

# Judaism and the Singularity

*Using Futurism to Predict Possible Trajectories of Jewish Identity and Community*

*Paul Golin*

What if, at the push of a button, you could have a more profound sense of the Divine presence than you have ever had before? Or study text *b'chavruta* (partnered) with Maimonides himself? Or literally stand at Sinai when Israel received the Torah, the ground shaking beneath your feet as the mountain becomes engulfed in clouds and flames as heaven touches earth? What would it mean for the Jewish community to be able to provide Jews with overwhelmingly powerful spiritual experiences, instantly?

And what if that button for profound Jewish experiences was also available to every person on the planet?

Now imagine everyone, including Jews, having access to the same kind of buttons for every other world religion as well. Actually feel the radiant warmth of Jesus' palm on your forehead, healing you. Meditate to a new spiritual plane under the Bodhi tree with Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha. And imagine having access not just to religious but to ethnic experiences as well. Fully embrace a Han Chinese sense of collective destiny. Then, engage in an intense connection with the natural world as an indigenous Amazonian tribesperson.

If you had all those buttons, would you choose just one religion or ethnicity and stick to it loyally, or would you pick and choose from various experiences? Would you do them all? Or make up something completely new? If access to any human "identity" was equal, based only on interest or need, would there be more Jews in the world than there are now or less? What would being "Jewish" even mean?

This scenario may seem like an exercise in science fiction writing, irrelevant to today's concerns. Actually, the future may be closer than you think, and the trends that will affect our future are already coming into focus and having an impact on the organized Jewish community. A fully immersive virtual world will accelerate the trend, but already in our real world people are choosing their religion. According to the 2009 "Faith in Flux" study from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "about half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives." How is the Jewish community competing, if at all, in today's reality of religion-shopping within the marketplace of ideas? And within the marketplace of spiritual experiences?

Future trends will have a dramatic impact on Jewish religious and ethnic identity in ways that are not being discussed often enough in the organized Jewish community. In part, this lack of discussion occurs because we are not engaging futurists in our planning (or planning much beyond next year). And in part it occurs because we do not have answers for those who are moving away from both Jewish religious and ethnic identity yet still call themselves "Jewish."

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*Paul Golin* is associate executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute ([www.JOI.org](http://www.JOI.org)), a national, independent, transdenominational organization reaching out to traditionally underserved Jewish populations with an emphasis on intermarried households. He previously served as JOI's Director of Communications and Strategic Planning. Together with Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, he co-authored two books including *How to Raise Jewish Children Even When You're Not Jewish Yourself* (2010). Follow him @paulgolin on Twitter.

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## EXPLORING THE JEWISH FUTURE

For a people rightly obsessed with our past, we have also become very good lately at incorporating the word “future” into our communal conversation. Various organizations and foundations have hosted conferences and gatherings around the theme of the Jewish future. Most of the conversation, however, is actually about what is missing or needed from *today’s* Jewish community, not about what we might expect 20 years from now.

That is not a criticism; it is certainly important and even essential to address the current trends affecting our organizations and individuals. When a conference exposes Jewish communal professionals to innovators with new and effective methods or programs, whether from within or outside our sector, it informs the “future” of our own work, even if that future is the improvements we make in a week or month from now.

For example, most sessions at the Jewish Outreach Institute’s Judaism2030 Conference, held in New York City in May 2011, fell into that category of making available the stars in our community who are successfully addressing current challenges, for those whose organizations’ futures rely on their ability to adapt to the present. However, it did also address the “further future” in several sessions.

By opening with a keynote from a futurist, the Judaism2030 Conference provided a vision of where society—human society, not just Jewish society—might be in 10 or 20 years. Of course future predictions are often inaccurate, even by those who make their living as “futurists,” but the purpose was to encourage conference participants to measure their organizations’ current activities and goals against what we might reasonably expect to see in the coming decades. The presenter who relied most on futurist predictions was Jewish activist Daniel Sieradski, whose fascinating and humorous presentation is available online (google “Jeuromancer” and click on the speaker’s notes under each slide).

Although Sieradski describes a dystopian future that I hope we can avoid, I do share his belief that technology is going to radically change humanity as we know it. We both derive our understanding of the future from the important conversations that are already happening among scientists, entrepreneurs, and other futurists that Jewish communal professionals can and should be accessing to illuminate where current trends may lead.

