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Jewish Theology after Google: Post-Rabbinic and Post-Denominational Judaisms in a Digitized World

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**To my father, Manfred Pieck.
May his memory be a blessing, z"l.**

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Preface

When entering a library I am still overcome by a sense of the sacred, or to use the preeminent scholar of religion Rudolf Otto's terminology of the divine in his work *The Idea of the Holy*, a 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans.' The shelves open up to me as a mystery that is both awe-inspiring and fascinating at the same time, and I am often overcome with a deep religious feeling before I immerse myself within the stacks of books. By contrast, when I go online to search for material, I have no such religious feelings of mystery, but rather an even rationality; no awe inspiring moments, but inklings of interest; no full fascination, but rather partial and fleeting moments of absorption. Alongside my academic work, as a liberal Jew in the limited liberal Jewish theological landscape of Basel, there are not many places for me to experience that 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans' as I can as a researcher entering the hallowed stacks of the University of Basel library, or when I am in New York as a Jew off the street entering the frenetic and spiritually charged setting of an upper-Westside synagogue. Without even noticing it at first, I, like many Jews, have turned more and more to the online world to satisfy my religious and theological needs. I began to ask myself if Judaism online is the same old Jewish theology, but just packaged in a different electronic wrapper? Has this change of form to the digital infused Jewish religiosity and theology with new functions and if so which ones? Has it changed at all, or is it 'just' another medium? If the medium has created new functions, what are they? How do they play out? This work is an attempt to begin to answer these questions and discover the 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans' of digital Jewish theologies.

Introduction

“The medium is the message,” declared Marshal McLuhan in his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The extensions of man* and goes on to explain his somewhat cryptic words. “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium -- that is, of any extension of ourselves -- result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (9). The most recent extension of ourselves and the newest technology today is digital media. This medium is extending and changing every part of our lives – the personal and the social, but also the political, the sexual and the theological. Christian theologians gathered in March of 2010 to discuss similar consequences for Christianity in a national conference entitled, “Theology After Google” (Clayton 7). Today, theologians from across the spectrum are pondering the medium of Web 2.0 technology and search engines such as Google exploring and experimenting with new theological messages within digital media.

For Jewish theology in particular, the medium of digital media is also extending, broadening and creating new theological messages. Revelation began for the Jews at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Torah and its message has been handed down and interpreted over thousands of years through Torah scrolls, Talmudic volumes, rabbinic discourses and individual responses. The medium of the Jews has been the Torah and the written word so much so that they are often regarded as ‘the people of the book.’ Jewish theological messages of the last two thousand years have been mostly confined to rabbinic Judaism and for the last 150 years amidst competing denominations within Judaism. However, digital media is bringing a new medium to Jewish theology. If McLuhan’s words hold true, a new message should come with it. “Jewish Theology after Google” must then ask: What can Judaism and Jewish theology become in a Google-shaped world?

The technology of digital media is pushing the functions of rabbinic and denominational Jewish theology into new realms. As such, I propose that digital media forms are allowing for new and expanded functions of Jewish theology as post-denominational as well as post-rabbinic. To analyze this transformative

process I will investigate three online synagogues, but also an online Jewish erotic site and a digital prayer book project. My methodology is gleaned from fourth-wave practices in digital religion studies that push the boundaries of many of McLuhan's statements and assumptions. For example, many researchers now look at online and offline worlds as a 'third space' carrying equal measures of authenticity and a non-dualistic status of separation between technology and ourselves. The characteristics of this third space are just beginning to be understood. Instead of technology being an extension of ourselves, in a third space we are steeped in and integrally intertwined with our very complex information age society and culture.

To investigate the relationship between digital media forms and new Jewish theological functions I will focus on three questions:

1. What functional impact does the form of online religious practice have on Jewish theological constructions of ritual, identity, community, authority and authenticity?
2. How do theological functions within Judaism form and shape digital media and vice versa?
3. How does the negotiation between online and offline worlds affect meaning making practices within Jewish theology?

Each case study exhibits manifold and variegated negotiations with digital media, producing contemporary theological functions pushing Jewish theology into a post-rabbinic and post-denominational age. The voices of rabbis and the denominations are still strong in digital media. However, an alternative vision for a contemporary Jewish theology is emerging in our Google-shaped world, one where post-rabbinic and post-denominational theological functions are gaining a voice, a message, and more and more of a following online and offline and in the spaces betwixt and between.

1. Post-Rabbinic Judaism

Before delving into post-rabbinic Judaism, a brief look at rabbinic Judaism is in order. Rabbinic Judaism has been and remains an extremely complex phenomenon resisting categories of definition. However, some defining features

are palpable. Karin Zetterholm in her article “Jewish Interpretation of the Bible: Ancient and Contemporary” states:

What characterizes Jewish tradition, perhaps more than anything else, and establishes continuity from the Hebrew Bible through rabbinic Judaism to modern Jewish denominations, is the emphasis on the need for constant cautious interpretation of the Bible in order for it to remain relevant. According to early rabbinic sources human interpretation started already at the moment of divine revelation at Sinai and is thus part of the revelatory event itself.

That humans and human interpretation were part and parcel of revelation set the precedent for rabbis to derive laws from biblical texts and develop completely new ones. Giving new meaning to the Bible was and still is legitimate and desirable in rabbinic Judaism. Zetterholm in her similarly named book, *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible: Ancient and Contemporary*, underscores the legitimacy of multiple and diverse interpretations of the Bible in rabbinic Judaism and its reflection in the “multiple, often contradictory opinions voiced by rabbis,” in rabbinic literature. But she takes this diversity a step further. She claims that the “[...] preservation of multiple opinions was also part of a strategy to legitimize rabbinic Judaism. Instead of creating unity by excluding certain views, rabbinic literature creates unity, or at least an impression of unity, by including all opinions as long as they are voiced by rabbis” (36 – 37). Diverse opinions were brought to rein under the umbrella of legitimizing rabbinic Judaism, and characteristic to this Judaism was the belief that legitimate voices were those of rabbis and only those of rabbis.

All Jews may have been part and parcel of revelation, but the rabbi, as Jacob Neusner established in “Varieties of Judaism in the Formative Age,” became “the avatar and the incarnation of the Torah” (172 – 173). It is the rabbi who knows Torah best, whose deeds others should emulate and whose actions become the basis for halacha or Jewish law (173). “In the person of the rabbi, holy man, Torah incarnate, avatar and model of the son of David, rabbinic Judaism found its sole symbol. [...] Through the person and figure of the rabbi, the whole burden of Israel’s heritage was taken up, renewed, handed on, from late antiquity to the present day” (196). The rabbi became the figurehead of

rabbinic Judaism from antiquity to the present and the rabbi's actions its central feature. The rabbi's behavior was the one to strive towards. Because of his assumed ideal actions, he decided on matters of halacha and imposed his version and interpretation of Torah on other Jews' behavior towards each other, with the material world and ultimately with God.

