the on-line user population who could vote for their favorite spot. The creator of the winning ad received 30 seconds of glory (and perhaps a future career in advertising) and Pepsi Cola saved millions of dollars in the cost of creative content generation, while pre-screening its Super Bowl investment to ensure viewer popularity.

2. The starting point for research today, for students young and old, invariably begins in one of two places: Google or Wikipedia. And most likely the results from the Google query will send the student to Wikipedia. Whereas Google depends on a mathematical algorithm to provide a list of the websites most responsive to the user query, Wikipedia provides a forum for bringing the concept of "user-generated content" to the realm of the encyclopedia. Whether or not you think the collective wisdom that informs Wikipedia is a legitimate reference, that model reflects both a new reality and an important trend in terms of authority.

3. To kick off her run for president in 2008, Hillary Clinton adopted the slogan, "Let's begin the conversation." While Hillary clearly has no intention of personally engaging the many millions who may join that dialogue, her campaign hopes to respond to the trend of interactive discourse, perhaps most clearly manifest in cyberspace, where millions literally do join the discussion. Whether or not one supports Hillary ideologically, this campaign strategy attempts to tap into the social culture of interactivity.

4. The March issue of *614*, an electronic magazine (E-zine) published by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, asked a number of female Jewish authors to comment on recently published works that changed their thinking about being a Jewish women. Yet instead of taking the advice of these "experts," 21st century readers frequently receive guidance from reviews and suggestions posted on or generated by Amazon.com.

Challenge of Web 2.0

To say that technology is rapidly transforming the very fabric of American society is no doubt an understatement. In a world in which broadband access and open source software facilitates file sharing, streaming media, and the development of user-generated content, Web 2.0 represents merely the latest stage in this consistently fluctuating environment. The challenge for Jewish education, and all education for that matter, rests not merely with the ever-changing technological developments - both the explosion of information available and the ability to access that information - but more significantly on the individual's changing attitude towards authority and empowerment. The collaborative, interactive, and user-generated world of the new Internet enabled by Web 2.0 reflects a social and an intellectual culture in which the individual end user

has the ability, and is even encouraged, to shape and create the frame of reference for Jewish life in the 21st century.

Jews today, both young and old, but more often young, define Judaism on their own individually generated terms, regardless of whether their perceptions coincide with the "establishment" of organized Jewish life. This phenomenon challenges the long-standing approach to Jewish life in which conceptions of community were defined by geographical parameters, and religious and cultural standards were determined by authoritative figures, most often rabbinic, but occasionally otherwise. While "legitimate" Jewish authorities clearly dismiss such unauthorized attempts to re-define Jewishness, isn't it possible that this user-generated Judaism represents the latest step in a chain that includes such revolutionary but ultimately significant challenges such as the *chavurah* movement, Kaplan's call for reconstruction, Zionism, early Reform and even Hasidism? In every stage of modernity, Jews have developed interpretations and understandings of their tradition as a response to the challenge of new circumstances, and these reactions quite often build on contemporary trends in social and intellectual culture.

Responses
What responsibilities do Jewish educators have in the environment where anyone can blog on Judaism's significance, Google provides the most popular answer to Jewish questions, and a wiki-Judaism could soon represent a new type of religious denomination? Must our teachers and educational institutions serve, as Jonathan Woocher (Chief Ideas Officer and Director of the Lippman Kanfer Institute at JESNA) suggests, as a conservative force amid a sea of unrestrained individualized challenges to communal authority? While Woocher (see summer 2007 issue of *Jewish Education News*) quite accurately assesses the concerns that emerge in the "age of Google," the development and proliferation of Web 2.0's infrastructure and software may already make some of those observations academic. Shouldn't we also ask whether trying to restrict or repress the individualized expressions that are helping define the age of Web 2.0 – in venues such as MySpace and YouTube – is either possible or even desirable? In the minds of the champions of the information revolution, access, not merely to information, but also to the tools of production and authority, represents nothing less than the most current manifestation of freedom. When parents genetically screen embryos, are they playing God or exercising their God-given right to shape their own future? The cover story of *New York* magazine in February 2007 calls the perception of freedom embraced by 21st century youth "the greatest generation gap since rock and roll."

