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# Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

*Celebrating 25 years of diversity and dialogue*

## In this issue

**...the second part of our two-part series on gender and Judaism.**

## A shteibel of one's own Yehudah Mirsky

When I was growing up, we divided our time between two *shuls*. One was a large, beautiful synagogue on 91st Street, the other a poor *shteibel* on top of a supermarket on Broadway. In retrospect, it often seems as though the synagogue was where I became attached to Judaism, while the *shteibel* was where I fell in love with the *shekhinah*, God's loving presence.

We always went to the *shteibel* for *mincha* and *maariv* (the afternoon and evening services) on *Shabbes*. Because my father was a *misnagged*, one who preferred study to rapture, we didn't eat a *seuda shlishis* (the third *Shabbes* meal favored by the hasidim).

Instead, we would sit and learn *gemara* in the twilight, to the accompaniment of the *zmiros* (*Shabbes* melodies) being sung by the old hasidim eating *seuda shlishis* in the *ezras nashim* (the women's section). The women, of course, were absent; my mother would sit by the window at home and wait for us to come home from *shul*.

### Personal Fires...

Another story. One of my great-grandmothers was an *agunah*. The man to whom she had been married off abandoned her without a divorce while she was still a teenager, leaving her unable to remarry. Only by the merest coincidence did a family friend witness her husband's death some years later in an asylum, thereby releasing my great-grandmother

and enabling her to marry my great-grand father, and eventually to give rise to me.

### ...Which Forge Disquiet

It is between the poles suggested by these stories that I try to locate myself today. I was raised by humanistic parents within a patriarchal culture that afforded a rich intimacy of learning and shared religious experience among father, brothers and sons. And that culture celebrates and has been sustained by a legal system, *halakhah*, that has perpetrated profound injustices against women, *agunah* being only the most flagrant example.

I try to live my religious life in and through *halakhah*, which is both law and religion, a system of norms and a framework of meaning, a spiritual language and an allocation of power. Like every legal system, the *halakhah's* internal logic compels it to assert hegemony over the whole, to be its own virtue, justification and reward.

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Even so, it willy-nilly exists in dynamic relation to the totality of Jewish life, literature and society, all of which in turn exist in reciprocal, dialectical relation to a thrillingly and alarmingly fluid society. It only makes sense to frame "manhood", Jewish or otherwise, in relation to "womanhood"--the two exist only in dialectical relation to each other.

## Measuring Gender

Throughout history, our common humanity has been fractured along gender lines, usually unjustly. Today we work to redress those injustices, and yet the distinctiveness of gender has not disappeared--indeed it is increasingly being reinterpreted and reasserted by any number of feminist thinkers, who point to uniquely female ways of knowing, seeing, judging.

I myself am reluctant to peg too much on gender, for two reasons. First, because virtue and goodness cut across all the lines of gender, race, class, etc., and correlate only to themselves. Second, because our understanding of gender roles is indelibly shaped by where we find them. In the *yeshivish* circles of my adolescence, trying to be an Alan-Alda-like, "free to be you and me" person, was taken as a sign, not of effeminacy, but of rebellion.

And yet some difference between roughly "male" and "female" ways of being human, seems inescapable. The difference today is that these styles of personality can be more freely chosen than ever before; that freedom to choose is a precious bulwark against injustice. How then, to choose? What's a nice Jewish boy to do?

We begin, of course, with the texts, but they speak in many voices. The patriarchy and formal hierarchies assumed and imposed by *Tanakh's* (biblical) legal texts are regularly subverted in its narratives. In *Tanakh*, women are legally disenfranchised yet socio-culturally vital; in the Talmud, it's the reverse. Medieval Hebrew poets express an ascetic piety and a lyric sensuality. These complexities find theological expression in the notion first suggest in the Talmud and later developed in the kabbalah that God exhibits both "masculine" and "feminine" attributes, joined in a higher unity.

## Divining Gender Synthesis

In this light, the familiar concept of *imitatio dei*, of trying to resemble God in our daily lives, takes on new meaning. In the celebrated passage expounding *imitatio dei* (Sotah 14a), the tasks ascribed to God--feeding the

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hungry, clothing the naked--are conventionally "feminine". They are humble acts of nurturance. And this nurture is seen as the self-disclosure of the law-giver. Perhaps the extraordinary and often confusing ferment of our times is disclosing to us richer, fuller possibilities of being men and women, of trying to live the divine synthesis here on earth.

