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A Digital Responsa Center and a 5th Vessel of Jewish Ethics

by Rabbi Jeffrey Schein

Jewish ethics is dynamic, often reinventing itself through the naming of a new arena of ethical concern. We have different ways of keeping track of these multifold Jewish values and sorting them out from one another. Rabbi Dr. Max Kadushin, for one, has written about the organic development within Rabbinic thought of distinct notions of ethical obligations "*bein adam la-Makom*," between a person and God, and "*bein adam la-chaveiro*," between a person and another human being. This sorting of obligations becomes particularly active during the Jewish High Holidays.

The creative impulse to name a phenomenon is perhaps related to the relationship in Hebrew between "*shem*" as name and "*shem*" as essence. The more clearly we can name and delineate an ethical concern, the greater opportunity we have to penetrate its core meaning. Arguably, the more we have a named vessel, the less likely we are to lose the ethical import of these situations amidst the complexity of our everyday lives (2).

What I would like to suggest is that this same dynamic impulse gives us five Jewish ethical vessels that we need לעבד ולשמר — to mind, cultivate, and observe.

1. *Bein adam la-Makom*/בין אדם למקום (between a person and God; "Biblical")

2. *Bein adam la-chaveiro*/בין אדם לחבירו (between a person and another human being; "Rabbinic")

3. *Bein adam l'atzmo*/בין אדם לעצמו (between a person and him/herself; "modern, Musar")

4. *Bein adam l'tevel u'mila-ah*/בין אדם לתבל ומלאה (between a person and the fullness of God's creation)

5. *Bein adam l'mishtamshei keilav*/בין אדם למשתמשי כליו (between a person and her/his uses of tools and technology)

*(ביו אדם למכשיריו Alternate 5th)

The first two of these vessels ("*la-Makom*" and "*la-chaveiro*") are well known from traditional sources. The third and fourth ones require more explanation. The third vessel ("*l'atzmo*"), between a person and him/herself, was first named (to my knowledge) by Dr. Zalman Ury, a scholar and educator working at the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish education in the 1960's and 70's. Concerned about character education, Ury suggested that the *Musar* movement created an imperative dating back to its founder, Rabbi Israel Salanter, to pay attention to ethical commandments pertaining to self-care, spirituality, and *middot* (character traits).

The fourth vessel ("*l'tevel u'mila-ah*"), between a person and the fullness of God's world, has always been present in Jewish life. Various traditional *midrashim* emphasize our being partners with God in maintaining the creation. The current concern about climate change heightens this awareness and helps to make this fourth vessel explicit. It is an example of "*ho-ra-at ha-sha-ah*"/the needs of our present moment amplifying an already

existing aspect of Jewish ethics and giving it enhanced status. Martin Buber in a variety of essays also calls this the Prophetic impulse to pay attention to the demands of the "historical hour". Such attention also generates new ethical concerns that warrant new vessels.

This same attention to *ho-ra-at ha-sha-ah* leads us to consider a fifth vessel, "*bein adam l'mishtamshei keilav*," between a person and her/his use of tools and technologies.* So much of our life has become digital. The way we understand and utilize these tools and platforms (computers, smart phones, social media platforms) may constitute one of the most significant challenges for Jewish ethics.

While at one level paying attention to this category may feel like "Mom and apple pie" homage to the obvious, there is reason to believe that we have fierce internal resistance to putting an ethical frame around our uses of technology. It serves our narrow self-interest to think of technology as a means to an end, a position originally critiqued by Marshall Mcluhan, who argued in *The Medium is the Massage* that new technologies "massaged" and changed our very being.   I explored this "indifference" to the ethical demands of utilizing technology in my volume *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology*.

The Restart Life Center Seattle(https://netaddictionrecovery.com/hat) suggests that technology is a taboo topic linked to "persuasive design," a phenomenon of intentionally harnessing psychological constructs to make technology all the more enticing, even addictive. If we can be kept so busy using a particular product we hardly have time to evaluate its impact on our deepest self.

In fact there is a sense in which discussing technology takes us into dangerous psychological territory. The psychoanalyst Rollo May argued that every age has a characteristic taboo, a subject

that cannot comfortably be discussed. The 19th century Victorian taboo against discussing sex in public had been replaced by a 20th century taboo about discussing death and dying by the time May wrote *Love and Will* in 1969 (May 1969, 105). That taboo too has passed. We discuss both topics now with relative ease. In the 21st century the new cultural taboo, I claim, is technology. As with all taboos, we are barely aware that we are not having conversations about this important aspect of our lives.

It sounds counter-intuitive. Technology is so pervasive that we can hardly imagine our lives without it. Yet we treat technology and its role in our lives in functional rather than religious or dialogic ways. In our minds, technology is a means to an end of enhanced communication capacity and increasingly, a tool for resculpting our own identities. From a Jewish perspective, rarely does it receive the kind of appreciative nod that the Jewish value of *hakarat ha-tov*/appreciation of the good, would suggest, even though technological ingenuity scaffolds our comfort, effectiveness, and core ethical humaneness. We are more likely to curse our technological instruments when they do not work, than praise them when they do. Still less does technology receive the reflective attention Einstein demanded for all science, when he claimed that human beings have developed a plethora of scientific and technological means and a paucity of worthy ends toward which we might deploy those means.

Famously, Marshall McLuhan once observed, "First we shape our tools and then our tools shape us" (McLuhan, 1967, 24). My conviction is that we desperately need a "Round 3," where we talk back to the ways we have been shaped by our tools. This, however, can only happen through dialogue. I hope this volume will "break the silence" about the fierce complexity of technology's role in our lives, using an explicitly Jewish voice.

What to Name This Fifth Vessel?

A value needs to be well-named in order to serve as a fitting vessel to receive and organize a set of ethical dilemmas. So what is the best name we can imagine for ethical dilemmas related to tools and technology? My own initial impulse was to call this category *bein adam l'mishtamshei keilav*, between a person and her/his uses of tools and technology. This choice of names draws from another transvaluation of the term *keilim* from simple tools to *klei kodesh*, instruments of holiness and the Divine will, our sancta/holy objects such as *sifrei Torah*, Torah scrolls. This process extended over several centuries, as taught by Rabbi Aaron Panken, *z"l*. (8)

This process of creative etymology takes a final turn in the 20th century, as people begin referring to Rabbis and cantors as *klei kodesh*. In this respect, the growth in semantic range and application of a Jewish idea reminds us of *Tikkun Olam*. Both are examples of fairly minor threads in the tapestry of Jewish thought that are teased out and given new importance within the context of 20th and 21st century Jewish life.

This naming makes for interesting *chomer l'derush* (sermonic materials) as we think about our relationship to technology. What if we thought of our instruments and tools of communication in the same way that we thought about other "instruments" of holiness in our lives? What if we thought of ourselves as creators of holiness with the technological tools we utilize? Might we achieve a balance between the six working days of the week, where we use technologies to create a *Mishkan*, a sanctuary for God, and the seventh day, when we desist from using those very same tools?

It turns out, however, that we have another Hebraic option: the term *machshirim*. In contemporary Hebrew parlance, a *machshir*

is an appliance, but the fluidity of language usage allows it to occasionally be used more broadly to suggest "tools". The term itself is rooted in *halakha* and the process by which items become *kasher*, ritually fit. Creating *kavana* (intentionality) around our use of technology might demand a similar degree of intentionality.

Machshirim might also mirror some of the deep thinking of Professor Sherry Turkle of MIT about technology. She believes that tools develop a psychic life of their own as they pass through our neuronic networks and become both personified and objectified. Our smart phone, for instance, becomes--particularly for teens-- not just an extension of our hand, but our hand itself. The objectified substance of technologies (perhaps taking the form of psychic furniture) might be exactly the way we need to think about new technologies in order to understand the impact they have on our lives. (9)

In the end, whether called *keilim* or *machshirim*, these emerging ethical sensitivities, necessary for leading an ethical digital life, are of great Jewish import. To that end, I want to propose the creation of a "Digital *Responsa* Center". The time has come more actively and consciously to wrestle with what it means to be a "GJDGC" (a good Jewish digital global citizen), using the full resources of Jewish ethics.

A Responsa Center for 21st Century Digital Dilemmas

In proposing a Digital *Responsa* Center, it is useful to connect two contemporary phenomena: the flourishing of *Musar* and other techniques of reflective centering and the overwhelming pace of technological change. The pace of such change is often numbing. To deal with its effect requires internal spiritual work on our part. In turn, this spiritual work requires useful platforms and perspective-bestowing insights.

