



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום

The Internet Can Make Us Stronger: Judaism in the Digital Age

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Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought
Leaders Summer Capstone August 2020

As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence below.

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But we have to do the work to use it in a way that works for us

The global coronavirus pandemic has stopped most in-person gatherings and forced Jewish organizations, along with everyone else, to either cancel programming or move online. While this crisis has forced a overwhelming reckoning with the role of technology in our community, it is not the beginning of the conversation about Judaism and the Internet, and it will not be the end. Right now, people are desperate to get offline, and it is easy to fixate on how it would simply be better to be in a synagogue or at sleep-away camp than on a Zoom call. There is no doubt that many experiences are better suited for being in-person and these experiences will return when they are safe. But overcoming this pandemic does not need to mean returning to normal. We are living in an increasingly global, polarized, and tech-filled world and it is time to think deeply, critically, and creatively about the role of technology in our new normal.

The Internet, its content and its usages, are extremely varied and cannot be lauded or criticized in one breath. New technology presents a host of ethical and religious concerns, some similar to those of past generations and some very new. This change is intimidating, but that doesn't mean that we should or can hide from it. Technology gives us the ability to stream services for those who can't make it to temple, to share diverse perspectives on our culture and religion without the costly burden of office spaces and printing, and to educate the world about Judaism in the constant battle against ignorance.

The Internet, when used correctly and consciously, is also an invaluable tool in fighting the polarization that deeply threatens the United States and the Jewish people. We are a strikingly small minority with a tremendous amount of internal diversity. We need to remain in communion and dialogue with each other, not only to fight antisemitism, but also to flourish as a Jewish community.

Judaism has always embraced discourse. The very structure of a page of Talmud, which presents both majority and minority opinions, makes that clear. But polarization is the enemy of discourse; if we have no common ground or desire to talk, we can't have productive conversations--at best, we can have shouting matches. Jewish identity is also incredibly complex and can be influenced by a multitude of histories, texts, and rituals. When we connect with other Jews, we expand and strengthen our own identity through learning and discussion.

For all of these reasons, connecting with Jews of different perspectives, whether that means different places, different practices, or different other identities such as race and sexuality, is good for ourselves and good for the Jewish community. But this is hard, especially because we often meet other Jews through our synagogues or other institutions that tend to attract Jews of similar beliefs, or at the very least from the same areas. Even for people who live in places with diverse Jewish populations, it is incredibly intimidating to walk into a new physical space where people think and practice differently from you.

Online spaces allow us to connect with Jews from all over the world, in relatively neutral spaces, where we all come individually on our own merits to talk and learn. The best way to embrace this advantageous ability of the Internet, without losing the two-way communication and personal connection of in-person programs, is through video-call based community, specifically those that include repeated meetings with the same people. While these calls have the disadvantage of physical impermanence, they create a realness based in people and shared relationships and experiences. The use of video technology cuts through the anonymity of the Internet and thus brings people much closer to the same ethical and emotional presence they have offline because, in the words of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his book *Totality and Infinity*, “the face presents itself, and demands justice.”

These types of communities are easier to form, and have an additional importance, when they are based around a shared interest or identity. These commonalities can help bridge the gap between different perspectives by creating a shared commitment to learn and form relationships. An established successful example of this is the Jewish Women’s Archive Rising Voices Fellowship, a year-long program (of which I am an alumni) that brings together a diverse group of teenage Jewish women from across the United States. Even in the best of times, an in-person version of this program would only be possible in major Jewish centers such as New York City or as a costly and time-consuming program that required participants to fly to a central location. While both of those alternatives can exist, this program is a perfect fit for the internet because the online version is simply better. As a Jew in Eastern Connecticut, neither of the alternatives would accommodate me. While I love my local Jewish community, our size limits the available programs, and there is certainly nothing that can provide the diversity or specificity of Rising Voices. I am extraordinarily grateful that the internet could be used to create this program which had a transformative effect on both my understanding of other Jews and on my own Jewish identity.

Through the program, I not only connected and learned with Jews from different time zones and practices, I also connected with young Jewish feminists with similar frustrations and questions as me. Most Jews understand the value of Jewish spaces, many young Jews love camp or youth group because it is a space where we are not the minority. But within the Jewish community, more specific safe spaces are needed, specifically for queer Jews and Jews of color who often feel alienated or unwelcome in general Jewish communities. Internet-based programs allow these people to gather with Jews of similar experiences and to find a Jewish community where they are not the minority. It is important to remember that the existence of these spaces does not mean that the rest of us are off the hook for fostering inclusivity. Online programming is a complement to our in-person spaces, not a substitution, and it is still imperative that we simultaneously work to improve our in-person spaces.

Group video call meetings are one small portion of what the future of Jewish community will look like. That future can include both local physical Jewish newspapers and international online Jewish publications. It can include learning from local Rabbis and teachers and from educators

on social media. It can include in-person services that are also streamed for those who are sick, elderly, disabled, or otherwise choose to use them. It can include thriving synagogues and community centers and also online communities. Inevitably, the future Jewish community, and the future world, will be both online and in-person. This will happen whether or not established institutions embrace it; in fact, it is already happening. Now is the time to embrace it proactively and work together to create the best possible Jewish communities that exist both in-person and online.