Each of us, man and woman needs to find, create, with apologies to Virginia Woolf, a *shteibel* of one's own, a place of heart and mind where we can, each in our own way, both express and transcend "manhood" and "womanhood" enroute to a wholeness, a personal and communal synthesis to be renewed each day.

Gandhi said: "You must become the change." We can only meet the future in justice and truth by trying to live in justice and truth today, to bring to life our fullest sense of what it would mean to be a man, a woman, a person and a Jew, living in an unsteady present, working each day until "*hesed* (kindness) and truth have joined, justice and peace have kissed; then truth shall grow from the ground" (Psalm 85:9-10). □

## Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

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## You must remember this: Jewish men and Jewish memory

Michael Medved

The Hebrew language provides invaluable insight in helping us understand what it means to be a Jewish male.

The Hebrew word for male is *zachar*--which derives directly from the word for memory, *zachor*.

In traditional Jewish terms, memory is the very essence of manhood; not just the recollection that allows you to learn from your own experience and mistakes, but the memory that connects you with all preceding generations and that ultimately reaches back to Sinai.

The epitome of manliness, in Jewish terms, isn't a ferocious warrior or a graceful athlete or an accomplished lover; it is the Torah scholar who works to guard the traditions of our people. What it means to be a man, in the most fundamental Jewish sense, is the ability and determination to build families and communities that will serve to connect our past to our future, our parents to our children. That's why one of the foremost acts of inter-generational connection--saying *kaddish* to honor the departed--is, according to Jewish tradition, a male responsibility.

### The "Unmanly" Jewish Man

Of course, this male role as guardian of memory has been largely ignored in 20th century America. For a variety of reasons--including the freewheeling, open-ended materialism that's always been part of American life, and the insecurity and poverty of immigrant generations--most Jewish-American men focused on getting ahead rather than keeping the faith; they treated *mammon* as a higher priority than memory. It's hard to fault struggling newcomers to these shores (like both my grandfathers) who viewed feeding their families as even more urgent than nourishing Jewish observance and continuity.

Today, however, the destructive obsession with all-consuming careerism still holds sway among most Jewish males, despite vast improvements in our economic security and status. Yearly income is the most commonly used measure of a man--rather than any consideration of his spiritual depth, Jewish commitment, or strength of character.

Major Jewish organizations unfortunately encourage this false standard of manhood by publicly honoring only

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the wealthiest males in any community. The standard of prestige or socio/sexual desirability is far more one-dimensional for Jewish men that it is for Jewish women. A woman may be considered worthy and desirable because of her sparkling personality, physical beauty, selfless communal service, skills as wife and mother--or because of her career success.

A Jewish male, however, has only one commonly accepted means for establishing his status within our community. How many times would a middle-aged man who earns \$25,000 a year regardless of his character or religious commitments, be honored by Jewish organizations--or deemed a prized "catch" among potential mates?

### What Should We Do With Our Men?

This devastating redefinition of Jewish manhood in narrow materialistic terms has contributed more than any other factor--including the rise of feminism or changes in gender roles--to Jewish men abandoning their traditional role as guardians of Jewish memory. In many communities across the country today, women are more energetically involved with the business of Jewish continuity than their male counterparts. In most families that I've encountered, mothers are far more likely to encourage (or insist upon) their children's bar or bat mitzvah training (or other religious involvement) than are their husbands. The deeper commitment of Jewish women, and the crisis among Jewish males, is illustrated by the continuing imbalance in intermarriage statistics; for several decades, Jewish men have been notably more likely than Jewish women to marry non-Jews.

In short, while complex questions concerning the role of women in Judaism receive intense public scrutiny, the much deeper problem involves the mass defection and indifference of Jewish males. As my long-ago Yale anthropology professor Margaret Mead famously observed: "The fundamental problem for any society is to decide what to do with its men."

