

THE ROLE OF POP CULTURE IN TORAH GROWTH AND EDUCATION: A CONVERSATION

Chanukah accentuates the threshold between the Jewish home and the public domain. Both the position of the menorah and the timing of lighting relate to the ritual act of observance, as well as to the distinction between our own internal home environment and the outside world. We ideally light the menorah in the doorway of our home, or minimally at a window through which we can project the light out into the street. The lighting takes

place specifically during a period of time when people are “in the street.” The religious and cultural crisis that ultimately led to the Chanukah story has much to do with the challenge of living a unique Jewish life within the larger environment of the outside world. Total isolation is virtually impossible, while complete integration has shown to be an almost certain path toward assimilation. Clearly, our capacity to survive and thrive within the framework of a

society that is characterized by its own ideals and culture is contingent upon our ability to discern and filter, embrace and reject; to relate to the complexity and nuance of the world around us.

In no area of societal engagement is this more complex than popular culture. Popular culture emanates from the population that creates, nurtures, and sustains it. We are part of that population, and therefore

exposed to much of its substance. Its influence is inevitable, yet also incredibly challenging. How do we relate to the popular culture around us? How do we determine which elements are opportunities for the edification of our religious life, and which threaten it? How do we create a framework of engagement that relates to the reality within which we live, yet also rises above it when the standards are not appropriate to our values? How do we teach our children that certain elements of the culture may prove enjoyable and enriching, while others are hostile and incongruent with our way of life? How do we place limits on our exposure without projecting inconsistency and hypocrisy to those around us? The discussion that follows explores the religious and communal dynamics that frame these questions.

What are the challenges and opportunities that you see in our community's relationship to pop culture?



RABBI FELDMAN: Our Yeshiva is known for, among other qualities, balancing

an appreciation of the wisdom and culture of all of humanity with an absolute commitment to the principles of Torah, which is necessarily exclusive of much of what is present within that culture. Accordingly, by that reality, it is the relationship with culture itself that is both the challenge and the opportunity.

The significant problem of objectionable content is well known

and understood, and is of course a concern. But the term “pop culture” requires greater definition. Often, in discussing the parameters of engagement, we talk about “low culture” and “high culture.” I don’t know if I’m qualified to define these terms, but I would not use the particular medium or genre as defining what is low culture and what is high culture. I would rather define high or low culture based on what the product seeks to evoke, or even more subjectively, what the unique personality of the individual consumer takes from the experience.

To illustrate, Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zatzal*, in his *Teshuvos (Igros Moshe II, 79)*, is dismissive of the possibility of any redeeming value in theatrical pursuits, noting, among other objections, that they reduce our aversion to the seriousness of murder and the value of human life. This is an understandable and in fact documentable concern: the U.S. Army has trained soldiers to overcome a resistance to killing the enemy by exposing them to war movies; this resistance to killing was also far less common once such movies had permeated the general culture. Undeniably, such depictions have the capacity to dehumanize the other and disconnect the viewer.

And yet other reactions are possible too. The late film critic Roger Ebert notably compared movies to “a machine that generates empathy,” claiming that they “let ... you understand a little bit more about different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears [and] help ... us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.” Also, “The great movies enlarge us, they civilize us, they make us more decent people.”

While his focus was on film, he could have just as well been commenting on any medium depicting the human condition.

So which is it? Presumably, both descriptions are possible. Further, a person’s reaction joins the intent of the producer with the sensitivities of the consumer, making the eventual response a highly individual outcome that transcends the vessel that contains the product.

High culture, accordingly, would be that which elevates and edifies, while low culture desensitizes and demeans. This classification might not be a binary reality inherent in the artistic output, but can be descriptive of the unique experience that occurs to the consumer, which can vary widely from the experience of a different consumer.

Of course, the intent of the creator does play an outsized role, which adds to concerns inherent in whatever might be called “low culture.” Objectionable content may not only be incidentally present, but may represent the purpose of the production, greatly intensifying the already significant obstacles therein.

