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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](http://shma.com) to view the series and responses.

## Turn It Off

ANDY BACHMAN

Recent news of serious labor abuses and alarming suicide rates at a Chinese factory manufacturing Apple products ought to disturb us greatly, particularly if the news of this tragedy is conveyed — read or viewed — by that very same device. Imagine, if you will, individuals enraptured by the magnetism of their iPhone screens — screens that also reflect the suffering and death of the workers who made them, sacrifices on the altar of these coveted electronic devices. It's a tragedy of biblical proportions.

The unequivocal prophetic voice in Torah warns us against our devotion to the material. Arguably, the moral currents wafting throughout the Exodus narrative paint the starkest of contrasts between our love and our service to that which can be seen and that which is only heard — that which is tactile and that which eludes our grasp. Thousands of years ago, our ancestors intuited that the human would forever seek existential validation in the work of one's own hands and from the Tower of Babel to the Golden Calf to the iPhone, this has been our tragic folly.

Moses understood this. His demand to Pharaoh was to allow for the removal of the Israelites from the center of idolatry to the ephemeral, stark, image-less wilderness of the desert. The battle lines were drawn: Worship the voice who gives the law vs. worship the man and the cities he builds. Sinai, clouded in mystery, the top of which no one could see and still live, represents eternity; the city, a mere temporal representation, brick over brick over brick.

A child navigates a crosswalk, ears fit with headphones, eyes drawn into the reflecting pools of his hand-held digitron. A driver, by mere chance, looks up from texting, swerves

to avoid the child, and narrowly misses ruining both their lives — not to mention the “diameter of the bomb” in any such tragic encounter. Though the social critic Neil Postman died too soon to see this affront to human responsibility, the title of his book captures it completely: *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

On a quieter level, are the potentially insidious effects of our devotion to this godless object-god in our human relations closer to home? Think of the child who looks longingly into his parent's eyes hoping for connection: The parent, though, is consumed by images on the screen. Parenting in this complicated world is complicated enough. Now, add to that a multi-layered distraction of data in various and immediate forms, a rush of waves threatening to drown us in the radically individuated messages of contemporary life. Ironically, each message appears to burn with the urgency of the child's need, while cumulatively amounting to a meaningless, faceless mass of nothingness. When we choose to connect in one direction, we risk alienation along a different vector of space, time, and reality.

And yet, paradoxically, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Isn't it true that while Moses stood on Mount Sinai speaking with God face-to-face, the children of Israel busied themselves below with the accumulation of material objects to build the Golden Calf? They, too, in their time, were driven to distraction while a more sublime “truth” was revealed. When Moses descends, witnesses their betrayal, and smashes the tablets, is he not channeling a desire so common today to rid ourselves of the objects we've become slaves to?

A final paradox: Of course, connectivity and *continued on page 19*

Rabbi Andy Bachman is the senior rabbi at Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, N.Y., which was named as one of *Newsweek* magazine's top 25 U.S. synagogues.

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*Yehudah Mirsky, fellow at the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute*

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# Coming April 2012

## Certainty

- **Shaul Magid & Yehiel Poupko** on certainty and pluralism
- **David Makovsky** on the history of Jews hating Jews
- **Amy Eilberg** on Martin Buber and polarized discourse
- **Micah Gottlieb** on certainty and truth
- **Jay Michaelson** on polarizing language
- **Kalman Neuman** on polarization in Israel
- **Toby Perl Freilich** on Israel's Haredi women
- **Donald Heller** on changing his mind
- **Melissa Weintraub** on curiosity beyond our own circles
- **Eyal Rabinovitch** on new paradigms of discourse
- **James Aho** on dogmatism, stereotyping and social prejudice
- **Laura Shaw Frank** on contextualizing attitudes toward women as an Orthodox feminist teacher

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technology (and therefore the tools that convey their power) have broken down barriers and revolutionized our world. Of course! One can argue that these tools have in fact brought about such a monumental expression of democratizing freedom as to be redemptive.

Therein lies the rub. “When you arrive at the stones of pure marble,” Rabbi Akiva warned about the philosophical inquiry into “radical truth,” “don’t say ‘water, water,’ for the psalms teach, ‘He who speaks falsehood will not be established before My eyes.’”

Know what you possess in your hands; know what it can do; and know, please God, when to turn it off, to look your neighbor in the eye, and live. 📖

## Suggested Further Reading

- Judith Z. Abrams, *Torah & Company: The Weekly Portion of Torah, Accompanied by Generous Helpings of Mishnah and Gemara, Served up with Discussion Questions to Spice up Your Sabbath Table*
- Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, *The Gentle Weapon: Prayers for Everyday and Not-So-Everyday Moments—Timeless Wisdom from the Teachings of the Hasidic Master, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov*
- Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*
- Mary L. Zamore, *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*
- Aryeh Cohen, *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism*
- Ayala Fader, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*
- Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah*
- Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York*
- Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters*