

And The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Part X, Resurrecting A Lost Tradition

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Here's the paper I delivered today at Rejewvenation. It went over

and dovetailed quite nicely with Pierre Levy's presentation. Sadly they wouldn't let me copy the DVD of our presentations and the following panel but they promise to get it to me sooner than later, so Quicktime will eventually follow. Anywho, the text below is interspliced with some of the slides from my presentation, though the lead image comes from my essay which appears in the current issue of *Atlanta Jewish Life*, which combines and hews down various pieces of this text with the text of my recent post on the ascent of autonomous Jewish movements.

There is an apparent trend of defection from Jewish denominations and institutional life. In their stead grow autonomous Jewish movements. All across the United States, and in Israel as well, young people are dropping out of synagogues and established Jewish institutions and starting their own projects that serve the needs and interests of their immediate communities.

The causes of this defection are multifold: An increased emphasis on personal autonomy in all aspects of life; the overbearing and alienating nature of religious dogma; frustration with agenda politics; growing dissatisfaction with institutional unresponsiveness; and so forth.

The advent of interactive technology has also played a role in this development. The values behind user-generated content on the net, the nature of the software on the net (participation driven), the method behind the development of that software (open source), and the net's anarchistic architecture in-and-of-itself, have brought empowerment to a new generation by providing a "proof-of-concept" for a participatory, self-governed life.

Following the destruction of the second Temple, the Jewish communal dialogue known as "The Oral Torah" was documented by our rabbis, out of fear that our tradition would be lost in exile—which it was. No longer having an active center of Jewish life in which the diversity of Jewish belief and practice were evident, we resorted to a textual fundamentalism in hopes of maintaining our faith and identity.

The rabbis weren't dumb, however. They wrote the Talmud as a debate, in which no definitive truth is ever asserted. Instead, every question leads only to another question, and conclusions are left to the individual to be debated and drawn. Using the process of Talmudic debate as a roadmap, we reconstituted our communal dialogue over the next two millennia, pulling the discussion off the pages and back into our lives. This dialogue flourished, particularly in Eastern Europe from the 18th century on, up until the Shoah, following which, we again revert to a textual fundamentalism for fear of losing our tradition.

We now find ourselves at the brink of a new resurrection of our communal dialogue, thanks in no small part to interactive technologies that are reawakening an innate awareness of our lost tradition. Indeed, like the *beit midrash* (house of study), the Internet provides us with a forum to engage in communal discussion and debate about vital issues, as well as an unlimited source of information with which we can inform our conversations and ourselves. While this was in some ways apparent in more primitive forms of Internet communication mediums such as bulletin boards and e-mail lists, a new wave of web technology is making this notion all the more evident and remarkable.

Branded "Web 2.0," this new wave has been described as "an attitude, not a technology"—one that consists of values such as user participation, radical trust, and radical decentralization. This so-called "architecture of participation" encourages users to push the technology to its limits, inviting a constant "emergent" evolution of the platform. It further seeks to "harness collective intelligence," suggesting that "software gets better the more people use it," and likewise, content gets better the more people contribute to it.

On June 29, 2005, John Markoff writing for *The New York Times*, hailed a coming era of user-generated content and the paradigm shift that attends it.

From photo- and calendar-sharing services to "citizen journalist" sites and annotated satellite images, the Internet is morphing yet again. A remarkable array of software systems makes it simple to share anything instantly, and sometimes enhance it along the way.

[...] The new services offer a bottom-up creative process that is shifting the flow of information away from a

one-way broadcast or publishing model, giving rise to a wave of new business ventures and touching off a scramble by media and technology companies to respond.

“Sharing will be everywhere,” said Jeff Weiner, a Yahoo senior vice president in charge of the company’s search services. “It’s the next chapter of the World Wide Web.”

An entire host of popular web applications has emerged from this ideology. Among those to be covered here, particularly in relation to their impact and potential impact on the Jewish world, are weblogs, wikis, and social networking software.

Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper editors this past April, media magnate Rupert Murdoch explained that today’s teens, twenty- and thirty-somethings “don’t want to rely on a god-like figure from above to tell them what’s important, and they certainly don’t want news presented as gospel.” They want “control over the media, instead of being controlled by it.” Sound familiar?