This, again, is a classification that exists outside of medium and genre. With all due respect to Marshall McLuhan, the medium may be the message, but not absolutely so. While one medium or another may be more or less conducive to a particular type of experience, it is also true that every medium has unique capacities in how it communicates, and in the hands of a thoughtful artist can enhance any message.

Likewise, the same applies when addressing “pop” culture. The manifestations of culture can be at

once popular and also high, low, or any place in between. Shakespeare, in his day, was the ultimate in popular culture. [Similarly, the oeuvre of Alfred Hitchcock has generated many hundreds of pages of scholarly analysis.]

The crucial question then is not whether the product was designed for the masses, or appreciated by them, but rather what effect it has on its beholder. This, in turn, is greatly shaped by the eye of that beholder, as well as by his ear, mind, and soul.

Every individual needs to understand himself and what he extracts from his interaction with any form of culture, popular or otherwise. The strength and character of our internal foundation will greatly impact what such engagement brings, and thus define both the challenge and the opportunity.

Regarding sports, I'm in a minority on this question because I am more cautious about sports than I am about some other aspects of general culture, which I think is a less common attitude. I should mention first that many wonderful *bnei Torah*, many outstanding *talmidei chachamim* who are far beyond me, have benefited greatly from their appreciation of sports, and have found a place for it in their spiritual lives that fits well with their overall character.

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That being said, I do think it is important to be aware of the risks that are attached to sports fandom. The admiration of professional athletes generally focuses on skills and abilities that do not have inherent moral or spiritual value, and then draws us into idolizing of individuals who may not have any other traits worthy of emulation by *bnei Torah* (of course they may indeed be upstanding and admirable people, but that is not a necessary prerequisite for athletic skill).

Again, many spiritually sensitive people have found great inspiration and moral insight from their engagement with the sports world. However, as with all cultural intake, this is contingent on the consumer's own inherent moral framework, since the game will generally not provide such messages or highlight them naturally.

I have heard many *rebbeim* modify the statement of the Talmud that one can be recognized "*b'koso, kiso, u'b'kaaso*" (in one's [uninhibited] intoxicated state, in one's spending priorities, and in one's state of anger," *Eiruvin* 65b), to include "*b'kaduro*," i.e. one's character can be discerned by how they behave on the basketball court. This is certainly true. However, the competitive environment does not always reward refined *midos*; thus, the context is valuable as a reflection of character, but not naturally as a

training ground for such development. Nonetheless, many *bnei aliyah* have found opportunities within both to display and to mold refined character, and we all benefit from their efforts.



RABBI

BASHEVKIN: Let's start with a given. We're talking about communities that

are already engaged in outside culture. Whether its subscriptions to the Wall Street Journal, television, art, movies, or theater, many in our community engage with culture in different ways. I would like to leave aside a halakhic discussion, since, as far as I know this is not being published in the Purim edition, and such a discussion is woefully out of my scope of expertise. Sadly, much of outside culture is.

I want to start by highlighting an important distinction in the question. A February 1949 article in Harper's, titled "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," by Russel Lynes, introduced to a wider audience the distinctions within different forms of culture. Namely, there are two major poles in culture. There's elite culture like fine art found in museums, and lowbrow culture like television, comics, and movies. During the "early years" of the Modern Orthodox community, there was much discussion about the encounter and integration between elite culture forms like literature and art with the world of Torah. People were rightfully fascinated when Rabbi Soloveitchik could marshal Kierkegaard and Hume within Talmudic discussions, and they would boast that their rabbi also had a PhD. By and large, the thought leadership within our community ignored pop culture, deeming it too

pedestrian and low-class. Of course, outside of the leadership, much of the community drifted toward the pleasant distraction of pop culture and left more highbrow discussions of “integration” and “encounter” to rabbis with PhDs. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein noted, “The children in Centrist summer camps today do not waste away their summers because they are busy mastering Bach or Euclid.”