An example of rabbinic Judaism at work today can be seen in the article from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency from February of 2014, "Yeshiva U. threatens to deny student's ordination over partnership minyan." It recounts how a rabbinical student was withheld his ordination due to 'incorrect' behavior and an unwillingness to defer to ordained rabbis to decide his correct behavior. The student in question had held a partnership minyan with his wife at home. In this type of minyan or prayer service, women lead parts of the Sabbath service and are called to the Torah. Most rabbinic sources, including the head rabbi at said student's rabbinical school, prohibit this practice.

The acting dean of the school then sent a letter to the student ordering him to cease this type of behavior and desist from creating "a public impression that he supports such activities in normative practice." The letter also states that the student will not be able to graduate, if he refuses to "defer, in matters of normative practice, to the opinions of recognized poskim,' or decisors of Jewish law." This is a classic example of rabbinic Judaism. It is centered around correct and normative practice, and only authorized rabbis can decide what constitutes that behavior. A rabbinical student is not given this authority. When the student mentioned above tried to run counter to the authority of his superiors, he was threatened with expulsion from the seminary. As a human being and a participant in revelation, he can interpret the Bible and even have a contradictory view to the majority of Jews. But as a not yet fully-fledged rabbi, his interpretation of revelation as expressed in his decision to support women at a partnership minyan was deemed unacceptable and beyond the limits of the variety of voices allowed within rabbinic Judaism.

If rabbinic Judaism is characterized by correct behavior embodied in the avatar of the Torah, the rabbi, and by the referral to rabbis to decide what correct behavior is, post-rabbinic Judaism has taken a different turn. Bradley Burston in "A Special Place in Hell" purports that post-rabbinic Judaism now

forms the basis for a common Judaism that binds most U.S. Jews and Israelis. Burston states, “Jews may have come to believe they don't need rabbis like these in their lives. They can be Jewish on their own with other like-minded people.” Instead of the rabbi setting the laws for normative practice, Jews in post-rabbinic Judaism want to make their own decisions with others who share their values. Adam Kirsch in *Tablet Magazine*, a leading online source for Jewish news and culture, asserts that “The vast majority of Jews—unaffiliated, Reform, and even Conservative—have effectively cast off rabbinic guidance and have decided to invent their own Jewish customs.” And the Notorious R.A.V. in his blog “Post Denominational, Post Modern, Post Halachic, Post Rabbinic Judaism Awaits Name” concurs. He declares that, “In short, we are entering post-rabbinic Judaism. The title “rabbi” will still be there, but s/he is increasingly a resource person rather than the primary leader.”

Christianity has been grappling with a similar transformation, one that Philip Clayton in “Theology and the Church after Google” directly links to digital Christianity. For example, Clayton states:

Theology after Google devotes itself to the questions that *all* Christians ask and the kinds of answers that ordinary people give, no matter how hesitating and uncertain. This new definition has a wonderful implication: *Theology is tightly bound to whatever and wherever the church is at a given time. Theology is about what the church is and is becoming now.* So ‘theology after Google’ asks: What must the church become in a Google-shaped world?” (12)

Clayton emphasizes the role of ordinary folk instead of that of ministers and sees the church as more of a flexible concept than a fixed institution. Many of his insights and theological statements can be adapted for a post-rabbinic theology today that is similarly focusing on ordinary Jews instead of rabbis and working outside of fixed institutions like the aforementioned rabbinical school. With minimal adaptations, Clayton’s statement can be transformed to fit a Jewish context: Jewish theology after Google is a post-rabbinic theology that devotes itself to the questions that *all Jews* ask and the kinds of answers that ordinary **Jews** give, no matter how hesitating and uncertain, **and even if they are not rabbis**. This new definition has a wonderful implication: *Theology is tightly*

*bound to whatever and wherever **Jews are** at a given time. Theology is about what **Judaism** is and is becoming now.*

So “theology after Google” asks: What can **Judaism** become in a Google-shaped world? Clayton’s observations regarding Christian theology can also help answer this Jewish theological query. Clayton maintains that it is necessary to move from a “church 1.0” to a “church 2.0.” “The analogy should be clear. ‘Web 1.0’ was a series of static pages that one would visit and (passively) read. ‘Web 2.0a’—the web of today—offers a deeply interactive experience, in which the users themselves help to make the places that they go (facebook, twitter, blogs, wikipedia). We respond, contribute to, and play at the places we visit; we go there *to do things*” (12 - 13). In a Google-shaped world, Judaism is also deeply infused with a Web 2.0a thinking. Everyone can experiment with theology in this type of world, lending itself seemingly effortlessly to a post-rabbinic theology. Clayton underscores the idea of experimentation:

[...] in a time of rapid change, there’s no alternative; *you have to experiment*. Perhaps here also we can learn something from software designers. When designers want to try out a new product, they issue a “beta” release. People try it out, find out what works and what doesn’t work, and let the designers know. They make some changes and then release the next version. [... it is] a call for honesty, transparency, innovation, creative participation, and inspired imagination. (13)

In a Google shaped world, the very form of Web 2.0 is allowing for experimentation and creativity in new theological functions, especially post-rabbinic ones. Clayton has proposed a Web 2.0 infused Christian theology. Paraphrasing at least four of Clayton’s theses, post-rabbinic theology can be based on the following four tenets (compare to Clayton 14 - 15):

(1) Theology is not something you consume, but something you produce. i.e. all Jews have to produce their own theology instead of relying on their rabbis as models of normative practice.

(2) No institutions, and very few persons, function as authorities for theology after Google, i.e. rabbinic voices are no longer solely authoritative in matters of

Jewish theology.

(3) Theology after Google is not centralized and localized. Likewise, synagogues or wherever Jews convene, cannot be localized in a single building or denomination. We find Judaism wherever we find Jews and like-minded people we link up with who are doing cool things.

(4) The leaders who influence our faith and action are those who convene (or moderate or enable) the conversations that change our lives. Instead of leaders being rabbis who embody and decide what our ortho-praxis is, a post-rabbinic leader gets “the conversations started, though she doesn’t need to place herself in the middle of each one. She leads by example, often by establishing an atmosphere or an ethos that fosters deep sharing. And, at her best, she transforms the lives of those whom she hosts. Instead, her most effective role is as *a convener of and participant in the discussions*” (16 – 17) not a decisor of the law and correct behavior.