When the landscape of Jewish life is shaped by mainstream American Jewish educators calling for conservatism, and social scientists like Steven M. Cohen and Ira M. Sheskin continue to measure Jewish identity almost exclusively by the yardsticks of intermarriage and affiliation, then Jewish leaders don't address the many and varied ways that 21st century Jews are using today's cultural tools to express themselves and redefine what Judaism means for them. Cohen and others see the rejection of denominational models largely as an issue confronting Conservative Judaism, where the engaged and more educated segment of that movement feels increasingly uncomfortable in their synagogues. In a recent response, Arnold Eisen, the new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, began an articulation of a clear Conservative outlook for the movement.

Cohen has also hypothesized that American Jewry can already be classified as bifurcated between the "inmarrieds" and the "intermarrieds." Yet Cohen and others seemingly ignore the fact that 21st century adherents increasingly relate to their faith or other aspects of identity in individualized and often innovative terms. Using the many resources available, including the Internet, cable television, and even books, to chart an expression of Jewishness, they respond to their personal needs and world outlook regardless of what "organized Judaism" presents as normative. Anecdotally, a significant proportion of the "user community" posting on the many Jewish websites call for Jewish unity rather than denominational and political factionalism. Not surprisingly, unconventional forums allow increasing opportunities for communication and connection among Jews sharing attitudes and interests they feel are underrepresented in the

mainstream Jewish establishment. While, statistically speaking, only a slim minority of young Jews currently participates in the social networks, blogs, and other venues for "user-generated Judaism," the impact belies their numbers. As one colleague suggests, the historical legacy of the 1960s counterculture was not shaped by a majority, but rather by the active and engaged minority. We should not quickly dismiss the new attitudes towards Jewish community, Jewish identity, and Jewish religion simply because most Jews do not yet share or even respect these innovative approaches. What is radical and revolutionary today may prove to be normative in the not-too-distant future.

E-*Kehillot*?
Jewish communal life faces numerous challenges in early 21st century America. As a way of life in so many ways dependent on the physical presence of others to form communal institutions, how does the phenomenon of on-line social networking and virtual community impact on Jewish notions of congregation or *kehillah?*

The changing nature of the individual's relationship to the collective, combined with ongoing technological and economic developments, demand a redefinition of the concept "community." In Jewish tradition, the word "community," *Kehillah* in Hebrew, has deep significance and is frequently included in the title of institutions of organized Jewish involvement such as JCCs, federations, and synagogues. But community today has gained new meanings with the parallel developments of globalization and virtual reality. Although contemporary trends might indicate a challenge to the conventional concept of community, the conclusions need not be pessimistic. In fact, the proliferation of new communication technologies and young Jews' facility with technology may contribute to communal strengthening, if Jewish leadership is willing to embrace new definitions. Even as people become more removed from one another physically, as survey data seems to show, the web of communication will bring people closer together, albeit in virtual space. For many Americans today, an on-line social network does in fact represent a collection of very real relationships.

Whether an electronic *kehillah* can ever replicate the organized community of the past is, to some extent, irrelevant. The question is whether virtual communities can become real enough to serve the needs of Jews in the 21st century and beyond. Think back to the experimental models of the 20th century, especially the *kibbutzim* of all stripes, as examples of innovation designed to establish new communities. With the plethora of on-line varieties of Jewishness in the marketplace already, 21st century Jews are in the process of constructing their own innovative "real world" communities as well.

