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Ethics Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on ethical issues arising from new trends in social media. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our interpretive tradition teach us about privacy, connectivity, experimentation, and much more. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

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Learning To Swim

RACHEL MEYTIN

The *New York Times* recently profiled a Silicon Valley Waldorf school because the school bans Internet technology for its students (both within the school and at home). The school is striving to create an environment that is conducive to learning at a core level, trusting that students will have plenty of time to learn technology as older teens and adults.

Similarly, *Pirkei Avot* 5:24 offers a delineation of the age-related challenges we master: At 5 years of age, a child begins to learn the Torah; at 10, the Mishnah; at 13, the commandments. Both of these frameworks rely on layering — that is, building on that which comes before. Only once the core is mastered should a child be encouraged to move on to the next phase. To do otherwise would be like asking a first grader to do calculus before he or she has mastered simple mathematical skills.

The Waldorf approach provides not only an unusual educational experience in today's climate of highly technological classrooms and teenagers, it also creates an important barrier between young people and the Internet. From cheating to bullying, gossiping, and "sexting," the Internet is filled with potential ethical infractions. Because we, as Jews, are concerned with the ethical lives of our children, and we create many boundaries and restrictions to prevent inadvertent lapses, should we consider creating walls between our children and Internet activity?

The Talmud (Kiddushin 29a) enumerates three specific requirements for what parents must teach their children: the Torah, how to make a living, and how to swim. The first two seem obvious, but how to swim? Swimming, literally, is a life-or-death matter. The authors

of the Talmud recognized that parents must teach their children how to survive — how to come out on the "swim" end of "sink or swim." Even if we live far from water, even if we think our children will never accidentally enter a pool area, even if we ourselves hate water, we must ensure that our children have the basic skills necessary to survive.

We must also teach our children how to swim in the virtual sea — how not to be sunk by a cyberbully and how to keep their heads (above water) and maintain their core values when faced with an anonymous blog post. I believe that we have an obligation to teach and to demonstrate to our children appropriate and positive ways to utilize and enjoy technology. Like swimming, we cannot pretend that *our* kids won't ever go near a pool.

The ethical challenges of interacting online aren't based in the technology itself. Technology is simply the tool or medium. Rather, ethical questions emerge within the realm of interpersonal interactions, and because of the nature of the Internet, ethical infractions loom larger than those offline. Our responsibility, as parents, teachers, and caring adults, is to teach and demonstrate how to swim in this new pool through taking responsibility for our words, moderating ourselves, and being cognizant of when we need to take a conversation or situation offline.

Genesis 1:3 teaches that God created the world through the spoken word: "And God said: 'Let there be light.' And there was light." Words have enormous power to create, to beautify, to refine. But this power comes with responsibility. The text could have simply said,

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That decline continues to persist. Recent reports² estimate that only a quarter of all eligible people between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the 2006 and 2010 midterm elections. (The 2008 election is, no doubt, a political, societal, and statistical anomaly). Another survey³ found that only one in 20 teens and one in twelve young adults read a newspaper on a near-daily basis. Aside from the obvious changes in reading patterns, apathy about world events and voting — the clout of each vote — is growing exponentially.


I can't speak to the byproducts of apathy in other communities; to theorize about how the rest of "my generation" contributes to these trends would be hollow speculation. But, as the fruit of a modern American Jewish upbringing, I can shed light on the broader ramifications within my own social microcosm: I study at the largest Jewish community high school in the country, taking classes in Jewish thought, Hebrew, and American government. I've spent summers at Camp Ramah, walked through the dimly lit pathways beneath the Western Wall, and chanted kaddish amid the remains of a crematorium at Auschwitz — all alongside my American Jewish contemporaries. I am someone who engages, quarrels with, and appreciates young adult American Jews on a consistent basis.

Some of my peers don't know the name of our vice president; others are amused to discover that my Internet homepage is CNN.com; many make lofty, irresponsible, or erroneous claims about the State of Israel — often built on a blind acceptance of their parents' or teachers' opinions. In school and synagogue, among my

peers, I watch teenagers lay claim to beliefs that are not their own. It isn't that they're indoctrinated; it is that they're indifferent.

That indifference is precarious: Neither passion nor advocacy can grow from the reflexive adoption of someone else's ideas. My generation is growing up without a sound skill-set or mechanism for expressing or defending statements. Belief without basis is futile; we are writers without a story to tell.

Although several Jewish high schools around the country offer classes like Model United Nations and Model Congress, and even advanced placement courses in government and economics, ignorance wears a stubborn armor. Young people remain uninterested in and unknowledgeable about current events.

It is my contention that in these months of fervent national conversation — and into the foreseeable future — Jewish professionals who teach, motivate, influence, and interact with Jewish youth must consider a paradigm shift. In the impressionable eyes and hearts of my generation, modern Judaism — at least for the time being — is in need of recontextualization. A focus on the spiritual is valuable, but a focus on the experiential, practical, empirical, and political — exposure to civic responsibility and our role as global citizens — is invaluable and imperative. Such an investment may help to usher out an era of apathy; it can drive the perseverance of a people and their values. We are the youngest members of the American Jewish electorate. Educate us: Teach us to use our collective, vital, and ever-potent voice. 


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"There was light," but it gave God credit for those words and for all that came after them. Social media platforms provide opportunities to share opinions, often anonymously. That anonymity can be tempting, but we must model taking accountability for our words as well as our actions.

No longer does *lashon hara*, gossip, travel from one person to another. Today, gossip spreads with the click of a mouse. Young people need to see adults modeling behavior online that demonstrates consideration before posting.

We teach our children to swim but also when to call for a lifeguard; we must also teach our children to recognize when they're "in over their heads" online. Cyberbullying and inappropriate sharing of personal information and emotional or sensitive conversations all

signal that a young person should bring in an adult or move offline. Putting down our smartphones to talk about our personal lives can demonstrate which situations demand a face-to-face encounter.

There are real, immediate, and challenging temptations and opportunities for our youth when they engage with technology. But as adults, we cannot throw our children into the deep end and expect them to swim. We must model and make explicit how the core ethical issues of interpersonal relationships and our responsibilities as ethical Jews translate into virtual activity. By demonstrating appropriate applications of our values to the current technology, we will provide a solid framework for our young people as they engage with each other through social media platforms. 

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