So, if pop culture is a reality within our community, where does that leave us? As noted, there is a challenge and an opportunity. And, as is often the case, I think they may be one and the same. Peter Drucker, a noted management consultant, famously remarked, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Sure, a company can have impressive change-management plans, but if it does not address the underlying culture in the institution nothing will really change. For too long, Modern Orthodoxy has been trying to beat culture with strategy. They re-examined the sources, they issued white papers, they convened conferences. But all our strategic plans were always devoured by the voracious appetite of culture. Our yeshiva league, our bar and bat mitzvahs, our Netflix account.

The challenge of pop culture is that it is very sticky, very contagious, and blissfully distracting. If the only pop culture in our community is sports, movies, and television, we are going to be left with a Modern Orthodoxy that is just a shell without substance. The opportunity, however, is to develop and mimic many of the positive trappings of pop culture within a Torah context. Though I often joke that given the attention it gets, you would think Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote

about the ontological importance of floor hockey in his *Halakhic Man*, I do think that our yeshiva sports leagues are a great case study for this. The culture surrounding the leagues, standards of behavior, and sportsmanship is a great opportunity to develop positive and sticky culture for our community. Many of our high schools and youth organizations are leading the way in this regard. They are all developing great experiential programming, means of affiliation, and just good old-fashioned shtick that can compete with the gravitational pull of pop culture. No forum, symposium, panel session, or conference is going to stem the tide of pop culture. The way to countervail the messaging of pop culture is to develop a better one of your own.

Should Torah education incorporate pop culture references (from sports, movies, etc.)? Is there a right way and wrong way to do this?



RABBI FELDMAN: This question represents a particular challenge for

educators and others who influence public discourse. The use of our personal sense humor, as well as of mass-produced sources of humor or entertainment, can be powerful tools for pedagogy; when employed well, not only does an educational message get across more effectively, it can endure for a lifetime. At the same time, there are inherent risks that are magnified exponentially when a rebbe or any teacher of Torah is involved.

Using our own sense of humor, a

cherished and invaluable natural resource, can nonetheless be dangerous when not carefully disciplined. A remark that seems casual when uttered by the average person is devastating when spoken by a respected teacher. Further, a teacher must be concerned that his or her less serious remarks can potentially create a climate of negation of others that the students will pick up on. If a teacher makes remarks about others that appear to be disparaging, even if it is granted that the remarks may be justifiable from his or her perspective, the effect on his or her students’ respect for others, as well as their perception of how a Torah scholar relates to others, can be severely affected. This topic is addressed very effectively in Rabbi Shalom Carmy’s important article, “You Taught Me Musar and the Profit On It” (*Tradition*, 42:2, Summer 2009). It is instructive in this regard to read the responsum of the *Chavvos Yair* (#152) that the *Chafetz Chaim* printed in the back of his sefer, in which the author contextualizes and explains the statements in the Talmud that appear to challenge our perceptions of what is expected in terms of mutual respect among scholars.

Regarding the referencing of popular culture, the benefits are similarly surrounded by risks. The teacher, as a mature and sensitive religious personality, is hopefully careful to structure his or her own cultural engagement with discrimination and balance. However, this may not be accurately perceived or appreciated by his or her students, who may lack the same ability of discernment. This is particularly true in that the attitude portrayed toward media consumption is often conveyed as all or nothing; i.e., we either abstain from engaging

with popular culture, or engage with it indiscriminately. While the simplicity of such an approach may be appealing, its premise makes it harder for a teacher to maintain a nuanced approach in public. This is all in addition to the fact that a Torah teacher has a need to maintain an appropriate level of dignity (see Rambam, *Hil Talmud Torah* 4:5), at the same time attempting to create an atmosphere where his or her students will reap the positive benefits humor can provide.

Beyond this concern, it is also important that any reference be used to enhance the message, rather than tailoring the lesson to the reference, which has the effect of cheapening both the content and possibly the image of the speaker as well. If I may cite Rabbi Shalom Carmy twice in one response, he illustrated the difference quite effectively in another one of his articles, “Homer and the Bible” (*Tradition* 41:4, 2008).



