THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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If you could have decided in 1990, with all you know now whether or not to invent the internet, what would you have decided?

Taking into account all the harm and all the good that the internet has played for the last 35 years (yes it's only been 35 years); from lowering intellectual and physical borders and barriers to providing a platform for hate, violence and conspiracy to circle the globe. Would you still want it to have been created?

If you determined that on balance a world with the internet is better for humanity than a world without it; what would be the values, principles and ethics that govern the use of the internet before this limitless power to communicate ends up in the pocket of nearly every human being on the planet within one generation?

It's a huge question, as a fan of science fiction, it's the kind of thought experiment that really inspires me; but it's not fiction and it's not an experiment.

Tragically we missed our moment with setting rules for the ethical use of the internet. Maybe we didn't understand it or see it coming when we first logged in to AOL and heard this sound. And yet, and yet we are presented right now with the rarest of things, a second chance.

The internet changed the way we communicate, Artificial Intelligence will reshape the way we think, it will fundamentally, perhaps irrevocably change the very nature of human existence and activity.

If Judaism and Torah cannot speak with wisdom and moral clarity to this moment, then why listen to it anymore?

Our's is an ethical code of living, grappling with the challenges of modernity and morality that, according to our calendar, goes back exactly 5784 years to this very day. More specifically Reform Judaism more than any other stream of Jewish life sets as its principal objective to live as Jews in a modern world.

"The Internet is not the first technology to shrink the globe and to push back the tyranny of distance; telephone, radio, aircraft, and Earth-orbiting satellites each played their part.

Prior to our own time, there were three such paradigm-shifting moments:

First was language:

The invention of writing 20,000 to 30,000 years ago introduced pictograms and hieroglyphics which led to the foundation of civilization."[1]

Later, the creation of alphabets, 4000 years ago, that torah, those letters in your machzor among the first. This gave rise to literacy and the spread of knowledge.

The second paradigm shift was in the middle of the fifteenth century, when the printing press challenged ecclesiastical authority, yet contrastingly expanded rabbinic authority with the publication of the talmud. It boosted education, and spurred the growth of science.

The third began just 200 years ago when the invention of the radio, moving pictures, the telephone, television and ultimately the internet allowed the near instantaneous communication of ideas to circle the globe.

Consider for a moment the rapidity of the change we are experiencing in our own lifetime. Where it took 25,000 years to go from language to an alphabet and another 5,000 years to go from the alphabet to the printing press, it was only 300 years from books to television and a little more than 50 years from TV to Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and PornHub.

"In the space of one generation, a planet without personal computers, where virtually nobody had heard the word "Internet," has been filled with sophisticated computing gadgets, all interconnected. A virtual environment that never existed before has become indispensable to government, businesses, organizations, and individuals… Phones and social media have reshaped human interactions, politics, relationships, families, and sexuality."[2]

We enter now the fourth paradigm.

Each of the previous paradigms, for good or for evil, increased the spread of human thoughts, values and ideas; Artificial Intelligence will reduce them, replace them.

With what it's hard to say exactly, something artificial, a mimic of human thought perhaps. In this fourth paradigm we may know only this, the very nature of what it means to be human will be radically transformed by this new Artificial Ingredient (AI).

AI has no conscience, no feelings. Its decisions don't impact the lives of its children or grandchildren. It has no yearnings, no love, it doesn't know sadness or pain or hopes or dreams. It can never die, so it doesn't know what it means to truly live.

It lacks all the things that make us who we are, make us human. Yet already we are giving it the power to make decisions in our life and the lives of those we love and those we hate; and without our intentional intervention and moral parameters it will do that faster than we will have time to contemplate or consider the implications.

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[1] Schiff, Danny. Judaism in a Digital Age (pp. 94-95). Springer International Publishing. Kindle Edition.
[2] Schiff, Danny. Judaism in a Digital Age (p. 96). Springer International Publishing. Kindle Edition.