User-Generated Jewishness – On-line and "Real World"
This phenomenon of user-generated Jewishness has been called, among other things, Jew-it-yourself, Jew 2.0, and JewTube. The directions that end-users take when they harness new media to serve their own Jewish needs run the entire spectrum of Jewish identification and engagement. Trying to obtain a comprehensive picture of what cyberJudaism and other innovative expressions of Jewishness looks like is a monumental task – with the numbers of sites and postings expanding geometrically. Perhaps the clearest proof of the growing importance of the on-line community today is the number of Federation websites that hope to occupy this space. (In April 2007, six of the top ten sites on a Google search for "online Jewish community" were the federations for Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, Toronto, Denver, and Richmond.) In general, though, these websites represent access to information and not innovative content, and probably do not appeal to a new generation that does not readily recognize either Jewish Federations or synagogues as the central address for Jewish communal life.

What Is Out There
In both virtual and concrete space, 21st century Jewish communities are taking on new directions and filling unconventional needs. A quick glance at a few will highlight the changing nature of this universe. But first, established Jewish social networks such as *jdate.com* are old news. Other examples like the new *chavurot*, while often innovative, still use well-established formats. (Please note that the following websites and activities, while active when this article was first written, may no longer be operative or the focus and content may have shifted over time.)

Now five years old, the magazine *Zeek*, available on-line at no charge, proclaims both "its independence and its expansive definition of Jewish cultural and spiritual life." What counts for "Jewish" in this environment is loosely and broadly defined. "We welcome the heretical, honor the sincere, and are generally bored by in-jokes, apologetics, and irony. We value independence, courage and thoughtfulness, and publish stories which say something new about that which is meaningful. Above all, we believe that an intelligent, articulate Jewish sensibility is one that speaks from its place of particularity in a far wider conversation -- and true conversation requires both a fearlessness to create and an openness to change" (www.zeek.net/masthead - accessed May 30, 2007). An example of the type of people taking leadership roles with these groups includes British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, of *Borat* fame, who is on the advisory board.

There are sites devoted to free expression that emerge from the world of ultra-Orthodoxy, such as thelockers.*net*, a virtual community for yeshiva teens, whose self-description includes the following: "The Lockers has no agenda. It is not here to convince anyone to be observant, or to love Israel, or to *daven* every day. We will never tell you whether or not you should touch someone of the opposite sex, or whether or not it's cool to party. Not because we don't believe in observant Judaism (we do), but rather because we realize that you can't ever love anything by force." The issues raised in this environment -- questions about faith, relationships, school, and self-esteem -- are no different than in previous eras, but the forum is now public and the users who post questions are turning not to a set rabbinic authority (of any denomination), but rather to the virtual community. For example, an April 2007 posting by a high-school junior/senior in an all-girls Orthodox school posed the dilemma:

> "Okay, so here's my problem. I want to cover my hair when I'm married and I want to be *shomer negiah* (abstaining from physical contact with, or touching of, a member of the opposite sex except for one's spouse, children, grandchildren, parents, and grandparents) now. But at the same time I don't want to be. I want to be able to make out with my bf, and i want to be able to go to the mall when I'm married without always weaing a hat (im not into the *sheitel* thing). I don't know what to do, on the one hand I am obligated to keep the *mitzvot* but on the other hand I feel that there are somethings that I am just not capable of doing. so yeah, there's my dilemna. Any thoughts?" (syntax errors in original)

The "cyber-*she'elah* (question)" does not demand a rabbinic response, but allows the full community of users to contribute to the discussion.

A UK website, *Jewtastic.com,* calls itself "the home of Jewish pop culture covering music, TV, film, food, fashion, and more." And the Jewishness of those who get to determine that culture is defined broadly. To help users navigate the site, they provide guidance, "Seen an acronym on Jewtastic when we reference someone? Don't have a clue what it means? Well, if it's an OJO, then it's someone Of Jewish Origin." How authentic is the Jewish culture that emerges from those pages? Perhaps my personal sensitivities reject the very notion, but these resources are clearly accessible and not only informing, but also accurately reflecting the opinions of a significant segment of the Jewish world.