The following *midrash* about the purpose of a *siyag*/fence in Jewish law is illuminating. Often, a fence is thought of as a mechanical, restrictive tool of those who wish to be *machmirim*, more hardline in their interpretation of Jewish law. This *midrash* suggests that the prime function of a fence is otherwise, actually that of bestowing perspective:

Enter not into the path of the wicked … . Avoid it, pass not through it; turn from it and pass on (Proverbs 4:14-15). Rabbi Ashi said: The verse may be illustrated by the parable of a man who guards an orchard. If he guards it from without, the entire orchard is protected; but if he guards it from within, only the part in front of him is protected, while the part behind him is not protected. (10)

The Digital *Responsa* Center would seek to create new possibilities for such balanced perspectives, by bringing Jewish sources to bear on the digital dilemmas we face daily. The traditional mode of *she-ayla* and *t'shuva*, question and answer, that is, dilemma-based dialogue about novel situations, has always been an engine for keeping Judaism fresh, alive, and relevant to the needs of the present moment.

The Digital *Responsa* Center would create several teams of Jewish scholars, developmental psychologists, and educators to respond to these new dilemmas. Although the goal is to respond with timeless Jewish wisdom, there would be representation of Millennials and members of Generation Z in order to ensure that the response is timely as well as timeless, and rooted in the emerging realities of 21st century Jewish life. A fair amount of street smarts is also useful for this process to unfold.

 The leadership team of the Digital *Responsa* Center would keep a careful eye on the synergies and dissonances between classical

Jewish wisdom and the emerging norms of digital citizenship, as understood in many online communities. Also, befitting the times in which we live, the wisdom of the *Responsa* teams would be open to crowd-sourced wisdom from an on-line platform. The goal is for the ensuing dialogue to generate new dilemmas for response. The website developed by the author to accompany his book, *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology*, is one likely such platform (textmejudaism.com).

In theory, the source of dilemmas is as vast and sprawling as our 21st century Jewish life. The generative arenas might include:

* dilemmas emerging in Jewish classrooms for children and adults;

* uniquely synagogue-centered dilemmas;

* dilemmas issuing from other forms of Jewish communal life;

* dilemmas emerging from various social media platforms; and

* dilemmas bringing together older Jewish ethical concerns with the unique   twist of their place in contemporary digital life.

The very breadth and quantity of these possible dilemmas would require the leadership team to make smart, strategic decisions about what a focus should be in the infancy of the Digital *Responsa* Center.

* Although "digital" is only one form of technology — plumbing, roads, vehicles, and all manner of analogue communication also

qualify — it is the one of particular concern and focus for the proposed *Responsa* Center.

Endnotes

1), Kadushin, Max, The Rabbinic Mind , (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1972)

2). Genesis, Chapter 2, verse 15

3). Ury, Zalman, In Their Footsteps, (New York, Torah Umesorah, 1966)

4). Maimonides commenting on Deuteronomy Chapter 18, verse 15 and the need to heed prophetic warnings in his Mishnah Torah

5). Buber, Martin, Between Man and Man, (New York, Bloch Press, 1985)

6). Fiore, Quentin and McLuhan, Marshall, The Medium is the Massage, (Corta Madero, California, 2001)

7). Schein, Jeffrey, Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology,   (Lanham Maryland, Hamilton Press, 2019)

8). Rabbi Aaron Panken's commencement address to Hebrew Union College graduation June, 2015

9). Turkle, Sherry, Turkle Ted Talk Alone Together, 2013

10).Bialik, Hayim Nahman and Braude, William, The Book of Legends, (New York, Shocken, 1992, page 464)

Introduction to *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology* by Dr. Jeffrey Schein

Chapter One: Why This Volume?

A double entendre is an *ambiguity of meaning arising from language that lends itself to more than one interpretation (Merriam Webster).* The agony and ecstasy of my teaching life as a rabbi, educator, academic, and spiritual coach these past six years is wrapped up in the double entendre in the title of this volume , *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology.* The term "text" can mean a source of wisdom in Judaism (as in studying sacred Jewish wisdom). It can also mean a form of contemporary communication (as in "texting" someone).

There are overlaps, synergies , conflicts, dissonances , and creative tensions to be discovered between these two uses of the word text.   This volume explores the interplay of these meanings in multiple directions, but with a single purpose in mind.   That purpose is to help readers understand their own rich and complex relationship to technology from Jewish, spiritual, and ethical perspectives.

Any book about technology runs the extraordinary risk of becoming dated between the time of conception and execution.   To cite just one example, in 2012 when I first began the workshops that led to this book there was a great deal of concern among parents about the digital footprints of their teenagers. The conventional wisdom was that any comments or pictures posted on social media stayed with their child into adulthood. Just think of the difficulty of explaining away an indelible remark or image to a college admissions officer of a prestigious school!   By the end of that year, however, the new technology of Snapchat offered a different reality, one of posts that disappeared in time sensitive ways.