“The world around us is changing at breakneck speed. We are hurtling toward the future at a velocity sufficient to ensure that the challenges of tomorrow arrive before we have adequately addressed yesterday’s issues.” (Schiff)

- Last month the Washington Post reported that AI assisted radiology is 20% more accurate than humans. Doctors are increasingly stretched beyond their time and resources. AI could soon allow us to be diagnosed without ever seeing one.
- If driverless cars, trucks and planes can remove driver error, reducing the number of fatalities on the road or in the air should we do away with human drivers or pilots?
- If artificial intelligence knows you better than your therapist, your rabbi, your spouse whose advice should you trust more?
- If AI guided medical technology could prolong life indefinitely so that we never die, should we allow it to do so and what does life mean if it has no end?

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks astutely observed that, “never before have humans been faced with more choices, but never before have the great society-shaping institutions offered less guidance on why we should choose this way rather than that.”

Will our ethical responses emerge from sacred texts, from the power of reason, or will they simply be fashioned around the practical realities of what is possible, profitable, popular and currently not illegal?

Will the most important decisions of life and society be decided by mortal humans or immortal algorithms?

There are compelling arguments for either.

One tempting response is that of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai who quite literally “buried his head [and body] in the sand”.

Rabbi Shimon was so overwhelmed by the corrosive new technology that Rome brought to Jerusalem after the destruction of the second temple he cursed it and the emperor. He said that the new technologies of markets, bridges and bathhouses that the Romans had brought to the city were for their own self-interest of taxation, fornication and self indulgence, distracted Jews from the study of Torah. Sounds a lot like some of our modern day criticism of the evils of the internet.

For his inability to “change with the times” Rabbi Shimon was sentenced to death by the Roman Governor Varus. To escape death, Rabbi Shimon and his son hid in a cave for 12 years. When they emerged from the cave, Rabbi Shimon saw, “Jews farming the land, and engaged in other normal pursuits”. Their embrace of this previously unimaginable way of life further enraged him and the Talmud records that he “killed them with his burning glances”. (Possible joke: This gives “flaming” a whole new context or the original “Jewish Space Lasers”)

At this a Heavenly Voice was heard, which said "Bar Yochai, go back to the cave! You are no longer fit for the company of other human beings." Rabbi Shimon went back to the cave, reoriented his perspective, and emerged again a full year later. This time, he was able to interact with the people of his generation, and become a great teacher of Torah.[3]

There is a debate in the Oppenhiemer movie about whether physicists should proceed to invent the Atom and later the Hydrogen Bomb. Many brilliant minds argue against inventing it, because while splitting the atom could be a source of boundless energy, it will undoubtedly be used as a weapon of mass destruction. The answer from the film, and the one that eludes Rabbi Shimon for 13 years, is that we cannot, “uninvent things”, therefore we have to learn to live with new technologies in ways that further human flourishing, not destroy it.

Ultimately this must be the response and responsibility of Reform Judaism - to set rules and boundaries so that we can live alongside new technologies while maintaining our reverence for humanity, pursuing justice, and nurturing the divine spark that is inside of every human being.

This will require moving away from both the Rabbi Shimon impulse of “burying our heads in the sand" and the Jewish diaspora impulse of “fitting in”. Instead we must embrace the core mission of the Jewish people. To critically appraise societal directions and through the wisdom of our tradition be an or l’goyim a light unto the nations that guides along this precarious path of human existence.

Rabbi Danny Schiff explains, “If Judaism is to have relevance going forward, it will need to emphasize the historic Jewish task of evaluating contemporary civilization critically and offering a Jewish vision for how to live Jewishly alongside it.”

To at once be a part of and a part from this rapidly changing world.

But Jews have always been contrarian.