These post-rabbinic tenets are not new to Jewish theology as can be seen in the Jewish Renewal Movement, the Havura Movement, the Jewish Catalog, and creeping up in various corners across all the denominations of Judaism. However, digital worlds and Web 2.0 thinking are revitalizing and channeling these post-rabbinic tenets into ever-stronger pillars of contemporary Jewish theology.

2. Post - Denominational Judaism

If Web 2.0 is catalyzing new and expanded functions in Jewish theology as post-rabbinic, what is happening to the denominations in a Jewish theological world after Google? If Jewish theology after Google cannot be centralized or localized, what does this mean for the denominational theologies housed within each denominational institution? Is the form of digital Judaism and Web 2.0 thinking fostering new post-denominational theologies and if so, how? Again, a short history of the defining features of denominational Judaism is in order before

searching for an understanding of the possible characteristics of post-denominationalism.

In “Defining our Jewishness in a Post-Denominational Age” Michael Gillette characterizes the birth and development of the denominations in Judaism:

Prior to the mid-1800s, although many streams of Judaism existed and vociferous debate often erupted about which expression of Judaism was most appropriate, all Jews were clearly considered to be participants in a single religious entity. Historical friction between Pharisees and Sadducees or Chassidim and Mitnagdim often grew intense, but these conflicts never fractured Judaism into completely disconnected experiences. Only once the reformers of the mid-nineteenth century secured recognition from the German government as the official ‘church of Judaism’ did non-reformers feel compelled to petition for recognition of their own organizations. Thus, the Reform movement and the Orthodox movement came to be.

Only with the outside recognition of the Reform movement by the German government did a previously united, if riddled with strife, Judaism begin to break into various denominations, a trend that did not stop with Reform and Orthodoxy, and which brought forth at least three very distinct approaches to Judaism. Gillette describes this further development:

Later, when some reformers were uncomfortable with many of the extreme positions of the Reform movement, the Conservative movement developed. Judaism was then defined by three very distinct philosophical positions. The Reform movement rejected the primacy of halacha. The Orthodox movement asserted the primacy of halacha as defined by inherited tradition. The Conservative movement accepted the binding nature of halacha, but maintained that continued evolution of that law is an ongoing aspect of appropriate Jewish development. (Reconstructionist and Humanist strains add additional legs to our stool based on cultural commitments, but they are philosophically indistinguishable from other movements when it comes to the compulsory status of halacha.)

Zetterholm, in her analysis of revelation from antiquity to today, highlights how these philosophical positions were supported by differing understandings of

revelation within the different denominations and how this directly affects halachic decision making processes for each group. As stated earlier, humans' interpretive role in revelation allows rabbinic Judaism to continually evolve. Nevertheless, the denominational view of the divine in this interpretation affects the halachic process within each denomination. Zetterholm states:

[...] the view that rabbinic tradition was divinely given at Sinai is widely embraced by Orthodox Judaism while the Conservative and Reform movements maintain a modified version of the tannaitic view, arguing that rabbinic tradition evolved as a product of human interpretation. As a result, Orthodox rabbis generally attribute a greater significance to Scripture and tradition than non-Orthodox rabbis among the multiple factors taken into account when legislating on new issues.

For the orthodox who see rabbinic tradition as directly revealed by God, scripture and tradition hold a central position. When making a ruling however, the more liberal denominations, who see a human hand in the development of rabbinic tradition, will take many aspects of a case into account while only giving a modicum of consideration to scripture and tradition.

These diverse philosophical, revelatory and halachic positions among the denominations make it difficult to envision a post-denominational Judaism. However Gillette proposes that Jews once again unite and move beyond denominational barriers by appreciating the strengths and values of all denominations. For example, Jews could appreciate the primacy of Torah in orthodoxy to sanctify Jewish life, they could value the hard work offered by Conservative Judaism in balancing tradition with a modern life style, and they could respect and appropriate the emphasis of the Reform movement on deeds of loving kindness (Tikkun Olam) and the pursuit of justice. Gillette calls for a post-denominational Judaism where each Jew can devote his or herself to the areas of Jewish life where they excel and that are meaningful to them. In this way, as a community, all facets of Judaism could be covered, reflecting a post-denominational Judaism where Jewish theology is produced by individuals instead of passively consumed within the confines of each institutionalized denomination and at the behest of rabbinic authority. But, Gillette does not forget to add a caveat and demurrer to rabbinic authority in his appeal for post-

denominationalism. His article begins with the following disclaimer, “The following article contains excerpts from notes that were used for a Rosh Hashanah sermon, 5770. They were developed by Michael Gillette and represent a trans-denominational perspective. Readers who identify with a particular Jewish movement or congregation should consider their local Rabbi as the appropriate authority.” The rabbi, for Jews still embedded within the walls of a denomination, is still the one who should ultimately decide on issues of Jewish law and correct behavior. The different denominations should support each other, and individuals should tease out from the different streams what is most meaningful for them. Nevertheless, it is difficult for Gillette to completely give authority in post-denominational Judaism to individuals or even to communities as a whole. The final word may still lie with the rabbi.

Interestingly, Rabbi Mendel Teldon, a Chabad rabbi, has outed himself as post-denominational in his article, “I Am Not Orthodox.” This is especially surprising as Chabad is usually defined as a hasidic, ultra-orthodox movement. But Teldon states, “I think what recent surveys cry out is that people are Post-Denominational. They are tired of being boxed into these silly categories. The overwhelming majority of people don’t even know what they mean. Instead, they are yearning for a real connection that has real life application.” This phenomenon can be seen at a recent Shabbat dinner he and his wife hosted:

A few weeks back we had three different families join us; each with their own story on how they joined our congregation and each with their own level of involvement. I was feeling a bit daring (maybe too much Bartenura) and I posed the following multiple choice question: Do you consider yourself Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, None of the above or Other. The first guest thought for a few moments and said “I’m not sure. My parents were Conservative, we were married by an Orthodox rabbi, but our kids went to a Reform temple for nursery. I didn’t fast on this past Yom Kippur but my daughter’s upcoming Bat mitzvah is going to be done by an Orthodox rabbi.” The next guy said he is Reform since currently he is not a member at any temple but he takes his family to a Reform temple in Westchester every year for the high holidays. Since his parents are on the board of directors they get a good price on tickets so it is worth the schlep.

Also, while he hadn't studied much lately, he feels that his beliefs are more in tune with the Reform movements ideas of Tikun Olam. The third scratched his head and said, "My friends ask me this same question when they hear I am a member at an Orthodox congregation. My response is 'Other' since I don't fall into any of those categories."