### The Singularity is Near

America’s preeminent futurist is Ray Kurzweil; his seminal work, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, popularized the idea of using technology to accelerate human evolution (his predictions were the cover story of *Time Magazine* in February 2011). In his book, Kurzweil defines the singularity as “a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed. Although neither utopian nor dystopian, this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself” (Kurzweil, 2005).

Kurzweil predicts that the technological singularity—the point beyond which computer intelligence (or really, merged human-computer intelligence) surpasses human intelligence and improves itself so quickly that we simply cannot predict with any accuracy what comes next—will happen in the year 2045.

The vision of medical and technological advances described in Kurzweil's book as a way to transcend death by merging with machines—"mind uploading" our consciousness to computers so as to indefinitely extend our lives—has been derided as "the rapture of the nerds." But Kurzweil is evangelizing and building on ideas that many of the most important people in the scientific and technology community share. They do not all agree with his timeline or the exact outcomes, but there is general consensus about where the exponential advances in genetics, robotics, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence will lead—to what author Joel Garreau calls "radical evolution" and others call "transhumanism" (Garreau, 2005).

We have all experienced how rapidly technology has changed in our own lifetimes. Five years ago, almost nobody had "smart phones." Today, if you went to work and forgot your iPhone at home, how helpless would you feel? We are already "offloading" a segment of our brainpower to the computers in our pockets (when was the last time you memorized a phone number?). This year the first mass-market wearable computer—Google glasses, in which information will appear in your field of vision as a heads-up display—will become available. If in 10 or 20 years personal-computing technology continues to shrink so much that it can be swallowed in pill form so that you will have your computer with you at all times and operate it with your thoughts, would you swallow that pill? I bet yes (especially if it has an Apple logo on it). Because each preceding generation of computer prepares us for the next, the advances feel almost seamless.

How long will it be until technology makes possible the virtual reality that can create experiences like those I describe in the beginning of this article? Whether it takes another 10, 20, or even 30 years, the Star Trek "holodeck" is coming (Silbey, 2013), and many of us will live to see it.

But of course the bottom-line question remains: Is it good for the Jews?

### Utopia or Dystopia?

There are really only three ways the future can turn out: amazing, disastrous, or something in between. Despite his claim of a future that is "neither utopian nor dystopian," the singularity described by Ray Kurzweil leans heavy utopian—it is still "us" inside the computers, and we have transcended all that ails us. Futurists such as Peter Diamandis, founder of the X Prize Foundation and author with Steven Kotler (2012) of *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think*, also predict good times. However, others envision a future in which we either never get a chance to make that great technological leap because of our own self-destructive tendencies, or once we make the leap the machines are so much smarter than us they have no need to keep us around any longer.

In the dystopian Jewish future imagined in Dan Sieradski's "Jeuromancer" there is a split between ultra-Orthodox and more liberal Jews over the halachic (Jewish legal) acceptance of transcending our biology through technology. Their rejection of these advances actually leaves the ultra-Orthodox less susceptible to the eventual machine enslavement of humanity:

*The choice those Jewish people who resist getting chipped [having technology implanted into their bodies] face is between being Amish, and simply allowing the future to pass us by as we sit on the sidelines, or being like the Luddites and rising up and taking action against the future. The battle over assimilation will no longer be merely about intermarriage and a loss of traditional values, but about the loss of our humanness overall, let*

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*alone the last vestiges of Jewishness.... the ba'al teshuvahs will be those who remove their chips and rise up against the system that seeks to enslave them, living as outcasts, as Ivri, on the edges of the mainstream society (Sieradski, 2011).*

I do not see the future so negatively. Indeed, if the future is dystopian, I think the Jews are better prepared for it than most. We have already come to the brink of extinction, we are continually grappling with existential threats, and many of the communal structures we have built are all about “survival.” If things go south, we are already highly organized. And in the absolute worst-case scenario, Israel has the bomb. Future attempts at Jewish extermination come with a much higher price this time around.

No, I am not worried about our performance in an end-of-days collapse of civilization. Instead I am much more interested in what happens to the Jews in a more utopian future (which also happens to be the future I prefer). I imagine there will be good and bad aspects of life for as long as there is life, but in the spirit of *tikkun olam*, I hope we can move the needle incrementally closer to good than bad with each passing year. In his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes*, Steven Pinker suggests that is exactly what is happening: Human beings are becoming increasingly less murderous brutes (Pinker, 2011).

