

Medium Matters: The Medium and Message of Torah in the Digital Age

In 1964, just as the television was becoming a fixture of the American home, Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), a renowned professor and philosopher of communication theory, published a groundbreaking book discussing the effects of different forms of content consumption.¹ McLuhan explored the relationship between the way content is delivered, for instance either through print books or visually through movies, and its effect on the human psyche. He summarized his basic thesis with his oft-cited idiom, “the medium is the message.” According to McLuhan, major changes in society result from the mediums in which content is delivered, not necessarily from the messages of such content. For instance, he explains, movies changed society not so much from the messages of film but from the medium of film itself. He writes:

The movie, by sheer speeding up the mechanical, carried us from the world of sequence and connections into the world of creative configuration and structure. The message of the movie medium is that of transition from lineal connections to configurations.

His writing, while a little obscure, had a pivotal impact on media studies. As a result of his adage “the medium



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is the message” future scholars paid closer attention to the forms in which we deliver content, rather than just the messages contained therein.

Does the Medium Matter in Jewish Tradition?

Though McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message,” the underlying concept is a central tenet of Jewish law and thought. The Talmud (*Gittin* 60b) records the following:

כתוב כותב לך את הדברים האלה וכתוב כי ע”פ הדברים האלה הא כיצד דברים שבכתב אי אתה רשאי לאומרו על פה דברים שבעל פה אי אתה רשאי לאומרו בכתב.

One verse (Shemot 34:27) states, “Write for yourself the following words” and another verse (ibid.) states “For according to the mouth of these words.” How can these be reconciled (whether the words should be written or spoken)? This means, that which is written cannot be recited orally (without the text present), and that which is transmitted through speech cannot be written down.

Here, the Torah prohibits writing the spoken word and speaking the written word.² Underscoring the Torah’s sensitivity to the importance of the medium, Rabbi Yehudah Lowe (1520-1609), known as the Maharal of Prague, explains the reasoning as follows:

דע, כי אין ראוי שתהיה התורה שבעל פה בכתובה, מפני שהתורה שבעל פה הם פרטי המצוה ופרושיה. ודבר זה אין קץ וסוף, כי הפרטים אין להם קץ. ולא היה דבר שלם אם היה כותב מקצת בלבד, לכך אין לכתוב כלל התורה שבעל פה חסירה. כי הכתיבה מורה על התמימות, שיהיה כאן הכל ביחד, והרי בתורה שבעל פה אי אפשר, כמו שאמרנו. אבל על פה, הרי כי ענין הפה כך הוא, שאין הכל ביחד. כי כאשר מדבר דבור, ואחר כך השני, כבר הלך לו דבור הראשון.

Understand, it is not fitting to write down the oral tradition because the oral tradition delineates all of the details and explanations of the commandments — and such an endeavor is infinite, there are no bounds to the details. If they were to be written, even just a portion, it would not be complete; therefore,



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it is better to write nothing at all. For writing presents issues in their complete static form — with everything outlined together — which would be impossible with the oral law. However, when ideas are spoken, inherently the nature of speech is that not everything is present at once. Once one word is spoken, the previous word has already dissipated.
Tiferes Yisroel, ch. 68

The Maharal's distinction between reading and writing is reflected in our figures of speech. When we want to make sure understanding is static and clear, without ambiguity, we ask that everyone should “be on the same page.” Alternatively, when we solicit interpretation and engagement we request the listener to “hear us out.” Aside from the messages conveyed through the written or spoken word, the Torah demands that we are equally sensitive to the medium of transmission.

The Ever-Evolving Medium of Torah

Much of this distinction has been blurred since the prohibition of writing the Oral Law was rescinded. As more and more Jews were unable to preserve the oral tradition due to increased communal instability, the oral tradition was reluctantly allowed to be written.³ Nonetheless,

even after our oral traditions were committed to writing, the form of such writing tried to preserve some of the characteristics of its original oral form. So, as rabbinic students are surely familiar, the Mishnah is written concisely, often in rhyming constructs, allowing its words to be easily committed to memory.⁴ Similarly, the Talmud's desultory structure mimics the original oral dialect in which these texts were initially developed.⁵

Interestingly, there is a debate as to whether the original prohibition to write down the oral tradition was completely abrogated or, for those who do not have trouble committing it to memory, it still remains in place. Rabbi Nossan Adler (1741-1800), noted German kabbalist and teacher of R. Moses Sofer (Chassam Sofer), developed a form of braille language to write down his Torah ideas, as he felt his sharp memory excluded him from the allowance to write down oral traditions.⁶ Later rabbinic figures, however, pointed out that the shift in medium from an oral tradition to a written one was definite and deliberate, regardless of one's memory prowess.⁷ The transition from a culture of orality to the medium of writing, they explained, provided unique opportunities for the perpetuation of Torah in future generations.