Murdoch was responding to the threat posed to “old media” by weblogs or blogs, the software technology that turns anyone with a computer and Internet access into an instant online publisher. Blogs have radically altered the face of newsmedia in the last few years, for the most part by getting stories onto the mainstream media’s radar and keeping them there. Blogs have put the power of media directly into users’ hands, allowing them to make the news instead of being fed it. At the time of Murdoch’s speech, but seven months ago, the estimated total number of blogs exceeded 50 million world-wide.

In his essay, “The Weblog: An Extremely Democratic Form in Journalism,” Jay Rosen writes:

[T]he people formerly known as the audience [those we have long considered the consumers of media—the readers, viewers, listeners—can get up from their chairs, “flip” things around, grab the equipment, and become speakers and broadcasters in the public square.

It’s pirate radio, legalized; it’s public access coming closer to life. Inside the borders of Blogistan (a real place with all the problems of a real place) we’re closer to a vision of “producer democracy” than we are to any of the consumerist views that long ago took hold in the mass media, including much of the journalism presented on that platform. We won’t know what a producer public looks like from looking at the patterns of the media age, in which broadcasting and its one-to-many economy prevailed.

Weblogs potentially explode the world of authorship far enough that we can at least imagine a sphere of debate with millions of productive speakers, where there was once an audience of millions listening to a few speakers dominate the debate. The existence of such a tool is an extreme change in prospect and pattern for citizens of the media age.

Blogs have proven their value beyond their apparent impact on journalism and, in turn, politics, even in the Jewish world. Unlike Federation or philanthropy endowed Jewish publications which are constrained by their funders’ agendas and therefore act more as public relations tools than as journalistic entities, blogs have made room for honesty, critique and dissent in the face of stifling hegemony within our community.

Protocols

was the first major “whistleblower” site which called attention to outrageous behavior in the Orthodox community, including several cases of sexual abuse committed by yeshiva-employed rabbis which had been swept under the rug by the Orthodox establishment. When Protocols folded, the torch was taken up by the likes of Jewish Whistleblower, which focuses primarily on sexual abuse scandals in the Jewish community, and Failed Messiah, which serves as watchdog inside the Chabad Lubavitch community. Protocols’ founder Steven I. Weiss, a freelance Jewish journalist, has since continued holding people’s feet to the fire at Canonist.

Other sites, like JTS Future

document the hopes and concerns of an ever-growing number of Conservative rabbinical students who find themselves frustrated and often at-odds with the movement’s leadership. In addition, there is an array of blogs by Yeshiva University students and alums (a list is available on CampusJ’s YU blog at CampusJ.com) which often take critical stances against the school administration’s positions.

Likewise, the web has made room for intra-Jewish dissent towards Israeli policy and the ubiquity of right-wing Zionist viewpoints. My own site, Jewschool, has been a leading force in promoting dialogue and dissent on issues such as Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories and Jewish mainstream support for the reelection of George W. Bush. Conversely, there are several blogs, such as Media Backspin, that report on bias against Israel in the mainstream media. A countless number of blogs charged with the self-conferred duty of defending Israel’s image also exist throughout the “blogosphere,” such as Israpundit and The Jewish View.

Blogs have also opened doors to the most inaccessible of places and fostered dialogue where it did not otherwise exist. Older sites like the now-defunct Hasidic Rebel offered outsiders an unusual look into the life of a Brooklyn *hasid* challenged by the tensions between tradition and modernity, while newer ones like Voices from Our Side of the Curtain

share the musings and concerns of an anonymous collective of Orthodox women, who are also confronting challenges of being modern women in what they see as an increasingly backwards world. Another site, Nice Jewish Girl follows the romantic adventures of an Orthodox, shomer negiah woman, who at 34 had (until recently) never been kissed. Countless other windows into the world of Orthodoxy, life in Israel (and often in West Bank settlements), and so forth, have been opened as such.

Blogs have also advanced the traditional forms of Jewish discourse: Talmudic debate, *responsa*, and scholastic review. Sites like Hirhurim and Chakira engage with *halakhic* (legal) texts, Hagahot examines ancient Hebrew manuscripts, and PaleoJudaica examines ancient Judaism, while AJHistory focuses on American Jewish history.