Traditional Jewish society responded to that challenge by defining the highest male role as that of Torah sage--the moral and intellectual leader who reminds his family

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*Today.*

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and community of obligations and traditions. In other words, we once had an answer to questions about the male role, but too many people today can't--or won't--remember. □

## Jewish men's groups

Herb Levine

Like most Jewish men I know, I have been on a success track all my life. Economic success. Intellectual success. Success in organizational life. Success in relationships. But Jewish life is organized to remind us that none of us has succeeded so well as we would like: *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*--all the way from *alef* to *tav*. At least once a year we recognize that we have failed, as individuals and as a society, over and over again. But what about the rest of the year? Where do we find times and places to practice the spiritual honesty of Yom Kippur?

A Jewish men's group has provided me this spiritual home for the last five years. Our group has six men, all in our forties and fifties. We meet every two-to-three weeks for the sole purpose of listening to one another and giving each other feedback and support. This is not a therapy group, but like a therapy group, we've often pushed each other to understand how we have most needed to change and grow.

Nor is this a purely social group, though it is highly social. The honest self-disclosure for which we strive is not part of any other social scene in which any of us participate regularly. This is not a group with an ideological program--say, a definition of manhood it's trying to promote, like some men's groups formed in response to books such as Robert Bly's *Iron John*. Nor is this a ritual group, though we do celebrate Jewish holidays together several times a year. And it's certainly not a bowling league.

### Opening Up the Softer Side

Precisely because we have no program other than supporting one another, we have done a remarkable job at asking for and channeling support. When we have talked

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about the support we received from our fathers, we have found that, like many Jewish men, they are or were mostly intimate with their wives, but with few if any other men. We now have a different legacy of Jewish manhood to transmit.

We have given flesh to how we want to be Jewish men together. We understand from what we have experienced that Jewish men support one another, love one another, hug one another, cry together, honestly share their failures with one another. Jewish men don't betray each other's trust. When they hurt each other's feelings, they quickly apologize. Jewish men don't play games of intellectual one-upmanship. They listen before they judge, show compassion before calculation, put relationships before power. They share themselves with those who need what they have to share.

### A "Minyan" for Re-envisioning Manhood

If I had been asked to free associate with the term "Jewish men" at any time before I joined a Jewish men's group, my list would have been very different, perhaps even in some ways inverted from how it now appears. This is not because I had notoriously bad experiences with Jewish men, but simply because I had few experiences which weren't framed in the larger world of success and its various jockeying for recognition and power to which I alluded above.

Coming to be Jewish men in the context of our families was equally fraught with difficulty for most of us. Even though families can manifest great tolerance and compassion at times, family life can be as much about power relationships as professional life and can be equally deforming to both men and women. Men's groups provide a space where Jewish manhood can be re-envisioned apart from the sexual and professional politics that are so much a part of our everyday lives.

Being in a Jewish men's group has been a profound Jewish teacher for me, and I suspect for all of us in the group, though we don't spend a lot of time dwelling on the lessons we've learned. We are too busy trying to put those lessons into action in our professional lives, in our volunteer commitments, in our families and intimate relationships. And when we don't succeed, we have a safe place to come back to where we can acknowledge

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that we are not always who we would like to be. It makes confronting Yom Kippur a lot easier and a lot more fulfilling when the work that the fast aims to channel doesn't just happen for one day during the year. □

## Brit taharah-- woman as covenantal body

David Seidenberg

The body as we know it is not a physical thing but a mental image, something contained within our imagination. It is this "imaginal body" which unifies each person's physical experiences, feelings and memories. In both secular and religious worlds, as humans and Jews, we define who we are by particularizing this image. We inscribe our imaginal body onto our physical bodies through rituals, personal and communal, through our dress, the way we move, how we eat.

The prohibitions we accept as observant Jews against marking or inscribing our bodies already inscribe our imaginal body as Jewish.

Though there are many ways in which the body is marked as Jewish, the most physical rituals, the rituals concerning circumcision and menstruation, also inscribe our bodies with gender. The bloods of circumcision and menstruation create an imaginal Jewish body which is always male or female, not one body but two.

### Countering the Priority of the Male Body

This double body has been reduced to a single one by the priority tradition has given to circumcision. For millennia, the image of the Jewish body has been defined by *brit milah*, the *yesod* or foundation, "[God's] covenant which You inscribe in our flesh". Circumcision is not only a mark of the male members of the tribe. By virtue of circumcision, Jewish men stand for the Jewish people as a whole. "Our flesh" means the flesh of the Jewish people, the covenant of the Jewish people, inscribed on the bodies of men.