In this view of post-denominationalism, Jews shuffle between the denominations, but don't subscribe to any one denomination's theology nor feel at home in any one denominational synagogue. They try to weave together bits and pieces from the various denominations, hoping that their needs and beliefs will somehow be met. Moreover, Rabbi Teldon, after experiencing many such conversations, sees the role of rabbis and Jewish leadership as a whole in a post-denominational theology as caregivers rather than as the overseers of Jewish laws and behavior, characteristics typical of rabbinic Judaism. He states, "It is the job of the Jewish leadership to embrace our responsibility, not as God's policeman but as My Brothers' Keeper. Our definitions should be based on the highest common denominator. And that is the Jewish soul, the piece of God that was gifted to each one of us and that each of us have a sacred right and responsibility to cultivate that relationship to the highest level." For Teldon, the essence of post-denominational Judaism is not labels, nor the rabbi as the avatar and controller of the Torah as seen in rabbinic Judaism, but the Jewish soul itself. And it is each individual's right and responsibility to bring their soul to the highest level possible. Instead of the rabbi as the sole symbol of Judaism, the Jewish soul for Teldon becomes the sole (no pun intended) symbol of a post-denominational Judaism. The Jewish soul might be the final word for Rabbi Teldon, but what remains unclear is who defines that highest soul level and how that level is achieved.

Nathan Abrams, Sally Baker and B.J. Brown in their study "Grassroots Religion: Facebook and Offline Post-Denominational Judaism" shed a different perspective on post-denominational Judaism than the view of Rabbi Teldon. They investigated the religious self-definition of Jews online and offline in an ever-increasing post-denominational Jewish world, particularly focusing on the effects of Internet use on forming new offline congregations that address the needs of Jews progressively frustrated with denominational Judaism. Abrams et

al see post-denominational Judaism in a slightly different light than the Jews around the Chabad rabbi's Shabbat table:

Rather than reject Judaism wholesale or 'engage in community structures they find alienating or bland' (Kelman and Schonberg 2008: 12), post-denominational Jews use their creativity and commitment to organize independently, to build meaningful Jewish experiences and to create ritual on their own terms outside of community institutions but within their own organic community of friends and family. They resist labeling by existing religious institutions and reject existing branches of Judaism to create something more fluid. (149)

Like the group gathered around Rabbi Teldon's Shabbat table, these post-denominational Jews also resist labeling, but they are more willing to work outside of institutions and share many of the characteristics of a post-rabbinic theology. Instead of hopping from one synagogue to the next, they seek Judaism outside of institutions and are willing to create their own theology instead of passively consuming it when they are at a reform or orthodox synagogue. It is a type of Pick 'n' Mix DIY Judaism that fosters "creative, heartfelt, intellectually inspiring environments" (151). Like Rabbi Teldon's Shabbat guests they also pick and mix their theologies, but there is more of an emphasis on DIY (do-it-yourself) Judaism and a post-rabbinic one where theology is produced instead of passively consumed between a mix of denominations.

Abrams et al view the Internet as galvanizing this type of post-denominationalism because it allows users to be connected on a global level and be part of a "global, post-national as well as post-denominational Jewish congregation" (144). Unlike the Chabad Jews stuck hopping between denominational synagogues or limited to a discussion of their identities amongst the different denominational labels around a Shabbat table, the Jews in Abrams' case study used the Internet to allow for new post-denominational theological functions to emerge:

Social networking sites, here Facebook, have created discursive spaces where choices that were once private have become increasingly public and visible and where small, emergent and labile offline congregations can form. Facebook is clearly helping to address increasing feelings of

alienation or disenfranchisement amongst post-denominational Jews who are dissatisfied with the existing communal and congregational infrastructure, providing greater opportunities for religious self-definition as well as a *qualitatively* different encounter with Judaism. It is seemingly allowing a new form of Judaism to emerge, unshackled from the constraints of denominational control, or at the very least reinventing and reviving earlier forms. (159)

Instead of a private discussion of Jewish theological identity centered around the denominations, this study shows how Facebook and other social network sites and the Internet as a whole are enabling new if labile congregations to form offline that value a qualitatively different approach to Judaism than is found at present within the denominations. This freedom from the restraints of the denominations supported by Web 2.0a allows for an emergent post-denominational Judaism with new and revived functions that closely mirror those of a post-rabbinic Jewish theology. When fusing the main features of post-rabbinic and post-denominational Jewish theology gleaned from these examples, four main tenets can be extracted for a contemporary digitally infused Jewish theology:

- 1) **Proactive** -- Jewish Theology is creatively produced, not passively consumed.
- 2) **Non-authoritative** -- No Jewish institutions or people are authorities with a monopoly on the interpretation of Jewish experiences in all their forms – religious, cultural and spiritual.
- 3) **Non-localized** -- Jewish theology is not centralized or localized in a building or denomination, but rather Jewish theology is found wherever and however Jews link up to do meaningful and inspiring things.
- 4) **Inspiring and Caring Leaders** -- Leaders enable Jews to convene and care for them, helping and inspiring them to make meaningful experiences, but from a peripheral rather than a central position.

These four post-rabbinic and post-denominational theological tenets will be used in analyzing the case studies to be presented.

3. Definitions

What is digital Judaism in particular and digital religion as a whole? How does it differ from traditional forms of religion and Jewish religiosity? How do we study it? Do the same methods that have been used for the study of religion apply?

In the case of Abrams et al, Facebook allowed for a relationship between online self-definition that then played out offline in new post-denominational functions in small offline congregations. But digital Judaism and digital religion as a whole have been and have become much more.

The term 'cyber-religion' was one of the first terms to describe the intersection of religion and the Internet, the Internet being a new virtual frontier. Heidi Campbell in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* describes how this new metaphorical framing "[...] evoked utopian and dystopian images of religion, where religious practice could be freed from traditional constraints and patterns" (2). Researchers in the late 1990's like Michel Bauwens in "Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship" explored the experimental interplay between computers and the religion of certain groups. He used 'cyber-religion' to not only give a title to these groups, but to suggest that their experimental interplay was bringing forth transformations both on the religious and the technical sides.