RABBI BASHEVKIN: Generally, I think there are two types of religious

experiences. One is a religiosity that reflects your life, your experiences, your worldview. It is a religious world that understands what your workplace may feel like and what your Sunday mornings look like. This is a religious affiliation that, to use an over-used descriptor, feels relevant. There is a second form of religious experience that is nearly the opposite. Not because it is irrelevant, but because the power of such religious experiences derives from their other-worldliness, rather than reflecting the quotidian world where you live. This may be a darkened *tisch*, a moving

kabbolas Shabbos, or an energetic Beis Medrash. It is not the world you live in everyday and that is exactly what makes it so captivating.

When I think about incorporating pop culture references, I think about these two types of religious experiences. For the former experience, where religiosity is a function of relevance, then pop culture, like economic terminology or the latest headline, is crucial to connecting to your audience. The danger, I think, is when our reliance on making religion relatable comes at the expense of showing how it is also aspirational. Many of the most powerful religious moments emerge because they transport the participants to places where clichéd sports references and dated 90’s movie quotes are no longer important.

Torah learning can be a mirror and a ladder. When used as a mirror, a well-placed movie quote or sports reference can remind the listener that Torah reflects and reaches the world we live in. But Torah also needs to be used as a ladder. It allows us, however briefly, to transcend the banality of our routines and responsibilities and, for a moment, feel eternity. Pop culture used right will sharpen the reflection in the mirror. But if used haphazardly and sloppily, it will erode the rungs of the ladder.

As an aside, for those who do plan on incorporating pop culture into their shiurim, please allow me to append this this handy check-list:

1. Do I really know how to pronounce the name of the actor/movie star/television personality I am about to cleverly reference, or is it just a name I have seen in print or overheard my children say, and I now plan to butcher



Listen to Rabbi Feldman analyze a topic in Bava Kama using the recent Banksy painting shredding story.

the pronunciation so badly that the entire audience doesn’t know what I am referring to?

2. Am I referencing a show that anyone in the audience has ever heard of, or in my sad and desperate attempt to assert my relevance am I actually just highlighting my irrelevance?

3. Is this example so over-used and cliché that most of the audience knows exactly where I am going with the analogy from the moment I start?

Nowadays, aside from professional sports games and Hollywood movies, there is a culture of content that is shared in the form of memes, GIFS, and amateur content. Sometimes this is called “low brow pop culture.” Is there any distinction in incorporating this new form of content as opposed to other types of content, such as sports and movies?



RABBI FELDMAN: As mentioned above, the format doesn’t have to dictate the

character of the message. Sometimes tools like these can be very effective, especially since they are low-budget options, both for the creator and the consumer, who don't have to invest money, or more important, time, to appreciate them. The constrained formats can also be very conducive to creativity.



RABBI BASHEVKIN: Most discussions about how we integrate pop culture into Torah learning relate to topical integration.

First, what is topical integration and did I make up that term just now? Yes, yes I did.

Leaving the genesis of this term aside, I believe topical integration can refer either to shiurim that use some pop culture phenomenon as a comparative value to Torah, or pop culture examples that explain or highlight Torah scenarios. An example of the former would be any shiur titled, “[Insert name of popular movie/video game/sports]: A Torah Perspective.” Here, pop culture is being used to contrast some Torah value. So maybe it is Fortnite and Torah or Snapchat and Torah or The Avengers and Torah, but pop culture is being used to highlight some Torah value. Similarly, in the latter example of topical integration, pop culture is used to highlight a halakhic process or scenario. So perhaps you use the Simpsons to consider a halakhic dilemma or analyze whether Seinfeld was, in fact, obligated to wear the puffy shirt, but pop culture can provide a situational lens to consider Torah questions.

The topical integration of pop

culture into shiurim began as something very interesting, but the overwhelming development of online communication and programming should force us to look at new ways we should be interacting with culture. Namely, as I have written about once in these very pages, we should focus less on topical connections (Torah AND Sports/Movies/Television etc. etc.) and instead consider much more carefully the medium of the internet and the opportunities it presents.

The next generation of creative Torah presentation will not just be about who could find a connection between the latest show or trend and Torah, but who could integrate the medium of such trends into Torah presentations. Simply put, the innovation of pop culture is not just about its messages — it is about the medium.

Let me give two concrete examples.