The Media Studies of Rav Akiva Eiger

One champion of the opportunities presented in a decidedly written tradition was Rav Akiva Eiger (1761-1837). In his introduction to his responsa, he instructs his children to be sure that they embrace the opportunities inherent in the printed medium. “I request of you my beloved child,” he writes to his children of his manuscripts, “that it should be printed on beautiful paper with dark ink and a pleasing font.” Rav Akiva Eiger intuitively understood that the medium is a crucial part of the message. It is not enough to transmit the right message, but the medium we use to deliver those messages must be properly considered as well. As Rav Akiva Eiger continues to explain, “because in my opinion, the soul is affected and the mind is expanded and focus is awakened from learning from an attractive and elegant book.” His children took his advice seriously and somewhat literally. In the first edition of his responsa, when there was room left on the page, his children added beautiful pictures of deer, birds, and trees.⁸ With the page absent of Rav Eiger's written message, his children were still mindful of the opportunities that the medium presented.



Images printed in Teshuvot Rabbi Akiva Eiger (Warsaw, 1835)

Online Torah: Untapped Opportunities within the Medium

If the message of the medium provided unique opportunities for the published word, what are the opportunities when transmitting Torah with modern technology? Rav Akiva Eiger concerned himself with using the proper font and clear typography — what are the opportunities contained in the medium of the internet that we should be considering when disseminating Torah? I believe there are three important opportunities that an online medium offers to Torah development.

Distribution: On the simplest level, the internet allows us to reach a wider audience. The host of social media platforms each offers a unique way to distribute Torah and construct Torah ideas. While the former point is obvious, the latter demands more careful attention. It is not enough to upload or email our Torah, but the different medium of each social media platform needs to be considered as well. The medium of Instagram presents different opportunities than the medium of Twitter and it is important not to overlook those differences. For instance, a Torah idea on Instagram needs a visual presentation — a picture, a sharp design — while ideas successfully transmitted on Twitter require concise and clever verbal formulations. Much of the Torah world already understands the power online distribution offers our messages, it is time we paid closer attention to the different mediums.

Collaboration: Alvin Toffler, in his 1980 book *The Third Wave*, coined the term “prosumer” to describe the

new way in which people engage with content. People are no longer divided among strict lines of producers and consumers; nowadays everyone wants to be both. Think about Facebook. Or Twitter. Or Instagram. What makes them so attractive? It is not just that you can engage with other people’s content, but you can also share your own. You consume other people’s posts pictures, and articles, while also producing your own. Torah online must embrace the “prosumer” mentality. Ideas shared best online allow for user collaboration. The most commendable examples of this are the wealth of user-generated materials available on Sefaria, a website that allows users to translate and create source materials. A slightly more advanced illustration of the power of online collaboration, albeit outside the Torah world, is the website Genius.com, which allows users to provide commentary and history to song lyrics, historical speeches, and even other users’ self-generated content. Their mantra, “Annotate the Web,” offers amazing possibilities for educators looking to introduce the rich history of Jewish commentary to otherwise uninterested students. One need not use the actual Genius platform to demonstrate the power of collaboration — skillfully using the comments capability of GoogleDocs could allow an educator to present materials and empower students to present their voices, comments, and questions on the ideas.

Interactivity: Although they sound similar, collaboration and interactivity address two different issues related to online content. A basic example of online interactivity is the use of the hyperlink, by clicking on a certain word or image you are sent to another page. Interactivity, however, can be

used in incredible ways to impart information. The more technical term for one of the most common methods used to design web interactivity is parallax scrolling, which gives websites a three-dimensional immersive feeling. Parallax scrolling would allow, for instance, for the background images of your screen to change as you scroll down an article you are reading. Imagine reading Megillat Esther online and, as you scroll down the page, characters from the story emerge to act out the scenes you are reading. Online Torah, without thinking about the medium, just feels like a less organic version of holding a book; but, if we become more creative about the possibilities of the medium, engaging with online Torah can become its own unique immersive experience.

