

All the World's a Sage: Do-It-Yourself Rabbinics

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In this world of Wikis and Tweets, of Digging, of Stumbling, of Flickring, YouTubing, and of endless Facebookery, it is no surprise that Jewish text study is getting into the social media game.

To wit: **The New Jerusalem Talmud**, and the **JPS Tagged Tanakh**.

The NJT is essentially a discussion forum for hot-button religious, political and other issues. It describes itself as "a set of websites devoted to multi-dimensional presentation and commenting on the world's biggest controversies... a better-than-wiki resource for you to discover the full and fair view of the most important issues facing our planet." While it does not begin from the traditional text, its format imitates the traditional layout and structure of the Vilna Edition Talmud. The NJT begins each "Daf" ("page") with a "Mishnah" (created by in-house scholars), and then collects input from readers on a blog, vetting and compiling these in order to create a "Gemara", which will eventually (says the NJT website) be printed. (Editorial scholarship that sorts and curates user-generated content makes this process "better-than-wiki", the NJT website states.) "Rashis" on one side of this "Gemara" are notes providing background, support, documentation and context. "Tosafot" on the other side provide interesting side points and tangents. While the site seems quite new, it will be interesting to see if it manages to live up to its impressive aspirations.

The **Tagged Tanakh**, a project of the **Jewish Publication Society**, is also rather new, currently operating in a sort of beta-test. It defines itself as "a collaborative platform... that joins vetted content and user-generated commentary around the Jewish Bible. The words of the Torah create the foundation of this dynamic database. These words can be cross-referenced, annotated, and connected-tagged-to other forms of media, including videos, maps or games." Unlike the New Jerusalem Talmud, the Tagged Tanakh does center primarily on a traditional text. Like the NJT, however, the user-generated content is the main attraction being offered.

This is the feature which differentiates these sites from their counterparts in online Jewish study, and it is what makes them *social* media. Many sites provide traditional Jewish texts in a user-friendly online format, whether in Hebrew, English translations, or both. But these sites above hope to create *new* texts / sources, presumably to be studied later by others. In a sense, the idea is to "democratize" text study and religious deliberation -- to allow all comers to become, as it were, a Jewish sage.

But both these sites differentiate themselves from other user-driven social media platforms by vetting and curating content. This will (hopefully) prevent digression and co-option, and increase the quality of the product, while maintaining an open door for new ideas.

Is this kind of "democratization" a good thing? I have ambivalent intuitive reactions: positive, because it may cause Jews to become newly interested in Jewish text study; and negative, because there may be a danger that a focus on user-generated content will come at the expense of focus on traditional texts, and because this focus may confirm and legitimize my generation's narcissism.

Daniel Sieradski, an artist and cultural documentarian, would be disappointed in my views on "do-it-yourself-ism". Writing this February in the journal Sh'ma (**'A Jew-It-Yourself Mini-Manifesto'**), Sieradski wrote:

Through creative interpretation and experimentation, the "Jew-It-Yourself" generation has introduced a reframing of social, cultural, religious, and political views through a series of inter- and extra-institutional initiatives that are slowly transforming the Jewish world, making it accessible and relevant for new generations...Though it sounds selfish, self-indulgent, or narcissistic to some, this radical subjectivity is nevertheless a core tenet of our faith. Rav Kook wrote in HaOrot that "all our endeavors in Torah and scientific studies are only to clarify whatever comprehensible words it is possible to distill from the divine voice that always reverberates in our inner ear."

I am not sure I agree with Sieradski's reading of Rav Kook as endorsing subjectivism; if our studies in Torah, and in science (as Rav Kook mentions) can clarify our inner grasp of deep truths, then perhaps it is because these studies contain processes or content which are authoritative. Either read of this quote is possible, I think.

Writing in the same journal, Rabbi Steven M. Brown outlines a history of technological innovation in text study (**"The Text and Technology"**), likewise endorsing technological change:

The technology of learning has been changing throughout history, and its impact has been profoundly important in the democratization of learning and the access to knowledge by the masses. The move, for example, from parchment scroll to books was an enormously powerful intellectual change. It physically represented the change from linear, sequential narrative to random access. Rolling a Torah scroll quickly from Genesis to Deuteronomy to check a parallel passage is far more difficult than checking a bound Chumash.

But Rabbi Brown, writing in 1999, is dealing only with new platforms for the delivery of traditional texts, not the creation of new texts for religious study. Indeed, when defending new technologies, part of Rabbi Brown's argument seems to be that new delivery methods need not be feared when, and explicitly *because*, they do not offer new content: "In an age when the methods of delivery of knowledge and information are rapidly changing, we must not confuse the medium with the message, the technology with the content." It would be interesting to hear how Rabbi Brown's views may have developed today, since social media has so thoroughly transformed the concept of web connectivity from presentation to communication.

Ultimately, despite my reservations about these user-generated content projects, I think they deserve support. The Talmud (you know, the old dusty Babylonian one) says (Pesachim 50b) that a mitzvah performed out of an ulterior motive can come to be performed for the right reasons, in time.

What do you think? Are these user-generated text study tools the greatest innovation since the printing press? Pure narcissism? Both?

