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# Our Technology Sickness—and How to Heal It



Micah Goodman

## AN ANTI-TALMUDIC WORLD

Guided by the belief that one can draw closer to God by studying sacred texts, Jews have long sanctified learning and scholarship. Surprisingly, they largely concentrated on the Talmud, not the Bible. And what's in the Talmud? Let's start with what is not in it: no clear and straightforward list of laws to be observed. Anyone who opens the Talmud finds many more disputes than legal decisions. Jews of all stripes, from sages to daily laborers, have studied this text as an essential element of their religious lives. They fulfilled the obligation to study not by examining the word of God as expressed in the Torah, but by examining the words of humans voiced in the Talmud.

The absence of an orderly list of laws and statutes in the Talmud does not mean those laws and statutes are inconsequential. Jewish

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tradition demands not just studying books but observing laws. The first requirement is intellectual: Jews are required to study texts. The second is practical: Jews are required to obey laws. Intellectually, Jews are expected to be conversant with *all* sides of a controversy, but in their lived behavior they are expected to follow *one* position among many. Jews are expected to know the opinion of Abaye, but to uphold the opinion of Rava; to study the positions of Shammai but live according to the positions of Hillel.

In studying the Talmud, we're enjoined to grapple with all sides of a dispute but in the end to live our lives in accord with only one of those sides. This model informed my last two books—a model that I believed might help heal the wounds of Israeli society. My two most recent books, *Catch-67* (2018) and *The Wondering Jew* (2020), were about relationships between groups of people: left and right, Israelis and Palestinians, religious and secular Jews. With *Catch-67* I tried to elucidate the ideological war in Israel over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict using a Talmudic lens. I attempted to show the left that the positions of the right are grounded in a deep and compelling philosophy; I tried to show the right that left-wing positions are shaped by fascinating schools of thought. In my most recent book, *The Wondering Jew*, I endeavored to present the profound thinking of secular positions to religious Jews, and to present the wisdom contained in religious schools of thought to secular Jews. In both cases, the organizing idea was Talmudic: not to persuade anyone to change their practice, but to broaden readers' worldviews.

In both cases, my project failed. Israeli society remains polarized, and the polarization is only deepening. On both the right and left, religious and secular, intellectual horizons are narrowing to fit political positions. Curiosity stagnates in a prison of ideology. Are Israeli politicians intensifying the polarization instead of healing it? Is Zionism itself infected by a virus that attacks the magnificently rich Jewish intellectual tradition?

Such explanations are locally defined, but polarization is far from unique to Israeli society. It is a global problem. Twenty years ago, political identity did not demarcate our intellectual or social horizons. Today, however, in contrast to the Talmudic ideal of nurturing an intellectual world wider than one's practice, our intellectual world has shrunk to fit the narrower dimensions of policy and practice. The books we read, the lectures we hear, and the videos we watch are all

produced by people in our own camp. In short, we have sunk into an anti-Talmudic world.

## DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

To understand why this is so, I turned to several leading thinkers, each of whom can help us understand what is going.

In his book *The Upswing: How We Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (2020), Robert D. Putnam, who teaches public policy at Harvard University, presents a fascinating study on polarization. In the 1950s, Americans were asked whether they would be bothered by their son or daughter marrying a person of a different race. About fifty percent responded in the affirmative. They were also asked if they would be bothered by their son or daughter marrying a person who affiliated with a different political party. About ten percent answered yes. When the same questions were posed in the 2010s, fewer than ten percent said it would bother them if their son or daughter married someone of a difference race, but over fifty percent said it would bother them if their child married a person with opposing political views. In other words, Americans are growing more open to people of different races and growing more closed to those who hold different political views.