Former Israeli President Shimon Peres’ (z’l) once observed that, “The greatest contribution of the Jewish people to the world is dissatisfaction. We are never happy with the way the world is but care about how it should be.”[4]

When the world saw human beings as slaves and chattel to be exploited day and night, Judaism responded with the sabbath and the six day work week. A day of rest did not exist till Judaism commanded it and our rabbis insisted on it. Having a fixed day of rest was most likely first practiced in Judaism, dating back to the sixth century BC.[1] In 1908, the first five-day workweek

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[3] Shabbat 33b

[4] https://www.timesofisrael.com/from-shimon-peres-on-israels-birthday-a-very-healthy-dose-of-dissatisfaction/

in the United States was instituted by a New England cotton mill, so that Jewish workers didn't need to work on the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.[2]

When humanity found pleasure and nourishment in food, Judaism responded with the laws of kashrut, setting limits and bounds for what is proper to eat and how to eat it. Not everything that we can do, should we do.

Judaism has also contributed to schools and education as we know them, requiring elementary school learning for nearly 2,000 years.

Talmud stresses the importance of education, stating that children should begin school at age six. Rabbis added that they should not be beaten with a stick or cane, that older students should help younger ones, and that children should not be kept from their lessons by other duties. All contrarian and radical ideas until Judaism said, "Wait, there is a better way for humanity to function."

With the environment, human rights, civil law, exploitation of the most vulnerable, or countless other conflicts between human values and human hubris - Judaism has always responded with a relentless pursuit of justice and truth, even at great costs and peril to our people. The Torah proclaims that we are destined to be an *"am l'vad"* "a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations."[5]

Beginning in the 19th century Reform Judaism added a universalism that endeavored to maintain Jewish particularism while recognizing that we live in an ever changing world amongst an ever growing and diverse peoples and cultures. New technologies would always come, the response of Reform Judaism, the reason why there are 1,000 people in this sanctuary this morning and our congregation has grown from 12 families to 900+ households is that we don't hide in a cave, bury our heads in the sand, close our eyes and pray that it will go away.

Reform Judaism is the Jewish voice our people and the world needs at this critical moment. Unapologetically our brand of Judaism says, 'let's find the right balance between tradition and modernity'. Let's look to our tradition of wisdom, scholarship, reason and debate to find the right way to live morally, ethically, responsibly as a Jew, as a human being in THIS world right now; with all of its challenges, distractions and enticements to the contrary.

CALL TO ACTION

NECHEMTA

[5] Num. 23:8-9

Other Material/ Notes/Hiddush/Call to Action:

- **In short, viewed from a Jewish perspective, the digital age is no longer about adapting Jews and Judaism to a slowly opening world of belonging and enlightenment; it is about asking how human beings should optimally function within the cacophonous tumult of an accelerating epoch of hyper-emancipation, hyper-connectivity, and hyper-individualism. (Schiff)**
- Judaism also created the concept of universalism that so many people cherish today. Rabbi Ken Spiro, author of WorldPerfect – The Jewish Impact on Civilization, asserts that the Jewish People are "history's most universal particularists," saying: "The Jewish People have always pushed a universal worldview, an idea of the whole human race united … [We are] particularists in that the Jewish People are supposed to do this, not at the expense of their identity, but by preserving their Jewish identity as a role model."
- Paul Johnson, a Christian historian and author of A History of the Jews and A History of Christianity, rendered a more detailed postulation: "Certainly, the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place. Humanity might have eventually stumbled upon all the Jewish insights. But we cannot be sure. All the great conceptual discoveries of the human intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they had been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of human person; of the individual conscience and so a personal redemption; of collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without Jews it might have been a much emptier place."
- Do our ethical responses emerge from sacred texts, from the power of reason, or are they simply fashioned around the practical realities of what is possible and seems unobjectionable? (Schiff)
- The conservative movement electric cars, not talking about that kind of Jewish living
- Midrash about should human beings have been created.
- **Privacy**
- **Hyper-individualism** that trusts in the virtue of our inner selves and amplifies our self-importance.
- **imperfection** (feature not a bug), lashon ha-rah "We have come to the point when the adage "to err is human" receives a new meaning." human decision making (Schiff)
- **Humility** is a measure of the balance between the attention paid to oneself and the attention paid to others. Humility is about questioning our individual importance and about seeking to highlight the worthy qualities of others. (Schiff)
- Put simply, if the current trajectory holds, what it means to be human will be radically transformed. The world around us is changing at breakneck speed. We are hurtling toward the future at a velocity sufficient to ensure that the challenges of tomorrow arrive before we have adequately addressed yesterday's issues. (Schiff)