  Though imperfect,the new technology allayed many parental fears. (COM)

The speed of technological change and adaptation also affects my personal positioning in relationship to technology.   Many a life-long friend finds it odd that I am writing this volume. At best I am in the middle of the pack in regards to keeping up with technological change.   I always begin my workshops by joking with participants that if they came for advice about purchasing a PC or an Apple or finding a new, innovative digital technology they must have misread the notice about the workshop. In general, I have tried to compensate for my own status as a digital immigrant by working closely throughout the project and book with an advisory board of digital native millenials and professors of educational

technology. There are also web based extensions of the book where new developments can be named, tracked, and analyzed, thus keeping the volume fresh and relevant.

In the end, however, I do not claim to be an innovative thinker about technology per se. Rather, my hope is that the volume offers the reader the three gifts of PERSPECTIVE, BALANCE, and SELF-AWARENESS in their relationships with technology. These capacities will arguably serve the reader well in any changed technological landscape. At the beginning of each chapter I have placed a reminder of the balance of these three gifts that I hope the reader will glean from the chapter. The gift I believe most significantly operative in the chapter is capitalized and bolded; the other two appear in lowercase letters.

I have found that the best way I can make theses gifts accessible to readers is to give myself permission to speak in a very personal voice throughout the volume, peppering the social scientific and academic with personal vignettes. I agree with Parker Palmer that we do our most authentic teaching when we teach ourselves (Palmer, 1998, 24) Though I appreciate why some readers will want to pigeonhole the volume into the categories of formal or informal, academic or personal, I have tried to resist these labels.   The label I would choose is one that reflects my intention of making the volume *dialogic* and *conversational.*

Even when the reader and author are not in immediate physical proximity to one another, I imagine a conversation that might begin in the reader's mind and be given later virtual reality on the Text Me website designed for ongoing conversations mentioned later in this introduction. To encourage this process I have placed a blank "Dear Evolving Self" page at the end of each chapter.   The reader is invited to pause before moving on to the next chapter and reflect upon new insights by journaling on this page.   The reader can also change the salutation to "Dear Jeffrey" or "Dear Commentator" and affirm, extend, or challenge points that have been made.

In the course of my teaching I have come to understand that while each of the three gifts has value for all, there is also a developmental/generational dimension that distributes value unevenly across the life-cycle. For people my age (Boomers and beyond) I believe it is PERSPECTIVE that is most appreciated in understanding one's relationship to technology.   We have, after all, lived through multiple technological revolutions . For Millennials who are often "sandwiched" between generations BALANCE seems to be the great gift. For Generation Z who have many shifts in their relationship to technology still ahead of them SELF-AWARENESS might be the greatest gift.

The value of these three gifts may not be immediately obvious or appreciated by all readers of any generation. The restart Life center of Seattle suggests (https://netaddictionrecovery.com/hat) technology is a taboo topic linked to "persuasive design", a phenomenon of intentionally harnessing psychological constructs to make technology all the more enticing, even addictive.   In fact there is a sense in which discussing technology takes us into dangerous psychological territory. The psychoanalyst Rollo May, argued that every age has a characteristic taboo, a subject that cannot comfortably be discussed. The nineteenth century Victorian taboo against discussing sex in public had been replaced by a twentieth century taboo about discussing death and dying by the time May wrote *Love and Will* in 1969. (May, 1969, 105) . That taboo too has passed. We discuss both topics now with relative ease. In the twenty-first century we have a new cultural taboo.   It is called technology. As with all taboos, we are barely aware that we are not having conversations about this important aspect of our lives.

It sounds counter-intuitive.   Technology is so pervasive that we can hardly imagine our lives without it. Yet, we treat technology and its role in our lives in functional rather than religious or dialogic ways. In our minds, it is a means to an end of enhanced communication capacity and increasingly, a tool for resculpting our own identities. From a Jewish perspective, rarely does it receive the kind of

appreciative nod that the Jewish value of *hakarat hatov/* appreciation of the good would suggest when technological ingenuity scaffolds our comfort,effectiveness, or core ethical humaneness. We are more likely to curse our technological instruments when they don't work, than praise them when they do. Still less does technology receive the reflective attention Einstein demanded for all science, when he claimed that human beings have developed a plethora of scientific and technological means and a paucity of worthy ends toward which we might deploy those means.