We have made some progress toward improving human nature, but unlike technological change that increases exponentially, our growth as people—emotionally, ethically, spiritually, and creatively—has been linear at best. For example, today there is a greater quantity of excellent literature produced than at any time in the past, but how much of it surpasses the greatest works, such as those by Homer written almost 3,000 years ago or by Shakespeare 400 years ago? Jews are rightfully proud of our historical contributions toward the betterment of human nature, yet all the themes of emotional failing contained in our ancient literature still resonate today. We have not eradicated jealousy, anger, adultery, or greed, even as we stand on the cusp of revolutionary alterations to human physiology.

Since technology is moving at a much quicker pace than human emotional development, there certainly seems to be a place for the great compendium of ancient wisdom and ethics contained in the Jewish tradition. In a paper titled “The Immorality of Immortality,” Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan, one of the few thinkers engaging the singularity from a Jewish perspective, writes the following:

*We should not categorically reject these [technological] advances because many of them do and will alleviate human suffering and misery. However, we should not let scientists alone determine our technological future. Rather, we must involve theologians, philosophers, ethicists, historians, sociologists and political scientists in the conversation about technology and not be afraid of robust debate (Tirosh-Samuelsan, 2008).*

## **TRENDS AND COUNTERTRENDS**

For Judaism to remain relevant in a future made better by rapid technological advances, we must more effectively address existing challenges to Jewish life that will only become more pronounced as we move forward. “Challenges,” however, mean different things to different Jewish communal professionals, depending on their perspective. There are seemingly contradictory concurrent trends and counter-trends. For example, Jews are becoming more religious *and* more secular. However,

if seen as a “big tent,” Judaism has enough room for movement in all directions, even room for those who do not recognize the others in the tent as Jewish. Therefore, working toward seemingly opposite goals is not necessarily counterproductive; it can make us stronger through diversity, a kind of bet-hedging.

The trends I spend most of my days working on are about disengagement from organized Jewish life by a growing number of Jews. This is an issue on which much of the community is also focused. And although the programmatic responses vary widely, the general approach or “solution” is the same almost across the board—from Orthodox through Reform, JCCs through innovative start-ups: *Get more Jews doing Jewish with other Jews*. Reinforce Jewish “identity” by increasing either religious and/or ethnocultural connections, experiences, and learning.

I do not object to that approach and in fact promote it, because it works for some people. However, I have also come to recognize why it will not work for others, particularly those who frequently identify as “Just Jewish,” one of the largest and fastest growing demographic groups of our community. When framed against the expected trends of a more utopian future, it becomes even clearer why the community-wide approach to engagement does not work for them and why we need to create additional movements within the big tent.

### Transcending Biology

Singularitarians seek to enhance current human physiology to allow for dramatically increased longevity and intellect (and endurance; Kurzweil imagines oxygen-carrying nanobots in your bloodstream that allow you to sit at the bottom of a swimming pool for four hours without drowning). We have already seen the first early human-machine mergers, such as artificial hearts and brain implants for seizures. Replacement parts do not all have to be machines; scientists are currently growing organs in labs and human ears on the back of mice.

Judaism is a religion that promotes life above all else, so there is compatibility with such advances but there is also an inherent challenge: the Jewish people are overwhelmingly “biological”—that is, Jewish by birth. The organized Jewish community celebrates Jewish tribalism. We are “M.O.T.,” members of the tribe. Jewish Federations of North America’s national conference for young leadership is called “Tribefest.”

I am not suggesting that people who feel a special comfort in being a “member of the tribe” are wrong for doing so or should stop feeling that way. However, I do want to raise awareness that there are Jews who are deeply uncomfortable with the notion of Jewish tribalism. For many, “tribalism” is something that happens in the most dysfunctional parts of the world, and it is something to be overcome.

More importantly, “tribalism” sets boundaries inside which many Jews do not feel included. Today there are more intermarried than in-married households in the United States; more individuals under the age of 20 were born to just one Jewish parent than to two Jewish parents. Many children of intermarriage feel they cannot abide by the exclusivity of tribalism without cutting off half their family, which few are willing to do.

The sentiment behind tribalism is also expressed through words like “ethnicity” or, more recently, “peoplehood.” In “The Case for Jewish Peoplehood: Can We Be One,” Drs. Erica Brown and Misha Galperin offer a very thoughtful

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meditation on the topic, but ultimately do not provide a clear enough differentiation between peoplehood and tribalism, particularly when they repeat the long-standing fallacy that intermarriage is synonymous with out-marriage and disappearance. They write, “Many intermarried individuals who care about Judaism understand that their personal choices—while clear to them—do not make sense on a communal level and are destructive to the peoplehood equation” (Brown & Galperin, 2009).