Another framework came from Christopher Helland who at the end of the 1990's distinguished between "religion online" and "online religion." He defines "religion online" as religious websites that "provide only religious information and not interaction" and "online religion" as websites "where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity" ("Online Religion As Lived Religion" 1). Religion online gave opportunities for creating new ritual forms without having to rely on traditional structures and easily transcended "normal limits of time, space, and geography" (Campbell, *Digital Religion* 2 – 3). By contrast, online religion used the fluid form of the Internet to build new social-religious functions for contemporary spirituality (Campbell *Digital Religion* 3). Helland, approximately five years after making this distinction, in his article "Online Religion As Lived Religion: Methodological Issues In The Study of Religious Participation On The Internet" has refined his definition of "online

religion” to not just websites, but to designate the living out of religion “on and through the internet” (12). It is a complete meshing of online and offline worlds. The online world is not some ‘other’ space, but a normal part of their daily lives where religious meaning applies just as it does in the offline world. Within this refined definition, Holland sees an ideal religious environment as one which both provides “information [...] and also an area where this information can be lived” (13). Online religion has subsumed religion online for an extensive religious experience. It is not just for example the use of Facebook as a platform for religious self-definition that supports offline congregational development as in the case of Abrams et al. It has become a space where these new religious self-definitions can be lived out.

The newest definition to describe these phenomena is “digital religion.” Heidi Campbell defines digital religion:

[It is] religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures. [It is] mediation of meaning via digital technology. This recognizes that the reformulation of existing religious practices has both online and offline implications. [...] We can think of digital religion as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa. This merging of new and established notions of religious practice means digital religion is imprinted by both the traits of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities.) (*Digital Religion* 3 - 4)

Here digital religion is seen as a bridge where meaningful practices flow between online and offline worlds. Religious practice in both worlds shape digital religion, be it the interactivity of online Web 2.0a culture or traditional religious beliefs and rituals from traditional communities. Digital religion takes place and is formed in movements between these worlds.

Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi in “The ‘Third Spaces’ of Digital Religion” take this fluid understanding of digital religion one step further. They favor an exploration of digital religion that seeks to take it on its own terms separate from any received categories such as the binaries of online and offline

religion. They invoke the notion of a “third place” or “third space” where new and unique meanings and functions can emerge. In their case studies of digital religion they describe how they came to this conclusion:

[...] we began to explore new ways of describing what we were seeing, and soon found ourselves calling the digital realm, in relation to these cases, as —or as enabling—a “third space.” [...] At the most basic, we wish to point away from physical location (an implication of “third place” as it [is] most often used) and toward fluid, conceptual, and imagined locations (an implication of the less common use of the term “third space”). “Third place,” and “third space” share in common an intention to describe something alternative to other, prior, or dominant domains. For our purposes, at this point, we think of the idea of “third space” as something to “think with,” nothing more, nothing less, and we will be grateful for the collaboration of scholarly colleagues as we do so. (5 – 6)

Instead of a dualistic separation of offline as a physical location imbued with traditional religion and online as something completely other, they invoke the notion of a new third space that is digital religion independent of prior domains and forms of categorization, but full of imaginations and original conceptions. Campbell takes up their scholarly appeal for something to “think with” and announces:

Digital religion as a concept acknowledges not only how the unique character of digital technology and culture shapes religious practice and beliefs, but also how religions seek to culture new media contexts with established ways of being and convictions about the nature of reality and the larger world. [...] Digital religion points to a different understanding of religion online and offline, one that is informed by the social structures and cultural practice of life in a technological and information-saturated society. (*Digital Religion* 4)

Campbell breaks free of notions of humans in an offline world as passive receivers of technology. She complicates and portrays the uniqueness of digital technology and its manifold ability to shape religion but also emphasizes the immense influence of human religious practice on digital media and spaces. Digital religion goes beyond a separation of the world into two realms, one

offline and one online. It is a new third space whose characteristics are just beginning to be understood and that are steeped in and integrally intertwined with our very complex information age society and culture.

4. Digital Judaisms

Through five case studies I seek to further this beginning understanding of digital religion in a Jewish context. Examples of digital Judaism can be seen today in the streaming of bar mitzvah ceremonies and funerals, Shabbat podcasts, Western Wall tweets, online minyans, e-conversions, and “Second Life” Shabbat candle lighting. Second Life might be the most radical type of digital Judaism according to Elicia Brown in her article “Virtually Jewish.” It is at one and the same time a virtual Jewish community and an online game. In Second Life Jews can “create avatars of themselves, selecting physical characteristics and clothing, and ‘teleport’ to virtual locations of Jewish interest” (Brown). In Second Life the avatars of Judaism are no longer rabbis but rather Javatars. Javatars are Jewish avatars who “can participate in a virtual sukkah building contest, study Torah with a Lubavitcher, visit an exhibit erected by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and teleport to a typical Eastern European synagogue” (Brown).

But digital Judaism isn’t relegated to the more radical streams of Judaism. Traditional Judaism has also become imbued with the digital. A prominent example is the digitizing of one of the most central texts of rabbinic Judaism – the Talmud. William Kremer of the BBC reports:

Since its launch last year, users have made around 15 million downloads, mostly of entire Talmudic volumes, Mayer Pasternak, director of Artscroll's Digital Talmud, told the BBC. To put that in perspective, the Jewish world population is thought to be a little under 14 million. Pasternak says the Talmud is peculiarly suited to a digital treatment. "It's a web of interconnected ideas and thoughts and commentaries," he says. "In one place something might be very poorly elaborated and you'll find in another place in the Talmud it's discussed at length - there's a constant cross-referencing process. We have about a million links in the digital app and we have a team of scholars putting the links in."

Pasternak himself is noticing how this form of digital Judaism is allowing for a new post-rabbinic function. Many of the users of the Talmud app are women. In rabbinic Judaism, women are not allowed to become rabbis and have mostly been barred from studying the Talmud. However, with this new Talmud app so freely available to anyone who has access to the Internet, women included, the number of women studying the Talmud and actively exchanging ideas with the (male) scholars behind the app is rapidly growing. (Kremer)

Though digital Judaism is abounding with ever-increasing forms and functions, the scholarly investigation of digital Judaisms has remained limited. Some examples are Brenda Brasher's work on a cyber-seder, Stephen D. O'Leary's investigation of the virtual Western Wall, Tsurriel Rashi's analysis of the kosher cell phone in ultra-Orthodox society, and Abrams et al examination of the relationship between Facebook and offline Jewish congregations. Abrams et al admit that research into digital Judaism has been growing but is still vastly limited. "[...] it is restricted both geographically and denominationally in that it is largely confined to the United States and Israel and Orthodoxy. [...] There is little cross-cultural comparative work and even less work that examines and compares Jewish self-definition globally. The European/UK environment is virtually ignored" (145 - 146).

To add to the work on digital Judaism, I will investigate three online synagogues -- Our Jewish Community, Sim Shalom and Punk Torah -- a Jewish erotic site -- Jewrotica, and an open source Jewish prayer book initiative -- The Open Siddur Project. All five of these Judaisms are lived out globally even if some of them are connected to offline Judaisms in the United States. They are also predominantly non-Orthodox though Jewrotica has a partial Orthodox basis. In this way, I hope to expand the research on digital Judaism to a global and multi- or post-denominational context.