Another study asked people who identified as left-wing to rate their level of sympathy for right-wingers and people who identified as right-wing to rate their level of sympathy for left-wingers. They rated their feelings using a one-hundred-point scale: 0 represented absolute hatred, 100 represented absolute love, and 50 represented lukewarm feelings, neither love nor hatred. In 1995 the average score was 40. Republicans did not particularly like Democrats, and Democrats did not particularly like Republicans. Their emotional temperatures were low, but far from a deep freeze. The researchers repeated their study twenty years later: the average score dropped from 40 to 7.<sup>1</sup> Within twenty years, Americans began to hate those who hold opposing political views. Similar polarization is happening in England, Poland, Hungary, Brazil, Argentina and many other countries. In recent years it has become a global epidemic.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that we are coalescing into like-minded groups in an age when we are all connected to the internet. Precisely when we seem most connected, we are most distant; precisely when

we have all the tools to free ourselves and gain exposure to the wider world, we find ourselves imprisoned and disconnected. A new economy, equipped with new technology, has created a very old politics. Tribal politics. But why is this happening precisely when we are supposed to have become more connected through the advent of technologies like social media, when we have all the tools to free ourselves and gain exposure to the wider world?

To fathom this change, I turned to the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian communications theorist who famously taught that “the medium is the message.” Technology can enrich our lives and fill it with things that were not there before. But it can also impoverish us and take things away from us.<sup>2</sup> In his book *Understanding Media*, McLuhan explained the difference between what technology gives and what it takes away. What it gives us is bright and shiny, but what it takes away is obscure and practically invisible. It gives quickly but takes slowly. Its advantages are therefore seen and spoken about, while its disadvantages are mostly unseen and much less spoken about. This asymmetry creates the illusion that technology is an unmitigated bonus for humanity. But in practice, it always comes at a price. McLuhan argued that history is shaped not so much by ideas as by the tools we use to disseminate ideas. In his view, the medium exerts a greater influence than the message. The events that changed history were not the birth of monotheism, the emergence of humanism, and the growth of feminism, but the revolutionary advent of printing, radio, and television; not the creation of new ideas, but the emergence of new media which shape our very ways of thinking.

What polarized societies have in common is not their political ideas but new digital technologies that disseminate ideas. Social networks are the new town square, the sites where ideas are exchanged, debates are conducted, and questions are explored. The migration to a new platform has transformed the discourse.

But what connects this migration to our current polarization?

Tim Wu, a scholar of media at Columbia University, explains how this new medium has led to the political polarization of society.<sup>3</sup> Human attention, he says, is increasingly being funneled into the neck

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of a digital bottle. In the early days of Google and Facebook, we all wondered why they would distribute their products for free. But over time the answer became clear: we are not *receiving* a product from these technology companies; we are *giving* a product to them: our undivided attention. In turn, they monetize that attention by selling it to advertisers, to great profit. In fact, Wu shows, the value of Facebook and Google today far exceeds the value of the major oil companies in the United States.

If our attention is worth more than oil, you can bet that these giant corporations will do anything and everything to pump out as much of our attention as possible. Facebook engineers work to capture our awareness, glue us to a screen, and draw out from us more and more human attention, just as oil companies develop technologies for drilling deeper into the earth. They design algorithms that first track our behaviors, see which posts we like, and identify which views we are drawn to, and then use that data to curate our “news feed” based on which posts will most likely receive our attention.

The result of these design choices is that our digital lives become sorted into tribes. Several years ago, Eli Pariser, a staunch leftist and president of the 5-million-member organization MoveOn.org, wanted to know what his conservative right-wing friends were thinking about a burning issue in the news. “I knew I had right-wing friends on Facebook, so I searched for their posts in my feed but couldn’t find any. For a long time I wondered, where could they be?” The answer was that Facebook’s algorithm had studied Pariser’s liberal preferences and stopped showing him posts by his conservative friends.

Once we are trapped in these digital echo chambers, what Pariser calls “filter bubbles,” hearing our own positions repeated over and over, it becomes natural for us to perceive those with different political views as mistaken, deceptive, and even sinful. We on the right and the left are increasingly unable to understand each other; we are increasingly likely to feel outraged or frightened by each other. We find it difficult to understand how it is possible that our truth, which is so obvious to us and everyone we know, cannot be understood by people from the other echo chamber.