Some likely dismiss some of the more innovative possibilities that the internet offers for Torah dissemination. Leaving more sensitive issues related to the internet aside, our overall emphasis on embracing the opportunities of the medium can seem for many like an unnecessary exercise. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, addressed a similar sentiment, when discussing the dreadful state of Torah writing. His commendable crusade for sophisticated Torah writing, as he recounts, was dismissed by many as allowing the medium to trump the message. Naysayers would ask him:⁹ *So what? If it informs and occasionally even uplifts, then who cares if the phrasing is inelegant or the words inappropriate? What difference does it make as long as it does the job?*

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ropes” — the casing and medium of our Torah matters too. Whether it is our choice of words or choice of web design — medium matters.

The integration of Torah and technology offers endless possibilities. But the revolution will only be fully realized when we pay closer attention to the opportunities of the medium instead of being solely occupied with the substance of the message. Particularly regarding distribution, collaboration, and interactivity there is still much unrealized potential for learners, but thankfully many organizations have already admirably begun creatively harnessing the power of the online medium.¹⁰

Have these developments changed the way people learn Torah? Those who are not digital natives particularly ask this question with some understandable measure of concern. While the answer to that question is a resounding yes, it still does not have to cause alarm for those who feel new presentations of Torah compromise the very substance of Torah. Every generation has their own path to access Torah.

The innovations of the Rambam’s organization of the corpus of Torah, the legal condensation of Rabbi Yosef Karo’s Shulchan Aruch and, yes, the NCSY Beit Medrash session are all part of one tradition that invites new minds of each successive generation to interact with Torah in new ways. Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829-1908) compared the diverse range of opinions within Judaism’s legal tradition to the harmonies and melodies of a song.¹¹ Each opinion adds depth to the symphony of our tradition. If the diversity of the messages within Judaism is compared to the melodies of a song, perhaps the varying mediums can be compared to instruments. Whether it is text, speech, pictures, or online platforms, each is a new instrument within the ever-evolving orchestra of Torah.

Five years after Marshal McLuhan published his essay, a television show debuted that educationally embraced the notion that “the medium is the message.” It was called Sesame Street. Christopher Cerf, one of the original composers on Sesame Street, related that the program was created in response to a basic question: “Why does educational television have to have no creativity? Or, turned around, why does creative television have no education?”¹² The Torah community has begun to answer this question as it relates to the integration of Torah and online mediums. Our collective educational success, however, demands that we continue to explore new vistas of Torah expression. It’s not enough to listen to the message of Torah, we also have to pay attention to the mediums of Torah expression.

Notes

1. Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: The New American Library (1964).
2. Regarding whether this prohibition is biblical or rabbinic in origin, see *Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim* 49:2 and *Sheilot U’Teshuvot Chikrei Lev, Mahadura Basra, Orach Chaim*, 15.
3. See Rambam’s introduction to his *Yad HaChazakah*.
4. See Talmud, *Megilah* 32a, Tosafos *ibid.* s.v. *V’hashoneh* as well as *Tiferes Yisroel, Arachin* 4:1.
5. For more on orality in the historical development of the Talmud, see my teacher, Dr. Yaakov Elman’s “Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud.” *Oral Tradition* 14.1 (1999): 52-99.
6. See *Sdei Chemed*, Ma’arechet 4, no. 22. Rabbi Adler’s student, Rav Moshe Sofer, also had a more limited view of the allowance to write down the oral law. See his *She’ailot U’Teshuvot Chassam Sofer, Orach Chaim* #208, which prohibits writing down the oral law for one’s self-aggrandizement.
7. See Rav Ovadia Yosef’s *She’ailot U’Teshuvot Y’Chave Daat*, Vol. 3, *Yoreh Deah*, #74. See also, Rav Tzadok HaKohen’s *Machshavat Charutz* 15:6.
8. I am indebted to Phillip (Pinny) Stieglitz for pointing out these pictures.
9. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, “Tefillin in a Brown Paper Bag,” *The Shul Without a Clock*, pp. 137-141.
10. I am hesitant to mention any specific organizations at the risk of leaving out others doing incredible work, though I realize I have already broken this rule by singling out Sefaria.
11. *Arukh Ha-Shulchan*, introduction to *Choshen Mishpat*.
12. See Michael Davis’s *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street*, p. 206.