5. Methodological Considerations

A short survey of the four waves of methodologies in digital religious studies is helpful before defining a methodology that I will use to analyze these case studies. Campbell sketches four waves of research methodologies in her

introduction to *Digital Religion*. The first wave – the descriptive wave - was characterized by “utopian and dystopian discourses” (8). This wave of researchers documented the rise of various religions on the Internet, providing a survey of uses of the Internet for religious purposes, and offering positive and negative critical reflection either to do with the power of the Internet to connect and engage spiritual communities or the dangers and ethical misuses such forums also provide (8). The second wave, more categorical, expanded the circle of research to go beyond the technology to the people who were reflecting on it. Researchers tried to find categories to encompass methodologies in use, though these categories more often than not failed to be comprehensive. The third wave, the theoretical, took a reflective step back to think about the theoretical implications of the research done up to that point. Previous areas of research such as ritual, community and identity were deepened to reflect the influence of everyday Internet use on religious practice and new areas such as authority were analyzed (8 – 9). The fourth wave is just starting to emerge with new methodologies like “third space” from Hoover and Echchaibi. Another example of a new fourth wave methodology comes from Gregory Grieve in “Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method.” He offers a method for studying digital religion based on a Cardean ‘Hinge’ model:

Named after the Roman Goddess, Cardea, our method uses the model of a hinge to theorize the virtual as desubstantialized and the worlds opened up by cyberspace as nondualistic [...] This can be theorized as the hinge, which models the virtual world and the actual as nondualistic. Nondualism indicates that things appear distinct while not being separate, and affirms the understanding that while distinctions exist, dichotomies are illusory phenomenon. For instance, a virtual body is distinct from an actual body, but there is no essential difference between them. They are both cultural practices. The hinge places you in two worlds at once [...] In the case of the Cardean ‘Hinge’ model, while actual embodiment and virtual embodiment are distinct, they cannot be dichotomized as real and simulated. Instead, both are *real*, because the virtual and the actual produce an effect. (38 - 42)

This is similar to the idea of a “third space” with its own characteristics, neither

giving precedence to the physical nor the virtual. Both realms are real, authentic and distinct though not separate. The Cardean 'Hinge' places users of digital religion in a non-dualistic world of actual and virtual cultural embodiment, able to create real effects and have real experiences online and offline.

Grieve also contemplates ideas of community in his fourth wave methodology, seeking to distinguish between online and offline models. He defines community in general as "a group that forms relationships over time by interacting on a regular basis around a set of shared experiences – this could be car enthusiasts or the members of a remote mountain village" (44). In the virtual world, Grieve expands on the notion of community where it becomes a "cloud community:"

[It is] an online group that is temporary, flexible, elastic and is inexpensive in the social capital required to join or to leave. I borrow the notion of the 'cloud' from computing where it signifies an architecture in which users access resources online from a host of different servers – Google docs, Blist and Sliderocket would be examples. Cloud computing users do not invest in infrastructure. Instead, they rent what they need when they need it. (44)

Instead of online community being based on long-term relationships with frequent interactions like in communities located in remote villages, cloud communities mimic the form of cloud computing. Long-term infrastructure is unimportant. Community is made by people accessing, uploading and downloading their communal resources for their particular needs at a particular time. New methodologies like Grieve's emphasize the importance of changing notions of communities in digital culture and the need for new methodologies to study them.

Ideas of community gleaned from computing and expanded definitions of authenticity in a third space in and between online and offline worlds have expanded current research to focus on "how new media shapes our understanding of authority, authenticity, community, identity, and ritual" and how "digital media also provide a space for anchoring one's religious identity and helping one connect the online and offline in order to find and negotiate personal meaning in everyday life" (Campbell, *Digital Religion* 12 - 13). I will use fourth-wave methodology to focus on how digital Judaism is shaping and being

shaped by ideas of authority, authenticity, community, identity and ritual in the five case studies and how in each case post-rabbinic and post-denominational theological meanings and functions are produced and negotiated in a third space beyond dualistic ideas of online and offline realms.

6. Case Studies

a. Our Jewish Community (<http://ourjewishcommunity.org/>)

Community

As its name suggests, Our Jewish Community as a form of digital Judaism places utmost importance on the role of community in the Jewish world. This can be seen immediately in the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of their website where they define their particular form of digital Judaism:

What is OurJewishCommunity.org?

Recognizing the changing needs of the Jewish Community, OurJewishCommunity.org reaches out to progressive Jews throughout the world. OurJewishCommunity.org provides some of the same services of a brick-and-mortar congregation, such as access to rabbis, sermons, educational materials, social networking, discussions, and more. The benefits of OurJewishCommunity.org are many: It is not restricted to geographic boundaries. It provides a place for people who may not have a progressive synagogue in their local community to which they feel connected. It is convenient – and open 24/7. It appeals to people who use technology on a regular basis. It promotes individual autonomy. It offers the opportunity to be part of building the future of Judaism. (Our Jewish Community)

This very short statement already reflects how digital features are shaping a new understanding of Jewish community, one that is unrestricted geographically and by its opening hours, almost like a corner 7/11 convenient shop open 24/7 but with many theological levels of meaning. In this digital community, physical location is less important than the connections one can make online. Like Grieve

and Hoover and Echchaibi, Campbell in “Community” sites the use of social network analysis to understand this change in the conceptions of community. Instead of a physical location being one of the most determinate factors of a community, networks have arisen as the central feature. Campbell states that, “Social network analysis [...] is based on the belief that communities are, in essence, social and not spatial structures” (65). Digital, and especially social media, are ideal in realizing this form of community since they are unrestricted by normal spatial and temporal boundaries. She continues that “When technology mediates and sustains relationships, geographical separation is no longer a factor in exclusion from a social network [...] Conversely, it is not uncommon for individuals to be socially separate from those who live in close physical proximity” (66). For Jews who do not have a physical synagogue in their location, like the progressive Jews who may not have a corresponding synagogue “in their local community to which they feel connected,” digital Judaism in the form of Our Jewish Community allows for a sense of community and meaningful connection that can meet their religious needs without having to move to a different physical location or accommodate their theological ideals to some institutionalized denomination. Digital Jewish community builds on notions of community as a social rather than a physical phenomenon, allowing for post-denominational and post-rabbinic functions of Jews linking up to do meaningful things beyond a centralized or localized building or denomination.