Social media exposes us time and again to our own positions and ideas and thereby locks us ever more tightly into positions we already hold. Scrolling through Facebook is essentially self-indoctrination.

What happens when a person inside this digital echo chamber, who hears his right-wing positions repeated over and over, meets another person who also lives inside his own digital echo chamber that repeats left-leaning positions over and over? Each experiences the other as deceptive, or even evil. Life in echo chambers deceives us. However much we may feel as if we are expanding, in reality our intellectual lives are constricting.

If political tribalism is a threat to our democratic wellbeing, self-isolation threatens our mental wellbeing. Our public life is under attack from the virus of polarization; our private lives, from the virus of loneliness, alienation, and—not least—envy. Digital technology is causing both viruses to mutate more quickly.

### REVERSING COURSE

The Digital Revolution has been no less potent than the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution is wreaking havoc on the natural environment. The Digital Revolution is wreaking havoc on the political environment. Yuval Noah Harari argues that the future ramifications of the Digital Revolution will be infinitely more dramatic than its industrial predecessor.<sup>4</sup> Since the Digital Revolution, our relationship with technology has spiraled out of control. And this relationship is by far the most challenging one that Western societies will have to regulate in the coming decades. The human-technology relationship is sick, and it's time to heal it.

Because of the digital revolution, our lives are being transformed by three grand bargains. The intellectual bargain: we have more knowledge but less capacity to concentrate and focus. The social bargain: we are much more available but much less attentive. And most importantly, the emotional bargain: we are much more connected, but much less empathetic. When we trade away skills for power, attention for availability, empathy for connectivity, and quality for quantity of relationships, we sign up to a Faustian pact that we do not even know exists—one that gives us more control over the outside world, but less control over our inner world.

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What then is to be done? What shifts in thinking and behavior will help us reverse course?

### 1. A PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFT: LESS CHOICE, MORE FREEDOM

The West's aspiration for freedom translates into a persistent cultural aspiration to have ever more options from which to choose. But a surplus of choice has a paralyzing effect. We do not get excited by the huge range of options but overwhelmed. Paradoxically—an increase in choice comes to the detriment of the chooser.

Yet the most devastating damage is not the difficulty of *choosing* but the difficulty of being happy with whatever one has chosen. When one is faced with a wide choice of possibilities and invests time and energy in weighing up the pros and cons of each, this investment might help one make a better choice—but it also guarantees that one will enjoy *less* whatever one chooses. This is the paradox: the more time people invest in choosing, the better their choice but the less their enjoyment from it. That is the tragic nature of human choice.

Consider the following experiment: a group was asked to choose a chocolate from a bowl with four types of chocolate. Another group was asked to choose a chocolate from a bowl with *forty* types of chocolate. Researchers found that those who chose from the bowl with *less* choice enjoyed the chocolate *more* than those who chose from the bowl with *more*. Too much freedom, the scientific evidence suggests, means too little enjoyment. He who chooses his lot, to paraphrase the ancient maxim, struggles to rejoice in it. Digital technology exacerbates this problem.

One of the great philosophers of the modern age, Baruch Spinoza, made a mighty effort to articulate the profound link between human happiness and the understanding that free will is an illusion. Happiness is not a corollary of feeling that we can shape the world, but of a radical acceptance of the fact that the world is shaping us. He argued that the most meaningful step toward happiness is recognizing one's *lack* of freedom and accepting the inevitability of one's fate. According to Spinoza, and contrary to the modern way of thinking, happiness is not a function of being free but of grasping that one is *not* free. Negative feelings, Spinoza explained, are driven by the belief that *things could have been otherwise*. We experience anger, for example, because we believe that something bad that happened to us should

not have happened to us. We experience envy because we believe that something good that happened to someone *else* should have happened to *us*. These negative feelings are rooted in the illusion of freedom over our fate. We are being immiserated on a false pretext. The truth, according to Spinoza, is that every human choice is predetermined by nature, and we are mere links in a deterministic chain of events. Philosophy, Spinoza believed, held the cure. Freedom is an illusion. Realizing this is the key to alleviating suffering.

