Technology and the Human Spirit

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> *From Hartman Rabbinic Torah Seminar 2018, Micah Goodman and Yehuda Kurtzer*

"Are we there yet?" A whining, bored child called out from the back seat of the car on a family trip. Parents would do everything they could to summon patience, humor, interest and concern for the bored child's whining. Maybe the family would play a game, laughing together at silliness, or talk with each other, sharing ideas or stories. Or they might quietly settle into reading, later wishing they had more time to continue to enjoy their books.

I recall a sea-change in road-trip comfort as a parent when I drove my three young kids on a two-day road trip in a van equipped with a small portable TV/VCR. We played word games and sang songs, and the movies filled the space in-between. The end of boredom was in sight.

That seems so primitive now. First, there were vehicles with built-in video screens. That's so unnecessary now – replaced by video streaming on hand-held devices. Everyone can be entertained independently according to their individual tastes and interests. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and all of the latest social media apps can keep us endlessly entertained.

We have become so dependent upon our devices that many of us have lost the skill to simply just "be."

"Are we *there* yet?!" has been replaced by quiet. We can avoid talking to each other for long periods of time. *Who we are* is rapidly changing *how we are* with each other in everything we do.

Do we hold our devices in hand at shared meals? Few of us write letters, and we talk less on the phone. Our human interactions are shifting to our electronic devices, and the results of this behavioral shift are deeply concerning. This raises profound spiritual questions.

When we look out the window, do we see Gd's creation? Do we take it in?

Boredom opens the possibility for discovery, gratitude, wonder, and joy. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik recalled a profound spiritual experience from his travels:

> "I remember how enthused I was the first time I saw the Baltic Sea. I was born in Russia and never saw a major body of water in my youth....I remember that the

water was blue, deeply blue. From afar it looked like a blue forest…When I came close and realized it was the Baltic Sea, I was overwhelmed by its beauty. Spontaneously, I began to recite the Psalm, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." … the words flowed from my lips… It was a religious reaction to viewing the majesty of God's creation… It was more than simply a blessing; it was an encounter with the Creator… The experience welled out of me."[1]

Have we become blind to such spiritual moments while we are busy looking at our screens?

I cannot claim that I have mastered control over my technology habits. Baby boomers like me have been dramatically impacted by the changes wrought by the internet, email and hand-held devices, perhaps even more than younger generations who grew up with it. The technological revolution has impacted every aspect of our lives. What a lot of cultural change in such a short time!

Millennials, like my children, came of age with social media and the internet at their fingertips. How different they are than we were at their age!

Many recent technological inventions have contributed to improving ways that we work and communicate. But as devices help individuals to personalize their world, we must wonder – at what human cost? At what spiritual cost?

This summer at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, two great scholars, Micah Goodman and Yehuda Kurtzer pondered this question. They debated the good and bad of **Media and Technology** through the lens of **Derech Eretz**, "the way of the world," meaning, manners and common decency.

Micah commented that "technology adds to our lives but also takes something from our lives." We may not notice what we have lost for a long time while we are busy absorbing the great new convenience of the day. "Technology is not progress," he said, "it is a tradeoff."[2]

Micah reflected that the most mundane of inventions have sometimes completely changed us. For example, the *watch*, an invention of the industrial revolution, gave us greater control and power over our lives. But we lost the intuitive understanding of time.

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[1] Erica Brown, *Spiritual Boredom; Rediscovering the Wonder of Judaism* (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009) As told by Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav* (New York: Ktav, 1999)
[2] Continuing content from Micah and Yehuda's comments are included in rewritten form, not quoted text

Do you remember using maps to find your way? Or asking for directions? We are losing our ability to know where we are or how to find our way. What do we do when the GPS stops working? We panic!

Technology has made us less able to remember details – who remembers phone numbers anymore?

Are all these trade-offs worth it? Micah contended that while the trade-offs are worth it, we should consider the nature and impact of those trade-offs.

Social scientists are studying the effect of technology on our emotions and our thinking. Sherry Turkle, a professor in Science, Technology and Society at M.I.T., is a notable voice. Her website[3] is illustrative. She has spent 30 years exploring the complex and ever-changing relationship between people and technology. "It affects everything – how we work and learn, how we parent and govern, and even how we love." Her work focuses on reclaiming conversation to recover human connection and the capacity for empathy.

Turkle highlights how "we have a crisis of empathy…there is an empathy deficit." Studies indicate that empathy is down 40%. The skill of empathy is developed through face-to-face conversations, where two people give each other their undivided attention. "We have become less sensitive to each other as we have turned to screens for conversations."