YUTorah.org is a fabulous case study in Torah innovation. On October 26, 2009, Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz uploaded a shiur to YU Torah titled, “Ten Minute Halacha – Microwave Kashrus.” What was the innovation of that shiur? It wasn't the first time someone spoke about kosher microwaves. It probably wasn't the first time someone spoke about microwaves for 10 minutes. But it was probably the first time that a discussion of kosher microwaves was marketed using a “Ten Minute” headline. That is not a *chiddush* of messaging, it is a *chiddush* of medium. It presented classic Torah within a new medium — in this case, a catchy, bite-size time frame. The sensibility of this new medium was quickly proven by imitators who gave you the ability to learn about kosher microwaves in a variety of timeframes from 20 minutes all the way down to two minutes.

But the lesson from this model is the power of harnessing a medium that speaks to your audience.

Another example is the proliferation of Jewish memes shared online. Now before people start sending angry letters to the editors, I am aware that some of these memes can be inappropriate and they certainly do not require a *Birchas HaTorah* before looking at them. But that doesn't make them insignificant. As I discussed earlier, Modern Orthodox communities have a culture problem. We have spent too much time on strategy and not enough time building culture. A dear friend who was raised in a Hassidic community once told me that the most important lesson our community should be learning from the Hassidic world is how to create great fun Jewish culture among our children. Now sharing “Shtark Jewish Memes” may not be the sole



when someone tells you a deep dvar at the purim seudah

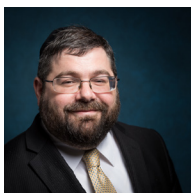


** Old school Rosh Yeshiva congratulates his Modern Orthodox son on completing rabbinic ordination**



answer to this problem, but it is likely a part of it. For too long, too much of our community has not been smiling in their official photographs — and a resilient community needs a sense of humor. Such memes and GIFS provide the slice-of-life smiles that help communities cultivate a warm and accepting self-awareness with a smile. Of course, they can go overboard or cross lines. But so can anything else. A Jewish community that embraces such a medium does not have to become duller. If anything, it opens more entryways for more people to fall in love with the oddities, quirks, joy, and inspiration of the Jewish community.

What do you think are the most exciting opportunities and developments in the way we create and share Torah ideas in 2018? What concerns you most?



RABBI FELDMAN: Here again, concerns arise in tandem with opportunities. And

also again, the concerns have been discussed extensively and effectively elsewhere.

In terms of opportunities, they may also be termed *mechayyim* — obligators. It is now possible to carry around in the palm of your hand literally *kol haTorah Kulah*. You can access anything anywhere, and while that is a danger when it comes to problematic content, it is a miracle when it comes to Torah content. If you have an hour or a minute sitting, standing, or walking, you can fill that time with valuable learning.

This development allows for advances of both quantity and quality. I often think about how my grandfather wrote *sefarim* 50 years ago, and probably wondered how widely distributed he could ever hope for them to be. I can't imagine he ever dreamt that someday, thanks to Hebrewbooks.org and other sites, someone in Hong Kong with a phone could call them up in a second, and may even be directed there by a search.

Further, there is the collaborative nature of what is now possible. Torah study has always been an extended conversation that spans across the generations. The fact that technology now preserves aspects of that conversation, disseminates that conversation more broadly than ever, and allows additions to that conversation to take place in real time, in formats that allow for all kinds of insight and detail to be shared both creatively and instantaneously, is exhilarating and brings new meaning to the mandate of *yagdil Torah v'yadir* — the spreading and glorification of Torah.



RABBI BASHEVKIN: I will begin by discussing my concerns, so I can

close with my optimism.

For all of the value of building culture, there are some very real issues. Culture in general has gone through many stages. Scholars have noted that in the last few decades post-modernism has seeped into our cultural language, rejecting many of the once sacrosanct grand narratives of life as trite and clichéd. Our television shows have become more ironic and cynical. Gone are

the days of sitcoms with sentimental happy endings; instead we have self-referential shows that exhibit witty irony and biting cynicism about our lives. David Foster Wallace famously warned of the corrosive effects of cynical culture:

Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. There's some great essay somewhere that has a line about irony being the song of the prisoner who's come to love his cage. Advertisements, television, and perhaps most of all snarky social media, eschew sentimentalism for a sharp quip and a clever retort that allows people to avoid clearly articulating what really moves them. As Wallace said elsewhere, "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human."