Spinoza's metaphysics may be debatable, but his psychology is scientifically proven. Our belief in infinite *possibility* undermines our ability to be content with any *eventuality*. Contrary to modern thinking, *less choice* means *more freedom*, but it can also mean *more happiness*. The proliferation of options and choices that characterize our digitally savvy lives needs to shift in the direction of fewer choices, leading to more freedom.

## 2. A CULTURAL SHIFT: ATTENTION OVER AVAILABILITY

In 1956, the psychologist Erich Fromm published his groundbreaking book *The Art of Loving*, a fascinating indictment of much of Western society. Fromm argued that the primary impulse of modern human beings is to be loved. That is why they go on diets, run marathons, and develop impressive careers. All for love. Fromm urged Western society to undergo an emotional revolution. Instead of seeking to be more loved, people should seek to be more *loving*. Loving, according to Fromm, is an acquired skill. It is an emotional muscle developed with much strain and hard work.

Inspired by Fromm's exhortation to become more loving, I want to make a wish for a mental revolution to heal our dysfunctional relationship with technology: *Our humanity should not be measured by how much attention we attract but by how much attention we devote to what matters*. This emotional revolution would also be a spiritual one. It should be led by intellectuals and educators, united by the common endeavor of changing Western society.

How can this lofty aspiration be turned into a practical agenda for disrupting the stranglehold of technology?

Until recently, people were not expected to be reachable at the drop of a hat. But nowadays it is considered impolite not to reply to an email in a matter of hours or a text message in a matter of minutes.

According to data from Adam Alter, one tenth of all digital communications comprises apologies for being unavailable. Researchers have also found that the average time it takes us to reply to an email has shrunk by over 80 percent over the past decade.

This new norm comes at a cost. The more available we are, the less attentive we are. Distractions undermine productivity, but bosses still expect their employees to be available—that is, less attentive. When two people meet and one of them peeks at his phone every few minutes, this interrupts eye contact and disrupts communication. Yet remarkably, this is not considered impolite. In other words, society no longer expects us to be as attentive but expects us to be much more available.

A healthy technological culture would flip these preferences and prioritize attention over availability. In such a culture, peeking at one's phone during a conversation would be considered extremely rude, and replying to an email with a delay of several hours would be con-

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sidered quite normal. In such a culture, bosses would rebuke their employees not for failing to reply within minutes but for paying insufficient attention at work. The mark of good parenting would not be replying to children's text messages within seconds but switch-

ing off their phones when spending time together. Cultures shape us because they determine what causes embarrassment. If we start to feel uncomfortable for not paying full attention rather than for not being fully available, we will have taken a big step toward emancipation from technology.

The cultural force needed to counterbalance the tech industry's economic power could emerge from a critical mass of lots of tiny changes, adding up to transform social expectations. Bosses might expect their employees to switch off their phones and focus on their work, and youth movements might require members to leave their phones at home during expeditions. Parents might insist on being unavailable in the evening, which is family time, and might refuse to endanger their children's mental health by giving them smartphones before a certain age. We might become expected to apologize if we check our phones in the middle of a conversation. The accumulation

of these new digitally healthy habits would create a world with more breaks from technology and thus greater awareness about its use. Such a culture would be much less permissive about *using* technology but much more permissive about being *free* from it.

### 3. REMEDIAL TECHNOLOGIES

What will a healthy human relationship with digital technology look like? The most elegant maxim I have found comes from Sherry Turkle: technology is a great servant but a terrible master. If technology is our master, it dilutes our connections, erases our free time, and pulverizes our learning skills. But if technology is our servant, it deepens our connections, frees up time, and broadens our minds. All three connections can suffer from an unhealthy relationship with technology, and all three can gain from a healthy relationship with the same technology.