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The How of the Book: The Tools of Jewish Textual Tradition

The following tools of the Jewish textual tradition are utilized extensively throughout *TextMe: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology* :

Midrash/Rabbinic commentaries designed to expand upon the meaning of a given Jewish text;

PARDES/Adventures in Jewish Complexity- -PARDES is an acronym that points to the complexity of our processes of understanding the world. Any single phenomenon has dimensions of *peshat* (transparent meaning)*, remez* (hints of a mystical reality, *derash* (moral concern), and *sod* (ultimate grounding for our place in the world); The initial letters of these four strategies form the acronym.

Hashkafot/The worldviews of Jewish thinkers, with an emphasis on the relationship to the world of tools and technology suggested in that worldview;

Sugyot/Focused conceptual, religious, and ethical issues explored in the Talmud ;

Responsa/Rabbinic legal rulings beginning in the 9th century C.E. that raise questions about how we should act in situations either unanticipated or ambiguously described in earlier Jewish law;

Musar/Conscious attempts to strengthen our ethical and spiritual virtues through self-awareness and introspection;

Machlokot/Divisions of opinion that lead to sacred, respectful argument ;

Teyku/ An acknowledgement that certain debates are not easily reconcilable and have no one single answer; we thus invite Elijah, the prophet who, according to Jewish tradition will announce the coming of the messianic age, to have the last say.

To use a digital metaphor these tools are our spiritual algorithms. They are time-tested ways of understanding the purpose of Jewish and human life in the face of a world whose pace of acceleration is dizzying. They serve as filters of an ethical and spiritual sort. One can make a reasonable case for government and industry to externally regulate aspects of our digital lives, but ultimately it is the self-regulation of individuals and communities utilizing their most deeply held Jewish and human values that can most effectively respond to the potentials and challenges of new technologies. In 2019---when the political right can define its relationship to media by railing at "fake news" and the political left can bewail the impulsive and compulsive twittering of our President---a personal, introspective, moral compass of our own relationship to technology arguably is of even greater value. (COM)The Who of the Book: Multiple Audiences

In the following chapters I explore these traditions in greater depth as well as provide concrete suggestions for incorporating the insights gained into patterns of Jewish, ethical, and religious life. Though primarily aimed at the thoughtful adult

Jewish learner and seeker, many activities are applicable to Jewish schools and congregations and other religious faiths as well. Those who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious" or simply appreciate Jewish wisdom as a subset of human wisdom might also find the volume of interest. For all readerships, I hope that this volume will serve as both a theoretical and practical guidebook, sparking insights generated by the collision of ancient wisdom and contemporary technological advances. An appendixat the end of the volume address the specialized learning needs of the different audiences.

Two unique features of the volume:

As befitting any twenty-first century book there are links to the *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology* website where issues raised in the book can be further explored and also accessed in formats ready for teaching, learning, and self-exploration. When a particular selection in the volume is available as a ready to use teaching-learning tool it is marked *TMW* for the Text Me website.

One of the goals of the volume is to generate ongoing dialogue. In Jewish tradition there is no better vehicle for that purpose than *parshanut/* commentary

Since I consider both Torah and the ongoing process of interpreting Torah as encompassing all human wisdom, I have invited a wide range of commentators--- Jewish and non-Jewish---to respond to passages in the book.

These include Reverend Terri Elton, Dr. Mary Hess, and Imam Sami Aziz, who were invited to deepen and enrich comments in the volume with insights from Christian and Islamic traditions. Jewish commentators include Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Rabbi David Teutsch, Dr. Mira Wasserman, Rabbi Marc Margolius, Dr. Brian Amkraut, Rabbi Nathan Kamesar and Rabbi Hayim Herring, Peter Eckstein and Etan Dov Weiss provide educational perspectives. Dr. Adina Newberg and Rabbi Steve Sager offer perspectives gleaned from modern and contemporary Hebrew Literature. Rabbi Michael Cohen provides the perspective of a Jewish environmentalist. Amelia Gavurin, an organizer for Twin Cities Jew Folk, offers a millenial/Generation Z perspective. *COM* in the text guides the reader to the commentary sections of the volume where these expanded insights can be found. The initials of the commentator follow the comment.

The reader can find their comments at the end of each chapter.

Content of the Volume

The volume alternates between a focus on the impact of technology on individuals as global digital citizens (Jews and people of other faiths as well) and on the Jewish people as a collective entity. The first section of the book addresses the individual. The second section tells the larger story of technology in relationship to the Jewish people as a whole. In section three I attempt to weave together the individual and the communal stories into various dimensions of contemporary Jewish living and learning. Finally in section four I propose a recursive journey back to the beginning of the volume, inviting readers to review key aspects of the volume and see if, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, they see some sections of the volume anew as if they were seeing them for the very first time.