A natural consequence of women's fuller participation in Jewish life and worship is that this centrality of the male body is destabilized. Together, Jewish women and men in the covenantal community defined by feminism are reconstructing the covenant of Judaism, gradually

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recreating the Jewish body as both male and female. The Jewish man no longer stands for the Jew "in general", neither in the synagogue or the *beit midrash*.

Egalitarianism, however, cannot ultimately effect this transformation. The neutered body imagined by the ideology of egalitarianism is not who we are inside, and it cannot connect to the body that desires.

### Reconstructing *Taharah*

Can we re-covenant the body in a way which liberates us to true desire and partnership? One response to this question is to lift up the rituals of menstrual *taharah* to the level of covenant, so that *brit taharah* and *brit milah* become equal foundations of the imaginal body of the Jew. For the covenantal community of Judaism, such a *brit* needs to be developed from out of the sources of tradition if it is to return the covenantal body to woman. For the covenantal community of feminism, such a *brit* must be disassociated from the social reality of *niddah* (which turns menstruation into an impurity which temporarily proscribes sexual relations).

In our time, a woman immerses in the *mikveh* to become *t'horah*--somehow fit for intercourse, after her menstrual period. In the time of the Temple, however, almost any contact between the body and what came from the inside or the outside could transmit *tumah*, cultic unfitness. *Taharah* was a detailed system which accounted for all aspects of the relationship between the body and the world. The Temple was the center of this complex knowledge, and *taharah* was the "exchange value" which unified it.

### Woman as Part of Covenant of Body

*Taharah* is not simply about separating life from death, although many people interpret it this way. After all, the Temple was where the cult sacrificed and dismembered hundreds of animals. Rather, the sacrifices and the rituals of *taharah* fit together a single system which separated two visions of the body: the vision of the animal's body as edible and sacrificial, and the vision of the human body as whole and sacred.

A society which allows itself to feel the sacredness inherent in all life, and the tension which comes from eating animals who are so much like us, must find a way to ritualize the unique relationship we have to the human body. Through the Temple cult, ancient Israel constantly reinscribed this unique relationship by establishing a different sacredness for the human body and the animal body. Through *taharah*, the sacred wholeness of the human body was not merely affirmed but actively created and renewed.

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Through *taharah*, the Jewish body stood in covenant for the human body. If the rituals of menstrual *taharah* could express the understanding of the returning wholeness of the human body through its cycles, then a covenantal reconstruction of *taharah* would be easy to achieve. The imaginal body of the Jew, inscribed by women through these rituals, would redefine the covenant of the Jewish people as a whole in relationship to God.

We cannot do this by simply continuing *niddah*. As one of the vestiges left of the Temple cult, *niddah*, like *kashrut*, has evolved very different meanings from the system of *taharah* and sacrifice which once inscribed our bodies.

Just as *kashrut* reduces the sacrifices to a process for packaging meat, so does *niddah* reduce *taharah* to a mechanism for controlling marital sex. This is the only reason why menstrual *taharah* continued after the destruction of the Temple. *Niddah*, which is so focused on relating a Jewish woman to her male partner cannot easily become the basis for a covenant relating the Jewish tribe to God. So the question of what is to be done remains.

Nonetheless, the development of *brit taharah* is something we are ready for, something which has already been worked on by many individual women. As a man, I want to be supporting this project, which will ultimately return both men and women to the covenant of body. If we succeed, then the body of the Jew, like the first human, will be both "male and female". And that, we learn, is *b'tselem Elohim*, God's image. May the *mikveh* of Israel strengthen our work. □

## 🍷 Endthoughts 🍷

### The eclipse of jewish men

Clifford E. Librach

The revelation some months ago by Gloria Steinem, daughter of a Jewish father and a gentile mother, that any Jewish identity or value that she carries was given and taught to her *by her gentile mother*, is yet another demonstration of an increasingly obvious phenomenon. Jewish men are leading the charge out of Jewish commitment and behavior.

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Anecdotal evidence abounds and has joined the routine prattle of pulpit rabbis whenever they gather together.