As a case in point: in 1 Samuel 17, we read about the battle between David and Goliath, one of the most familiar stories in Western civilization. This story is often used to teach that victory is not guaranteed to the strong but to the faithful. But there is another way to interpret the story.

Goliath the Philistine had a fearsome physique, protected by heavy armor, and he wielded a lethal weapon: a sharp and powerful sword. Facing him was David, a mirror image: short, unarmored, and swordless. Goliath was offended by such a weak rival. “Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks?” he asked.

David did not see himself as exposed and vulnerable but as agile and speedy. Nor did he see Goliath as defended and unassailable, but as overburdened and heavy. Goliath was not killed by the stone that David slung into his forehead; this strike only made him lose his balance and fall to the ground. What killed Goliath was his own sword. “So David ran up and stood over the Philistine, grasped his sword and pulled it from its sheath; and with it he dispatched him and cut off his head.” Here lay David’s secret: he used his enemy’s own weapon against him.

Like David and Goliath, the relationship between human beings and technology is asymmetrical. Technology has proved greater and more powerful than the humans who invented it. Those who imagine that we can protect ourselves from it using willpower alone do not

grasp the power imbalance. If our humanity cannot protect itself by defeating technology, perhaps it can defend itself by harnessing technology. Real-world examples include technology installed in vehicles that prevents the driver from texting, surfing the web, or receiving notifications when the car is in motion; and a cell phone jamming technology that creates small zones of quiet at a restaurant or business meeting or family living room. I call these “technologically liberating technologies.”

### 4. A TALMUDIC SHIFT

In opening this essay, I noted how Jews concentrated their sacred commitment to study on the Talmud rather than the Bible. This commitment established a culture in which intellectually, Jews are expected to be conversant with *all* sides of a controversy, but in their lived behavior they are expected to follow *one* position among many. Such a culture ensures that one’s intellectual world is much more expansive than the world of one’s lived practice.

Returning to this culture can help heal the ills caused by our digital-driven culture. Translating the commitment into contemporary terms: I might hold progressive views and vote for the Democratic slate of candidates down every ballot but at the same time seek to understand conservative thinking. However left-wing in my actions, I might nurture more capacious curiosities and interests. When we cannot fathom why so many people would believe what they believe, we know this is a symptom being imprisoned in anti-Talmudic digital echo-chambers. The Talmudic tradition exalts a culture of disagreements. Embracing the Talmudic way of life grants our intellectual world the freedom to be far more expansive than the world of lived practice.

Early in my exploration of the impacts of the digital revolution, I’d assumed that people could resist the seductive powers of digital technology. Though as individuals we may be weaker than our devices and the tech corporations behind them, I believed we would triumph. Just as David defeated Goliath, we too would beat the technologies that oppress us.

Today I have come to embrace the opposite view: technology is much more powerful than I imagined, and the human mind much weaker. David did not beat Goliath by smashing his strength but by

wielding it against him. Jewish mystics assumed that Moses must have been a prince of Egypt and a member of its civilization's culture because Egypt could only have been defeated using the same sort of power that Egypt deployed. The great medieval thinker Nachmanides believed that this was a metaphysical principle: the road to freedom from oppression runs through using one's oppressor's strengths against him.

This is what it will take to heal the societal ills caused by the digital revolution. By pursuing fewer choices and more freedom, prioritizing attention over availability, experimenting with liberating technologies, and leaving our narrow digital echo chambers for the Talmudic expanse of broad intellectual horizons, we can all do our part to begin the healing process. The capitalistic pursuit of profits has led to a destructive attack on human attention. But the most effective strategy to protect our attention is neither to fight human impulses nor to wage war on capitalism. On the contrary, the ambitions of capitalism created the crisis, and the ambitions of capitalism will remedy it. The remedy will grow out of the ailment itself. ■

*Translated from the Hebrew by Justus Baird and Eylon Levy.*

## Notes

- 1 Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, pp. 126–129.
- 2 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 63–70.
- 3 Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside our Heads*, 2017.
- 4 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, 2017.