On the blog *Yoyenta.com*, part of the Jmerica.com network, Yoyenta defines herself as a "clueless, winging-it-as-I-go Jew." In researching the difficulty in obtaining kosher-for-Passover Coca-Cola, she provides the perfectly accurate explanation as to why certain foods, known as *kitniyot*, including sodas made with corn syrup, are not technically forbidden according to biblical

and rabbinic law. Linking Ashkenazic Jewry's ban on legumes during Passover to the authority of Moses Isserles in 16th century Poland, Yoyenta challenges its relevance for today's Jews. Questioning the need for continuing to avoid *kitniyot* is not revolutionary, but the fact that Yoyenta, an anonymous blogger, enjoys a forum that might impact Jewish practice reflects the new virtual community enabled by Web 2.0. Should young Jews be taught in school to avoid Yoyenta because she has no standing in the Jewish world? Should the next Jewish blogger be discouraged to comment on Jewish law and practice if they have no rabbinic ordination? Most likely, a generation being reared in this environment will not accept any curtailment on their freedom to both navigate the Internet and create the content therein.

Moishe House, funded by the Forest Foundation (whose mission is fostering young leaders committed to social action, based on the concept of *tikkun olam*), is a network of homes throughout the North America and beyond that serves "as a hub for young adult Jewish community." The homes allow "eager, innovative young adults to live in and create their vision of an ideal Jewish communal space." While the concept resonates with echoes of early *kibbutzim*, the Moishe House communities have no preconceived vision of Jewish communal life, while allowing the residents to develop their own unique outlook. As of February 2007, there were seven such homes in the United States and three elsewhere, serving not only as residences, but also as innovative communal centers. (Information available at www.theforestfoundation.net)

The website *Jewlicious.com* hosts a broad range of blogs and videos with Jewish content – the subtitle on the site reads "100% kosher" next to a girl sporting an "I (heart) *Hashem*" T-shirt. The site hosts postings that include a heavy metal rendition of *Hatikvah*, Chassidic and kabalistic commentary from "Rabbi Yonah," and an Israeli clip from YouTube that appears to be a party sponsored by *Playboy* in Israel. Jewlicious.com allows users to vote for their favorite Jewish postings in the following categories: Best Group Blog, Best Jewish Culture Blog, Best Pro-Israel Advocacy Blog, Best Slice of Life in Israel Blog, Best Designed Blog, and Best Contribution/Blog that Made a Difference.

The blog site *Jewschool.com*, describes itself as "an open revolt . . . Offering the latest and greatest from the bleeding edge of Jewish cultural and communal life."   Among its many blogs, the site includes a posting from "Y-Love" titled "Generation *Moschiach*," that states the following: "At the nexus of brand marketing and contemporary *Torah* Judaism you will find this blog [thisbabylon.net], where I ask the question, 'Who is *Moshiach's* target market?' Jewish tradition is replete with phrases regarding the generation to which *Moshiach* will come. The generation to experience the Messianic transition is to be '(brazen-) faced as a dog,' is to 'thirst for the words of G-d,' and so on." Today, our classification systems are less likely to offer an animal analogy as they are to rely on psychographic, consumer research, or demographic data. I proffer that Web 2.0, social networking, and social marketing — buzzwords that are becoming the lifeblood of the new marketing arena — provide a uniquely pro-Messianic environment. So who is *Moshiach* destined for? The collaborators, the individualists, or the workaholics? The "early adopters" or the "echo boomers"? In the ongoing quest to define 21st century youth, Y-Love sees them as the Messianic generation.