### Men's Jewish Antipathy

My own "favorite" story involves a proposed mixed marriage, the bridegroom a Jew. The bride, a Ph.D. candidate who had studied Judaism as an undergraduate, had arrived at the conclusion (after several sessions with me) that she was not only ready and willing but positively enthusiastic about making Jewish identity her own and making Judaism the animating force of her new married life. She wanted to become a Jew. The process of *gerut* (conversion) and my functioning as their *m'sader kiddushin*, the rabbi who would marry them, never began, however, for the simple reason that the Jewish bridegroom and his family resisted any cooperation, support or enthusiasm for the proposition. To cooperate in the establishment of a Jewish home was "too much" to ask of him; it was "not necessary anyway" because Reform Rabbis would "call the kids Jewish"; and, in any event, Judaism was "just not relevant" to their modern life.

The gentile bride was amazed that the resistance and ambivalence to such a proposal came from her future husband and his Jewish family. For "it seems so strange", she said to me with tears in her eyes, "that I am the only one in this whole situation who really wants this".

The story and its gist are not unique. For vast parts of the American Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jewish communities, more and more husbands and fathers see themselves as peripheral and psychologically uninvolved in all but the most superficial "performance" aspects of Jewish ritual life, including *britim* and *B'nai Mitzvah*. This is true--remarkably--even in cases where the father is the Jewish partner of a mixed marriage.

And so, too, as men have abandoned responsibility for the maintenance and character of synagogue life, women have filled the void and have now emerged as its controlling force. The domination of women as officers and members of synagogue boards and professional search committees attests to this fact. For most men, the prize is no longer worth the candle.

### The Feminization of Judaism

Men have, of course, historically treated the synagogue as nothing less than a men's club. In non-Orthodox circles, they have now abandoned it and all that it represents, except for the few who have picked up their marbles and taken themselves to the Jewish communal fundraising and political apparatus--Jewish Federations,

AIPAC and the like. This abandonment has occurred during the very time of continuous and aggressive attacks by a generation of feminist critics upon traditional Judaism and its male domination. The likelihood--ironically occurring at the least traditional end of Judaism's spectrum--of male psychological surrender and retreat to another (less vulnerable) fortress, is apparent. For women in synagogue life, the glass ceiling has been shattered only to discover that there is no one upstairs.

But it is not just synagogue leadership which has been abandoned. It is Judaism itself as a system of life and thought using family, prayer, ritual and obedience to unite memory and ultimate values. In this secular American culture, as the egos of Jewish men have been marginalized in the distribution of synagogue power and honors, the foundation of the commitment to this way of life has collapsed.

Of course, all of this sends confusing and, in some cases, very negative signals to Jewish children. Judaism can easily be perceived as a children's activity (like summer camp, Christmas vacations or weekly allowances). Such matters are of little moment when the serious questions of career, lifestyle or lifemate are at issue. If Dad never took Judaism seriously, why should I. □

## Circular jewish reasoning

Jay Rosenbaum

1. The Torah describes the Creation of the world as a drawing of boundaries. God fixes a boundary dividing day from night, heaven from earth, human beings from animals.

2. At first this boundary-drawing proceeds smoothly. Nature does not appear to resist the limitations God imposes. But when it comes to Man, there is pushback. By eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve violate God's boundary.

3. God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree. Eve added to God's restriction. Eve said: "We may not eat from the tree, nor may we touch it." God drew a boundary. Eve drew a boundary. Eve was the first being other than God to create a rule. In doing so, she became like God, even before she ate from the Tree.

4. The boundaries which Genesis speaks of are circular. A center implies a circle. If the Tree of Knowledge was in the middle of the Garden, then the Garden of

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## Ta sh'ma

We invite you to send us your favorite text and comment. Submissions should not exceed 200 words. Be sure to include proper citation of sources. Hebrew will appear in transliteration.

### Jack H. Bloom

A man is lost in the forest. He has been wandering many days and nights and cannot find his way. Finally he meets another man--and says to him, "My friend, I am lost. I have been trying to find the way for many days and nights, but I cannot. Can you show me the way?"

The other man answers: "I too am lost. Yet I can tell you this: 'Do not go the way I have gone--that way does not lead anywhere. Let us search for the way together'."