Most of our communal concern about social media has revolved around pornography and, undoubtedly, it poses an immense threat on our conceptions of intimacy and family.

I love a well-placed joke, a funny caption, a clever meme, but sometimes I wonder if people are losing their capacity to experience sincerity. I am nervous that sincere expressions of religiosity will soon be instinctively greeted with knee-jerk eye-rolls.

A subtler but perhaps more troubling concern is the ascent of irony and cynicism in our religious discourse. There are several examples of this on Facebook, where groups such as “Sounds Yeshivish But OK,” boasting nearly twenty thousand members, share memes, pictures, and GIFs that seem to mock and deride any hint of sentimentalism about Jewish devotion and practice. I feel comfortable leveling this criticism because I myself am a product of this culture and interact with it every day. I love a well-placed joke, a funny caption, a clever meme, but sometimes I wonder if people are losing their capacity to experience sincerity. I am nervous that sincere expressions of religiosity will soon be instinctively greeted with knee-jerk eye-rolls. We cannot allow our culture to become cynical. Maybe I sound yeshivish advocating such a position, but that’s ok.

Whatever ills may be emerging from these developments, they have thankfully been mostly overshadowed by some very exciting developments. People are sharing Torah online in frankly jaw-droppingly creative ways. Communities of educators, students, and friends are beginning to form online cohorts that transcend geographic and economic boundaries and have become genuine communal places to share Torah and ideas in innovative ways.

Here is one exciting example that gives me hope for Torah in 2018.

Jan Mieszkowski, a professor of German and comparative literature at Reed College, began sharing on Twitter brief comparative breakdowns of different philosophies and philosophers.



Jan Mieszkowski
@janmpdx

Following

Philosophy begins in
Aristotle: wonder
Kierkegaard: dread
Camus: despair
Sartre: your local cafe

1:15 PM - 6 Aug 2018

Reb Joey Rosenfeld, in a brilliant example of recognizing an emerging medium, began using a similar format for Torah ideas.



joey rosenfeld
@jorosenfeld

Torah is:
Arizal: primordial
Ramban: name of god
Besht: letters
Maharal: enlightenment
R. Nachman: ancient
R. Tzadok: creative heart
Nefesh Hachaim: studied
Baal HaTanya: divine garment
R. Kook: infinite
Leshem: perpetually unfolding
Gra: everything
R. Salanter: instruction



joey rosenfeld
@jorosenfeld

Prayer is:
R. Kook: perpetual
R. Nachman: conversation
Baal HaTanya: meditative
Mittler Rebbe: contemplative
R. Aharon HaLevi: ecstatic
Nefesh HaChaim: functional
Maharal: dependency
R. Nossan: creative
Baal Shem Tov: unity
Rav: urgent
Arizal: mechanical
Dovid: everything

The creativity of his execution of this idea cannot be understated,

though its wider reception remains underappreciated. Aside from the creativity of the pieces themselves, each one sparks substantive Torah conversations, as readers squabble with his summaries or suggest other distillations for personalities he did not cover. And, much like Ten Minute Halacha, this innovation has also garnered its fair share of flattering imitations.

What a time to be alive! Content is being shared in such exciting new ways, which only opens more possibilities for reimagining the ways in which we share Torah. For all our creativity, I still believe that nobody has sufficiently unlocked how to share Torah through video. That, I believe, is the next frontier. The secular world has found ways to get millions of people interested in philosophy through the lens of pop culture (see, for instance the Wisecrack or Nerdwriter channels on YouTube), but the Jewish community remains far, far behind within this medium.

The world is always evolving, but so is Torah. Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin writes that just as creation is renewed every day, so too Torah is renewed each day (*Tzidkas HaTzadik* #216). And I am excited to see what renewals tomorrow will bring.