I am an intermarried individual who cares deeply about Judaism, and although I did not intermarry to make a statement to the organized Jewish community, I believe that intermarriage is healthy for Jewish “peoplehood,” because the tribal definitions currently used are growing increasingly incompatible with the future I hope to experience. It certainly would send a powerful message to “Just Jews” like myself if a leader of a major national Jewish movement would loudly proclaim that because we are entering an age when being Jewish, particularly Jewish-by-birth, is increasingly irrelevant to being a good “citizen” of the Jewish community, intermarriage is no longer a useful measure of anything.

“Multiethnic” does not mean Jewish ethnicity dies or has to become less intense. People, particularly young people, have a remarkable ability to compartmentalize and express many simultaneous identities, and I believe future technologies will enhance, not diminish identity experiences. Jewish ethnicity was going to change anyway. Our expressions of Jewish identity are not the same as our grandparents’, so why should we hope our grandchildren’s will be exactly the same as ours?

### Ubiquitous Judaism

In letting go of Jewish tribalism, the logical place to turn might be to Judaism as a religion. And indeed, important segments of our communal tent seem to have done that. Although all of the denominations have shifted over the past two decades toward greater religiosity, it is particularly interesting to note that shift among the Reform movement, which during that same time welcomed huge numbers of interfaith families. Could it be that the challenge to Jewish ethnicity inherent in welcoming non-Jews into our “peoplehood” forced the movement to ask itself what being Jewish really means, and that the answers they found were about ritual and belief?

As thankful as I am that intermarried households seeking Jewish religion are finding an increasingly warmer welcome in many synagogue communities (Zevloff, 2011), Judaism as a religion is not the answer for my segment of “Just Jews,” primarily because many of us do not believe. Of course, many Jews struggle with belief. For decades, Jews have scored the lowest among all religions or ethnicities on studies that asked about belief in God; for example, the “Jewish Distinctiveness In America” survey found only 27% of Jews agreed they “know God exists,” compared with 59% of Liberal Protestants, the next lowest scoring group (Smith, 2005). Although many non-believing Jews still find meaning in synagogue participation, many more do not, yet movement leadership makes clear that God worship is a central purpose of affiliation.

So now that I have knocked down the two central pillars of Jewish American identity—ethnic and religious—what is left? Zionism? Ethical culture? Social justice? Secular engagement with sacred texts?

For me, what is left is all of it, none of it, and pieces of the ethnic and religious too. The description of Judaism that resonated most for me was from Rabbi

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Irwin Kula, president of CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Leadership and Learning, who spoke passionately at the 2009 Jewish Outreach Institute national conference about “Judaism as a Technology” (for a video clip, search YouTube for “kula technology”). He referenced Maimonides to claim that the only important measure about any mitzvah—for example putting up a mezuzah—is not counting how many people do it, but determining what it does for the individual—and whether it helps mitigate violence and/or develop virtue. Kula also challenged the notion of peoplehood by stating that Jewish wisdom is for everyone who wants it. To me, that is the starting point.

In Ray Kurzweil’s vision of a postsingularity future, the universe will “wake up” with intelligence everywhere, because having data written in subatomic particles means that even an inanimate object like a rock can be filled with information. I envision a “Ubiquitous Judaism,” available everywhere for anyone who wants it. If there is a special role for Jews at all, it should be in explaining to anyone who might benefit how each piece of Jewish technology works to improve people’s lives or the world. Judaism can be a part of everyone’s identity (in the future, it will be anyway).

Just as we cannot see beyond the technological singularity with any certainty, I do not know where such an experiment might lead. However, I would like to bring likeminded, future-oriented “Just Jews” together to create something new that would also acknowledge the old; make it accessible for everyone; infuse it with depth of meaning; and use David Ben-Gurion’s definition of a Jew as “anyone who’s meshuggeneh enough to say they’re Jewish.” Let’s try to ensure that as the definition of “human” inevitably evolves, we also offer, for those who are interested, a compelling and useful Judaism for all.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a daily moment of awe about where we are potentially headed as a species, I encourage you to subscribe to the free e-newsletter at [www.KurzweilAI.net](http://www.KurzweilAI.net), which provides links to new articles in mainstream media about the latest advances.

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