Our Jewish Community is so committed to this new form of non – localized community that in 2010 they were the first group to stream High Holiday services (Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur) on Blackberries, iPhones and Droids, allowing for dynamic movement where Jews did not even have to be localized at a computer to be part of the community (Constant Contact). After realizing that many people access the Internet on their mobile devices, they decided to add these new digital forms so that even more people could become part of the community. This was partly due to the fact that the year before “nearly 4,000 computers logged in from 100 countries on Yom Kippur day. Among those watching were members of the military serving overseas, people who are homebound, and some who are geographically isolated. Many commented that they would not otherwise be able to afford services [...] and

many families (sometimes in different states) watched together” (Constant Contact). After reaching across military bases, physical disabilities keeping community members restricted to their homes, and geographic isolation to hook Jews and Jewish families up to have meaningful religious experiences as a community, Our Jewish Community decided to expand the boundaries of their community even farther beyond physical limitation through varying mobile devices. This new form of a digital religious community is continuing to expand post-rabbinic and post-denominational community functions as non-centralized and non-localized in a building or denomination as the social connection afforded by digital mobile media override geographic and temporal impediments.

Ritual

One of the most observed Jewish rituals is the Passover seder, where the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt is recounted around a festive meal. Rabbi Baum, Our Jewish Community’s founding rabbi and director, justifies its popularity on the fact that “people want a way to observe without schlepping to synagogue all the time” (Burstein). Despite its rich rabbinic tradition, this ritual, like many rabbinic traditions, is not localized in an institution or a synagogue. Baum took this non-localized tradition and adapted it to digital media. “Anyone who clicks on to OurJewishCommunity.org Saturday night will be welcomed by a cozy image of an impeccably-set Passover table with all the fixings of a traditional, 'round-the-dining-table' holiday” (Lagnado). Baum broadcast “her own seder live online to an estimated 400 viewers from around the world. The seder also garnered 165 "likes" on Facebook” (Need a Haggadah?). On Passover, “People feel free to do whatever they want,’ says Barr (another rabbi connected to Our Jewish Community.) [...] ‘And we want people to feel empowered to create a Jewish experience that works for them.’” (Kahn)

And that is just what they have done. The participants around the world did not just passively sit back and watch as Baum led the seder, nor did Baum passively limit her seder to existing technology. The participants interactively engaged in the seder through a new app created by Our Jewish Community in

partnership with Jvillage 2.0. This new app takes the traditional ritual of Elijah, for whom a special cup of wine is poured at the seder table and for whom the front door is opened to welcome him to each seder, and transforms this ritual for digital media:

“What I realized is that Elijah’s role during Passover is very similar to Santa Claus’s during Christmas,” said Rabbi Laura Baum who then “launched the ElijahTracker.com website, which allows users to follow Elijah on his journeys during the week of Passover. ‘Elijah and Santa Claus have this theoretical journey around the world, visiting homes and having food and drinks left out for them.’” (Savage)

Instead of passively consuming technology, Our Jewish Community and Jvillage are actively shaping rituals in the digital world. Jvillage 2.0’s mission is to “combine creativity and technology to help you educate, connect, and **grow your Jewish community**. Bring your organization to life in the digital world” (Jvillage). Using ElijahTracker.com participants can upload photos of their locations and photoshop Elijah into the picture. Baum remarked that “Instead of having the holiday fizzle out in a malaise of matzah menu madness, this creative use of Twitter maintained the aspect of interactive anticipation that is meant to infuse the sederim” (Abusch-Magder).

This collaboration between computer developers and religious organizations is making digital ritual ever more interactive and meaningful. A similar example to that of the Elijah Tacker is the “wiring” of the Western Wall in Jerusalem that allows for 24/7 viewing. With the help of developers the ritual of virtually going to the Western Wall was made more interactive through programs that allow users to submit prayers that are then printed out and put into a crevice:

[...] the person visiting the website has more than just a virtual connection, they are participating in a form of “long-distanced” ritual practice that is facilitated by the Internet. [...] The participant is not just watching a computer screen to view the activity, they are entering a liminal space, betwixt and between, where they manipulate the actual environment by leaving tangible proof of their ritual activity. (Helland, “Ritual” 33 - 34)

Partnering with programmers like those at Jvillage or the creators of the virtual Western Wall allows participants in digital Judaism an active creative role in the production of theology instead of mere consumers of technologically augmented religion. Additionally, it augments the non-localized tradition of the seder to a third liminal space betwixt and between virtual and real, where they have manipulated their environments to leave proof of their ritual activity either in the form of actual pieces of paper left at the Western Wall or virtual evidence of Elijah's visit as he freely moves between physical homes in such places as York, Tallinn, Uganda and Alaska. Digital rituals like these that are proactively created are invigorating the creative production of theology in post-rabbinic and post-denominational Judaism.

Identity

Some groups like the Baha'I in "Bounded Religious Communities' Management of the Challenge of New Media: Baha'i Negotiation with the Internet" (Campbell and Fulton) resist fluid notions of identity that are made possible by digital media. Instead they use new technologies "to maintain closed social structures and solidify their unique identities" (185). This is also seen in examples from ultra-orthodox Jewish groups where the Internet is used to control the group's identity and membership (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai). However, Mia Lövheim in "Identity" found that the Internet can enhance identity on two levels – the individual and the social:

The Internet enhances the possibility of individually practiced religion, but digital media also make visible and provide a new form of social infrastructure for the individual's religion: a network of local communities, technological devices and software applications, and geographically close or remote friends and family members. This shows that religious identity in modern society is still a social thing, deeply anchored in the social situations and relations individuals want and need to stay connected to in order to find meaning and act in everyday life. (52)

Technology like the Elijah Tracker can enhance individual religious experiences, but digital media can also support social frameworks. Religious identity in a digital context is still primarily a social phenomenon where individuals connect

to find meaning. One of Our Jewish Community's goals is to do just that. They want to "Reach previously unengaged or under-engaged Jews while strengthening their Jewish identity" (likeable media). Rabbi Baum is forging a new definition of Jewish identity in the 21st century:

The organization's goal is to be a spiritual home, a meaningful voice and a resource for people worldwide seeking a contemporary Jewish identity and experience. [...] Participants are young and old, healthy and homebound, Jewish and in interfaith families, straight and gay, single and married, with and without children. Many of them are unaffiliated. The innovation is not only in the technology, but also in the organization's commitment to serving Jews who are unaffiliated and/or under-engaged. The inclusivity and commitment to making people feel comfortable even if they do not feel particularly knowledgeable about Judaism has brought to the table hundreds of thousands of Jews who weren't being reached by other organizations. (roi)

Jewish identity at Our Jewish Community isn't about how much you know or belonging to a particular denomination. It is about connections and feeling comfortable enough to find meaning in daily Jewish rituals and life. Instead of using digital media to be an identity gatekeeper like in the previously mentioned cases of the Baha'i or ultra-Orthodox Jews, Our Jewish Community uses the form of the Internet to open up a meaningful Jewish identity to thousands of Jews outside the Jewish establishment. "Baum is willing to challenge assumptions about the nature of Jewish identity, community, and religious ideas [... touching] the lives of many who the organized Jewish community is not reaching" (The Huffington Post). Or in post-denominational and post-rabbinic terminology, she is taking Jews wherever and however they are and connecting them to do meaningful things. It is not important if they are affiliated with a synagogue or where they are located in the world. What is important for a post-denominational and post-rabbinic identity is that Jews connect and find meaning in a Jewish context, something that the social dimensions of the Internet make increasingly effortless.