- What are the characteristics of this new digital age? Here is a brief sampling: In the space of one generation, a planet without personal computers, where virtually nobody had heard the word “Internet,” has been filled with sophisticated computing gadgets, all interconnected. A virtual environment that never existed before has become indispensable to government, businesses, organizations, and individuals. Mobile communications devices that can track positioning and connect universally —previously the stuff of science fiction—have become ubiquitous. The Internet has extensively erased the tyrannies of time and distance, leading to remote work and long-distance collaborations that were once fantasies. A worldwide ethos of sharing, collaborating, and crowdsourcing has produced remarkable leaps forward. Phones and social media have reshaped human interactions, politics, relationships, families, and sexuality. Algorithms have been deployed that invisibly mold human choices. Privacy has largely evaporated. (Schiff)
- the answers to the urgent human questions of our day should not only be in the hands of scientists, politicians, think tanks, and philosophy departments but ought to be a core project of the Jewish collective.(Schiff)
- Reinvigorating non-Orthodox Judaism will, therefore, require moving away from the founding impulse of “fitting in” towards embracing the complicated work of critically appraising societal directions. If new iterations of non-Orthodox Judaism are to have relevance going forward, they will need to emphasize the historic Jewish task of evaluating contemporary civilization critically and offering a Jewish vision for how elements of society could be constructively reshaped. The complex challenge is to live in society while not yet wholly being “of society,” to comprehend society’s values while yet questioning them: simultaneously, to be a part and apart. (Schiff)
- Legality is displacing morality in the subjective conception of right and wrong. (Schiff)
- One of the best-known lines about human duties comes from the prophet Micah: “God has told you what is good, and what the Lord requires of you—only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly [modestly] with your God” (Micah 6: 8). The clear expectation is that our task is to promote the Divine agenda—with conscious humility. Judaism emphasizes that the Jewish role in the world is to engage in Kedushat HaShem , the sanctification of the Divine name, not our own names. It is not by chance that the Torah stresses the great humility of Moses as his preeminent character trait. Nor can it be just happenstance that the Talmud gives priority to the positions of Beit Hillel because they taught their opponents’ teachings and cited those with whom they disagreed before stating their own case (Eruvin 13b). (Schiff)
- Jewish values for all the world needs us. Light unto the nations
- AI, named for its intelligence features, will likely do a good job mimicking human intelligence or even exceeding it. “Mimicking” is, however, the operative term. AI may well end up being functionally superior to humans, but the way it solves problems will never resemble human thought. The human mind is not just an intelligence machine. Human minds produce emotions and feelings, they contain our subjective view of the world, they are the locus of our reflections and our internal conversations, and they contain our dreams and our daydreams, our fears, our doubts, our loves, concerns, and

ambitions. Perhaps most significantly, they are the seat of our consciousness and self-consciousness.(Schiff)

- Gelernter draws a distinction between two different functions that humans perform: doing and being. AI is almost exclusively designed for doing; its code is written as a series of instructions for carrying out tasks. By contrast, while much of human life is preoccupied with doing, a considerable slice of it is about being. (Schiff)
- Jews are mandated to expand the Divine image in the world, not to lessen it. That goal demands the preservation of humanity. Judaism provides no license to contemplate an alternative. (Schiff)
- The irreplaceable human perspective and the poetry inherent within the grandeur and the struggle of human existence are exquisite. That is why Jewish tradition maintains that “anyone who destroys a life is considered by scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life it is as if they saved an entire world” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4: 5). Each human life contains the potential for untold significance, and that will remain true even if AI comes to be viewed as functionally superior. If we allow humans to be regarded as “useless,” it will return us to that brutal historical perspective that valued human life only insofar as it was economically productive, possessed the strongest muscles, or displayed the highest intelligence. Judaism rejected that viewpoint back then; it rejects it still today. (Schiff)