There are now so many Jewish blogs of varying themes, in fact, that there are currently two aggregating services which cull the writings of these sites into a central location. Jewish Blogging and JRants index the majority of Jewish blogs on the web and provide quick access to their latest postings and an ability to search through their headlines for relevant content.

It is hard to gauge at this point the impact that blogging has had on the Jewish community specifically (as opposed to on the world in general, which should be apparent unless you've been living under a rock for the last few years), however I can personally attest to receiving several e-mails from perfect strangers each week thanking me for the writing I've done on my personal blog, Orthodox Anarchist, and—whether for my positions on Jewish religious observance or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—claiming to have been influenced by what I've said in one way or another.

Unfortunately, serious research has yet to be conducted on the subject. However, blogging in general has reasserted the values of questioning authority and publicly discussing sensitive issues—values that seemed to have been lost in recent years. Issues that were once “off the table” have been returned the agenda by individuals who have taken the power of media into their own hands, and long deceased conversations are once again burning on our tongues.

Continuing on the Talmudic theme of communal discourse and, in turn, the collaborative creation of documents—wikis are a type of online collaborative writing tool specifically intended to “harness collective intelligence” by encouraging everyone with knowledge to share it. This happens in a user-controlled, actively democratic environment, in which an individual's knowledge is contributed to a pool of communal knowledge, and is subsequently tempered by peer review. In the March 28, 2005 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, Vauhini Vara explains:

Any visitor can easily change a wiki's appearance or the information it contains using tools included on the site. Later, if another user disagrees with a change, he can cancel it just as easily with the click of a mouse. Changes appear instantly and are tracked in a “history” tab on the page. Each topic is overseen by an administrator, who has the power to block users who have records of contributing little more than vandalism. Still, for the most part, democracy rules.

To the uninitiated, that free-for-all approach to editing sounds like a recipe for chaos. But it's a model that has made Wikipedia [a wiki-based, user-written encyclopedia], one of the most-visited sites on the Web...Over the past four years, Wikipedia's high traffic and strong community of die-hard users has helped it gain a reputation for being surprisingly accurate.

The wiki model is essentially, the embodiment of the Web 2.0 value of radical trust. With millions of hands at work, generating each article on Wikipedia, we learn to trust that, working collectively, we can develop a democratic semblance of “truth.” The majority of articles on Wikipedia emerge from conversations taking place on “Talk” pages corresponding to each article, where dozens of qualified and unqualified experts committed to that page's topic, hammer out the details of each article, seeking to incorporate the greatest variety of perspectives on the subject at hand. In other words, the objective truth becomes the one which takes into consideration the greatest number of subjective “truths,” while retaining factual accuracy.

This is why, when I launched my Googlebomb campaign two years ago, to knock an anti-Semitic website out of the top slot on Google when searching for the term “Jew,” I recommended the Wikipedia entry “Jew” to replace the site. Because of the collaborative, democratic nature of the writing on Wikipedia, the site offers the most exhaustive and inclusive definition of a Jew imaginable. Further, anyone with a bone to pick over the definition has the freedom to jump in and change it.

And on that note, I should add that Wikipedia has an extensive number of entries on Jewish subjects. In some ways, it rivals Jewish encyclopedias that are available only in print and at prohibitive costs. Wikipedia is free, and always at your fingertips, online.

Another added feature to wikis, is of course, hyperlinking—the manner in which web pages are linked together. While browsing an article on Wikipedia, one need only click a proper-noun to arrive at another article encapsulating an entire study of that entity. In that sense, the parallel to the Talmud is striking.

"The Hebrew word for tractate is *masechet*, which means, literally, 'webbing,'" writes Jonathan Rosen in his book *The Talmud and the Internet*. "As with the World Wide Web, only the metaphor of the loom, ancient and inclusive, captures the reach and randomness, the infinite interconnectedness of words."

"I have often thought, contemplating a page of Talmud," continues Rosen, "that it bears a certain uncanny resemblance to a home page on the Internet, where nothing is whole in itself but where icons and text boxes are doorways through which visitors pass into an infinity of cross-referenced texts and conversations."

Indeed, a wiki is the closest thing to a virtual Talmud imaginable. In fact, the idea is so obvious to some, that a small group of committed Jews, of their own volition, are currently undergoing the process of making the entire Mishnah available via wiki, in Hebrew, French and English. Other sites of this nature are beginning to emerge as well. I, personally, am working on one of them, which I'll come back to later.