RABBI HAYYIM OF ZANZ, 19TH CENTURY

Since it is unlikely that we will soon be out of the woods  
Let this amongst all needs be our desire...  
That in traveling the road to we-know-not-where  
we go side by side, hand in hand, heart to heart  
alone yet two together  
and so lighten our steps and brighten our days.

JACK H. BLOOM, rabbi/psychologist, directs the Professional Career Review for the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Eden must have been circular or spherical in shape. The boundary separating the Garden from outside the Garden was a circle.

5. It could be argued that the most important boundaries in our lives are, in fact, circular. The earth is a sphere. Thus, the boundary which separates heaven from earth is circular. We speak of a life cycle, and the cycle of the year. We measure the day and history by revolutions. Thus, the borders which divide both time and space are circular.

6. Perhaps this is why circular boundaries play such an important part in Jewish life. Our holidays are called *chagim*, circles. A Jewish family is formed when a wedding ring draws a circular border around bride and groom. And when we put on *tefillin*--we circle one arm with leather 7 times, and our finger 3 times, enclosing ourselves and God within a circular boundary.

7. Here's a paradox. Everyone who has put on *tefillin* knows that, especially in the beginning, it is

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possible to draw the circle too tightly and cut off the blood circulation--or draw the circle too loosely and the *tefillin* will come apart. The motion of putting on *tefillin* is all about the process of creating rules and boundaries. Yet there are no rules to tell us exactly how tightly to pull the *tefillin*, the circle of leather, so that it stays in place. We have to do it by feel.

8. Throughout Jewish history, we have alternated between wearing *tefillin* that are too tight, metaphorically speaking, and wearing *tefillin* that are so loose that they lose their shape entirely and cease to function.

9. Not surprisingly--when Jews complain about feeling restricted by Jewish rules--they often express that feeling of constriction in spatial terms. Jews who live by too many rules are conceived of as ghetto Jews, Jews closed off from the world by physical boundaries, as well as religious ones.

10. The struggle with being a Jew in the modern world is the struggle to figure out how tightly or loosely to wear our *tefillin*. Ironically, there are no set rules or formulas to help us find just the right kind of boundary. We experiment and we do it by feel. Ultimately, rule-making itself is subject to the mystery and the spontaneity of human freedom. □

## But others say about ...

### Jews in Cyberspace

David Gelernter's strange article on the place of computers in Jewish religious life (*Sh'ma* 25/483) raises hackles on several levels.

His warning that computer technology could threaten Jewish survival by superseding "beat-up old volumes" of

traditional texts, is nothing more than an updated version of what was said hundreds of years ago when books began replacing scrolls, and thousands of years before that when scrolls began replacing stone tablets. In fact, the Jewish tradition wisely concentrates all reverence for the physical past on the *Sefer Torah*, still handwritten on parchment as it has been for more than two millennia, a format that is feasible because the Scroll is used only for public reading several times each week, and in sequential order. Otherwise, Jews take advantage of whatever technology affords maximum access to traditional wisdom.

Dr. Gelernter's warning that catastrophe will be brought on by misguided Reform and Conservative leaders is a *non sequitur* that borders on irrationality and/or slander. Even if true, which it decidedly is not, his allegation that Torah study in "many" non-Orthodox synagogues is bereft of Jewish content, would hardly lead to his conclusion that the rabbis who conduct these sessions are "capable of instituting (for example) Network *Davening*. Instead of going to *shul*, you log on". In fact, the opposite is true. Rabbis who structure Torah study as a participatory experience, instead of as the textual lecture Dr. Gelernter prefers, do so because they want people in *shul*.

Moreover, for an individual who is obviously expert in computer technology and who claims to be knowledgeable about Judaism, Dr. Gelernter curiously misses a fascinating connection between the two. Midrash, and to a lesser extent, commentaries, represent a very early example of the kind of non-linear textual treatment currently being popularized by computers and CD-ROMs. Why not leave open options for contemporary scholars, and laypersons, to add their own wisdom and insights to an age-old tradition now made more "user friendly" by technology that more guarantees the Jewish future than threatening it.

Rabbi Ira S. Youdovin  
Leonia, NJ

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