In a recent NYTimes Op-Ed, "*There Will Never Be an Age of Artificial Intimacy*," Turkle writes, "Children will lose the ability to have empathy if they relate too consistently with objects that cannot form empathic ties. Technology challenges us to look at our human values." She worries about developments where science "presents us with artificial intimacy, yet another form of Artificial Intelligence. This is an intimacy that does not make room for human empathy or what human beings…experience as the fear of death, loneliness, illness, pain. We diminish as the *seeming* empathy of the machine increases. It is technology forcing us to forget what we know about life…In life, you are struck by the importance of presence, of the small moments of meaning, the miracle of your child's breath, the feelings of deep human connection. When you are thinking about technology, your mind is not on all of that…Artificial intelligence…will never be enough to replace real human intimacy."[4]

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[3] Sherryturkle.com

[4] Sherry Turkle, "There Will Never Be an Age of Artificial Intimacy", New York Times, August 11, 2018

Real conversations that involve empathy expose our vulnerability. These can be messy and awkward, and still, they are the best kind of conversations. Conversations train our sensitivities.

Micah Goodman says, "Today, we are very accessible and *not very present*. Are we ever really *there*? Technology is trading our humanity for the power the devices give us. Our tradition should have something to say about this."

Yehuda Kurtzer reflected on the way our news is curated. The Wall Street Journal analyzed all 2016 news stories read on Facebook, concluding that Facebook fuels political differences more than it mirrors it. Their algorithm works that way, keeping you on the site through a *curated* newsfeed. This undermines our efforts to learn about the world, holding us in virtual echo chambers where we express our outrage together with people who share it. The outrage doesn't actually do anything — it isn't an action. In fact, "*Slacktivism*" is thinking you are doing something by posting something on Twitter.

In addition, Facebook and other social media sites have honed the skill of making their sites highly addictive. When you post something, you return over and over again to see who liked it and what they said. "Likes" create a dopamine response. It is hard to stop.

Still, it would not be a good idea to completely avoid technology; resisting technology always fails, tech always wins. Since "modernity is a steamroller, it has dramatic consequences to those who stand in the way." Instead, we need to figure out how to embrace it. In actuality, tech advancement naturally precedes the ethical treatment of it.

The religious instinct is to resist change and technological advancement because it impacts roles and authority. Technology democratized power.

Several years ago, there was a huge anti-tech rally in New York's Citi field for ultra-Orthodox men. Guess what?! It was sponsored by *tech companies and was live-streamed to the women* – who were not allowed to attend. Fear of technology is a SYMBOL of fear of the *loss of authority*, along with fear of relevance for traditional communities.

Today, ideas are proliferated, and opinions shaped on social media. What would be the result if we abdicate that space? Since our social media profiles are *curated*, we each have to decide which versions of our edited selves we want on social media— the good ones or the bad ones?

Facebook can sterilize relationships, where we connect without satisfying our need for connection. People who spend 2.5 hours a day on Facebook feel lonely. A column in the *Atlantic Magazine* last September[5] told of a dramatic change in the mental health of young Americans since 2010. The main driver for depression and suicide is *loneliness*.

What do we gain from technology? Facebook, for example, *could* be a space to find common ground in a very broken world — isn't that a good thing?

Technology impacts every corner of our world, including synagogues. Many synagogue communities struggle over the question of whether live-streamed services are a good idea, while others are breaking new ground in this area. Live-streamed services are bringing people together and giving them something they couldn't otherwise access. Technology can add to humanity rather than limiting it.

Think about this[6]: Human beings have been around 200,000 years, and for 190,000 of those we were hunter-gatherers. We have the personality of hunter-gatherers, being social by nature, enjoying multi-level social networks. *Human beings are in a quest for connection — and that means person-to person.*

It took us 200,000 years to develop our social wiring. The problem now is that we are harming it and harming ourselves. It has begun to change the way we think, and even the way our brains are wired. We are developing self-induced attention deficit disorder. The changes in our world have been *too fast* for us to adapt in healthy ways.

It's foolish to be against technology. But it is <u>not</u> foolish to ask *what* to consume, *when* to consume and *how much* to consume. What is technology doing to us?

Sherry Turkle asks, "How can we use tech intentionally? When you are constantly connected, you are also constantly distracted."

When our phones are shut down, we are open to creativity and spiritual awareness. We need times when the devices are off, and <u>we</u> are on. Turkle recommends that we have <u>at least an hour a day</u> and <u>one day a week</u> without technology – a detox. How do you like that – Shabbat!

We need to think about time and space differently. What if we create "no phone" zones? The elite schools of Silicon Valley – of all places – do not allow phones. What if all schools could follow their lead?

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[5] Jean Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?", The Atlantic. September 2017.
[6] Insight from Micah Goodman

Can we reclaim the practice of walking through the public square – fully present? Can we sit in a car or a train without constant entertainment? Can we celebrate the opportunity to be bored?

How do we shape *halachah*, Jewish law, to adapt and *save* our humanity? *Screen free Shabbat* is a good start. I have been working on the discipline of not looking at my phone while I am waiting in line. Where can you go screen free? It is up to us to shape the world we need. Technology is not the moral problem. Let's ask ourselves: Is technology the master or a tool to assist us?

This is the moment to embrace our task: it is ours to define who we are, who we wish to be, and what is our becoming as human beings. Can we be more present, using technology more consciously? This is the call of the Shofar: "Be present!" This is how we will develop and cultivate empathy. This is how we will enjoy lives of spiritual awareness, wholeness, holiness and peace. This is my wish for the New Year.
May it be so!

Leshanah Tovah U'metukah!