Wikis are just taking off, and their effects have yet to be seen. However, wikis have, for some Jewish communities, been essential as an organizing tool. One *chavurah*, Jews in the Woods, which holds weekend retreats for so-called "fruity Jews" of the neo-*hasidic*

persuasion, uses a wiki to set a communal agenda and plan events. The site is open to contribution by all participants, whereas Jews in the Woods is an entirely grassroots organization with no centralized leadership. It is essentially a *kibbutz*-style *kehillah*, distributed across the United States and Israel, which stays connected in cyberspace in between real-world meet-ups.

Along those lines, another popular component of Web 2.0 is social networking. Social network software allows friends to get connected online and to meet others of like-mind and interest, through their already established contacts. Users create a profile for themselves, listing basic biographical information and their overall interests—hobbies, favorite books and music, and so forth—and then connect their profiles to those of their friends. They can then traverse the entire network by hopping from one friend to the next.

Social networking sites, such as Friendster, Tribe and MySpace, have the added feature of allowing friends who connect online to form groups together, where they can share a bulletin board, a discussion forum, community calendar, and photo galleries. Never failing to seize unto a new medium, Jews can also be found organizing on such services, with literally dozens of groups catering to Jewish interests on MySpace alone. The generic "MySpace Jews" group itself has over 10,000 participants.

Some content-driven websites have begun adding social networking as an added feature of their sites as well. In addition to feature articles and pictorials, the popular adult-themed site, SuicideGirls offers social networking with the same functions as MySpace, such as groups, calendars, discussion forums, and so on. A specialty site catering specifically to people with tattoo and piercing fetishes, the Jews have banded together there as well, with both a Jewish group and a pro-Israel group.

Birthright Israel has also recently introduced social networking to its website (though at a lower level of implementation) in order to help alumni stay connected after their trips. Some Hillel directors also report having success using social networking as a means of connecting with Jewish students at their universities, particularly on commuter campuses.

Again, here as well, because of the emergent nature of the technology, and the lack of serious inquiry into the subject, it is still too early to gauge the impact of social networking technology on the Jewish community. However, its potential to be used as a means to connect Jews in disparate communities, or to help Jews connect to those of like-mind and interest in their own neighborhoods, is immense and as of yet unexplored.

Now that you've been introduced to some of the core Web 2.0 technologies, allow me to share my vision for the future by describing some of the projects I'm working on.

Imagine, if you will, taking the entire Jewish bookshelf and making it available online in a wiki-based format. Using existing technology, the software could automatically create a concordance of words and verses, as well as allow for public and private annotation and linking of the text.

Reading a piece of *responsa*

from 14th century Spain, that has been translated into English by a diligent team of volunteers? Drag your mouse over the reference to a biblical verse within the text and see the full verse in a pop-up window, along with links to the perek in its original context, a concordance of all references to that verse in Tanakh, Talmud and *responsa*, and a separate list of user-contributed *drashot* (commentaries) on that verse.

Highlight a selection of text and click 'Annotate' to add your own commentary to the text, either for personal or public use. Imagine the possibility of having thousands of Jews of different stripes and perspectives adding insight into one verse of Torah and connecting it with endless numbers of classic and modern texts. Further, contributors could "tag" text with relevant keywords, simplifying searches infinitely.

Considering the prohibitive cost of Jewish education, providing resources as such, online and free of charge, is essential to Jewish continuity. Further, encouraging continued discussion, commentary and debate upon Jewish texts is a way to keep them relevant and valuable for future generations.

Next: Consider *The Jewish Catalog*. The three-volume collection offered practical information for practicing Judaism and organizing a Jewish community. In some ways like the *Mishnah Torah* and the *Shulchan Aruch*, *The Jewish Catalog* simplified Jewish practice by giving straightforward directions on how to “do” Judaism. However, *The Jewish Catalog* offered a pluralistic and egalitarian view of Jewish practice that was inclusive of multiple viewpoints, unlike the *Mishnah Torah* and the *Shulchan Aruch*. Unfortunately, *The Jewish Catalog* has been outmoded for a number of years, and has become in many ways irrelevant.