Conclusions?
Can any of us reach significant conclusions regarding the nature of Jewish life and Jewish education in the future based on the ever-expanding possibilities for Jewish expression? Perhaps the most important response by educators to the engagement of Jewish youth with the interactive world of Web 2.0 is not to apply a corrective or "authentic" view of Judaism, but rather to become conversant with user-generated Judaism and become personally familiar with the media, digital or otherwise, that enables such extensive individual engagement. Should we give any weight to a possible "Long Tail" of Judaism that allows all of us to provide our "recommendations" for Jewish life, in the style of Amazon.com and Netflix? On the other hand, he question of whether or not the "Jewishness" that flows from these sources corresponds to late 20th century normative patterns pales in comparison to the very fact that 21st century Jews, many of them unaffiliated and removed from serious discussions of Jewish life, some raised in interfaith

or faith-less homes, now actively engage with some aspect of their Jewish identity. Even if their opinions, behaviors, and religious beliefs fail to conform to standards deemed acceptable by communal leadership, they are creating their own dialogue while attempting to participate in the larger communal discussion. In large measure, the culture of Web 2.0 is merely the latest means, and perhaps the most powerful, of continuing the 3000 year old conversation that is Judaism.

Implications for Educators
Considering the broad ideological and religious spectrum that Jewish educators represent, detailed policy recommendations to respond to the technologically enabled social culture seem inappropriate. Of course, some institutions do attempt to control the flow of information available to their students, but this approach hardly appears realistic. The following brief list suggests action steps Jewish educators may take on their own and collaboratively to respond to the constant changes in the 21st century learning environment.

- Become familiar with the increasingly popular genres of technological and communal activity that currently engage children of all ages, including social networking, on-line gaming, and user-generated content. (You might have fun while learning a bit about your students)
- Assess how students use technology as an information source. They will continue to Google and rely on Wikipedia, so the informed educator should understand, in general terms, both the mathematical and advertising basis for Google and other frequently used search engines and the communal "wisdom" that creates wikis of all sorts.
- Continually update your literacy in this space. The constant flow of information and rapidity of technological innovation means that, year to year, if not more frequently, significant change will likely appear.
- Don't go it alone! Take advantage of the many resources that provide virtual community for Jewish educators to share their concerns, experiences, and suggestions for navigating this brave new world. And, if you are uncomfortable with what you find, create your own and expand the conversation even further.

Annotated Bibliography:
(These volumes, some dating back to the year 2000, address the cultural changes facilitated by the digital revolution. While not always shedding direct light on the Jewish experience, they are useful references for the broader transformations afoot that are shaping the contemporary Jewish experience.)

Greenberg, Anna. *Grand Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam: Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices. Los Angeles, CA:* www.rebooters.net. 2006. The statistically organized study seeks to understand the changing identities of Gen-Y and Millennial Jews, recognizing that they inhabit an environment of increasing customization. Builds on the previous rebooters.net study titled *OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era*, 2005.

Howe, Neil and William Strauss. *Millenials Rising: The Next Great Generation.* New York: Vintage Press, 2000. This book analyzes so-called Generation Y and its successors, dubbed *Millenials* as coming of age in the 21st century. According to the authors, this cohort marks a sharp break from Gen-X trends, because, as a generation, they have received more concern and attention than any others in quite some time.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet.* London: Routledge, 2002. While accepting the possibility of virtual anonymity offered by the Internet, Nakamura argues that racial identities, politics, and stereotypes follow users into cyberspace, in many respects conditioning on-line activity to the human and communal relationships of the "real" world.

Surowiecki, James. *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economics, Societies, and Nations.* New York: Doubleday, 2004. As the name implies, Surowiecki examines ways that the collective

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intelligence of the masses significantly impacts important sectors of contemporary civilization. He even argues that, given an effective mechanism for harnessing the "wisdom of crowds," the general population more often than not will outperform the "so-called experts."

Turkle, Sherry. "E-Futures and E-Personae," in *Designing for a Digital World*, edited by Neil Leach. UK, Wiley-Academy, 2002, pp. 31-36. Turkle addresses the anonymity enabled by the Internet and demonstrates how users can adopt distinct on-line personae, seemingly contradictory in many ways to their "real life" characters, but nevertheless reflecting genuine elements of their individual identities.

Some additional interesting websites of on-line user-generated Jewish content:
http://www.jewcy.com
http://www.abigjewishblog.blogspot.com
http://jlearn20.blogspot.com
http://www.e-kehillah.org
http://www.opensourcejudaism.com/

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