Imagine using a wiki to bring *The Jewish Catalog* back to life online. No longer a one-off dead document, a wiki-based “do-it-yourself” guide for autonomous Jewish practice could be fluid—ever growing, ever changing—and inclusive of an array of viewpoints, extending validity to each one. Users could contribute practical advice, instructions, and motivations for everything from organizing Shabbat dinners, to leading services, to making *sukkah* decorations. And, once again, it is free and online, thus always accessible to all.

Finally, let us consider the value of social networking technology as a tool for better organizing existing *chavurot* (fellowships/affinity groups) and *kehillot* (communities), and for helping create new ones. Using social networking technology, synagogues, JCCs, independent minyanim and other entities can stay connected to their constituents once they leave the confines of their buildings, and further, help establish deeper connections between the members of their communities. Using collaborative tools integrated into the social networking platform, together communities can plan events, develop their agenda, and even create texts such as prayerbooks, all in one central location online.

In a Jewish world increasingly dogged by disaffiliation, resulting from dissatisfaction with institutional agendas, creating tools to empower independent communities to be successful without the direct support (and control) of overarching institutions may be the only way to insure Judaism’s survival.

As the values enshrined in these emergent technologies begin to move out of cyberspace and into “meatspace,” we can expect them to have a dramatic impact on all aspects of our lives, not least of which will be our approach to religious practice and communal organizing.

By embracing these technologies and their attendant values, we can help resurrect our lost tradition—the assertion of the spectrum of Jewish belief and practice—and prevent a deadlocking of Judaism that will render it impervious to change and adaptation to shifting paradigms, and thus a dinosaur destined for extinction.

There’s a thrilling future ahead of us. Try not to get cut by “the bleeding edge.”

7 Responses to “And The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Part X, Resurrecting A Lost Tradition”

1 **formermuslm** Nov 1st, 2005 at 2:27 pm

I’ll be honest, I didn’t read the entire post. But enough to get a general idea of what you’re saying. I have just one question.

What is supposed to be the point of all this debating that you’re so excited about?

2 **AngerBoy** Nov 1st, 2005 at 5:19 pm

Yasher koach.

I would LOVE to get a copy of the DVD from you. I am currently working on a paper about wiki-as-Jewish-metaphor myself, and would really like to be able to cite you in it as well.

Let me know if you’re interested.

3 **Smooth Henry** Nov 1st, 2005 at 5:35 pm

the mishna is already available online

<http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/b/...>

4 **Rabbi Menachem** Nov 2nd, 2005 at 1:46 am

Thank you. The stuff you've been posting lately is real helpful for my thinking as we get our community organized. We're kinda behind with our technology—our website doesn't capture well who we are—but we're working on it. We recently formed councils to get stuff done, like 501c3 and a social action agenda. I often say that the community came about because a bunch of us wanted to do Judaism in a way that made sense to us. It's helpful and inspiring to read about KZ over at Jewschool and your essays here as we continue.

shalom v'ahava,

Rabbi Menachem

5 **Jay Rosen** Nov 2nd, 2005 at 8:09 am

Thanks for doing this. Extremely interesting Click my name and scroll down to point number 3: "3. What the printing press did to the Catholic Church the blogging press is doing to the media church." Fits right in with what you are saying. Cheers....

6 **josh** Nov 2nd, 2005 at 3:01 pm

Very interesting indeed, though I think it might be easier if Jews learnt hebrew.

Blogs are an incredible way for disconnected and remote people to come together, but usuallu it's for banter and chat with no purpose, except perhaps the chat itself (which does have its merits seeing as how without the internet, we'd all turn into mindless tv watching idiots).

7 **Rishona** Nov 7th, 2005 at 10:36 am

Yes, many resources are becoming available online; especially crucial is the presence of Torah-true Judaism in all of its variations so that people can see that there is more to being an Orthodox Jew than sporting a beard and peyes. Also it's a sense of strength to see that you are not totally alone/unique in being different. In my case, being a Black, single woman (w/progresive political beliefs) in a yeshivish/Black-hat community - I sometimes get discouraged with having no one to relate to. Of course I love being Shomer Shabbos/Mitzvot and having the strong Orthodox Jewish community life and all it can provide. Fascinating blog.

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