Authority

Our Jewish Community states one of its core values in the following way, “We value principles of responsibility and origin of authority that rests with each individual” (Our Jewish Community). Instead of authority lying with certain individuals, namely rabbis, Our Jewish Community values a new type of authority, one that rests on the shoulders of all individuals. The form of the Internet helps enable this new theological function as “the most significant impact of the Internet lies in augmenting a development in which individuals come to exercise more autonomy in relation to formal authorities and institutions in matters of faith” (Lövheim 50). Rabbi Baum even as a rabbi strongly supports this move from rabbinic authority to individual authority. In her role as rabbi she is “constantly on the move teaching, writing, lecturing, educating, tweeting, leading services, or officiating at her members’ life-cycle events” (The Huffington Post). Despite these mixed rabbinic roles, some traditional like officiating at life-cycle events, and some modern like tweeting, Baum puts huge value on diversity and individuality and “empowers people to chart their own Jewish course” (The Huffington Post).

Through digital media, Rabbi Baum, in her role as rabbi, is incorporating non-authoritative, inspiring and caring leadership qualities found in post-rabbinic and post-denominational Judaism. She is a religious leader who has embraced sharing her faith with the Twitterati. “People can log into Facebook and Twitter, see what we've posted, and based on their interest level decide to explore the post further,' she says. 'We use these as models to engage Jews who haven't responded to more traditional forms of outreach in the past” (Murray-West). This is another finding of research into the impact of digital media on religious authority. Paul Emerson Teusner in “Formation of a religious Technorati: Negotiations of authority among Australian emerging church blogs” found that digital media attracts those who have often been excluded or didn’t feel comfortable in traditional institutions. The Internet helps “challenge institutional structures that exclude certain people from having a voice in public religion” (188). That is exactly Rabbis Baum and Barr’s goal, to engage Jews not being reached by traditional institutions and putting the responsibility of their

Judaism in their own hands. They also want Jewish theology to be accessible, not confined to rabbinic schools, but available to anyone without membership requirements or even a login.

Not all rabbis are happy about this. Rabbi Harold Berman, a Conservative rabbi, is bothered by this type of individual, any which way, type of interpretation of faith. "Judaism is not just to be there for everybody as they wish it to be,' he said [...] Such criticisms don't deter Barr, who says religion cannot lag behind as the world changes. 'We're not constrained by the traditions of the past,' he said. 'The world of our ancestors is not the world we live in'" (Heagney). The rabbinic past where revelation could be interpreted by individuals, but only rabbinic individuals who set the bar for how Judaism should be instead of how an individual may wish it to be, is according to Barr not the world we live in anymore. Contemporary Jewish theology and interpretation of revelation does not need to be constricted to a limited set of individuals. Instead, according to Our Jewish Community, it is an evolving "process that will be influenced by congregants' feedback."

Authority stems from an interaction between the individual congregants with each other and with the rabbis where no one has a monopoly on the interpretation of Judaism. The rabbis' role is to care for and inspire congregants, not to be authorities of proper behavior. Through new forms of digital religion, authority at Our Jewish Community is taking on more and more post-denominational and post-rabbinic functions as can be seen in Rabbi Baum being named one of America's top fifty female rabbis. "Baum's expertise in social media and her commitment to modern Jewish thought have enabled her to transform the lives of Jews around the world" (The Huffington Post). Through social media Baum can inspire, transform and enable Jews to be their own authorities in meaningful ways.

Authenticity and Third Space

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler in "Authenticity" states that in research into digital religion a question still remains, namely, "[...] how the relationship between the offline and the online body can be defined, and whether online bodily experiences can be judged to be as authentic as offline experiences" (93).

According to Rabbi Kalman Shor, the role of the Internet in Orthodox Judaism is extremely complex. Besides the more straightforward considerations of the use of electricity on the Sabbath or High Holy Days, more complex issues arise when seen in the light of the Shulchan Aruch – the Code of Jewish Law. “It expressly states that anything that comes between a mitzvah (a commandment) and the one who is observing it renders the mitzvah invalid” (Wexler). For Kalman, the main purpose of the Sabbath or other Jewish holidays is to achieve a connection with God. There can be no separation between the person and their prayers – a separation he sees built into Internet religion. He does acknowledge that the Internet can augment the social side of Jewish holidays. But for him, “technology discounts any spiritual connection” (Wexler).

From a proscriptive rabbinic perspective, the form of digital Judaism is one that creates a barrier between humans and God, one that inhibits the proper fulfillment of God’s commandments. However, another orthodox rabbi, Jeremy Rosen, disagrees with Kalman. He thinks that the Internet can meet congregants’ theological needs, but cannot give them an authentic social spiritual experience since it “tends to weaken [their] interaction with the community” (Lipman). Only an embodied community encounter can meet the social side of congregants’ theological yearnings. Both Kalman and Rosen’s perspectives are based on assumptions that there is a clear cut difference between online and offline worlds and that there is a distinction between actual and virtual bodies. However, both notions of third space and the nondualistic Cardean ‘Hinge’ model of the worlds opened up by the Internet complicate this dualistic understanding. Current methodologies for studying digital religion call on a more entangled notion of the relationship between online and offline worlds. Radde-Antweiler explains:

[...] social actions within virtual environments have real effects on the offline body and mind. Religious performances and experiences online generate effects that are not limited to the online arena [...] For many users their offline and online lives are seen as contexts that are merged and interwoven, and they are not seen as contradictory. [...] As Boellstorff stresses: What makes these virtual worlds real is that relationships, romance, economic transactions, and community take place with them – in

short, that they are places of human culture. It is this social reality that links virtual and actual. (95 - 96)

Many users of the Internet do not differentiate between online and offline worlds. Their actions in the virtual realm can have real effects in both the offline and online worlds, merging these spheres into one continuous third space, undifferentiated between the physical and the virtual. A democratization of authenticity then occurs, where the physical no longer has an “authentic” upper hand compared to the virtual. This third place is a place of human culture, and digital religion is a part of it. In this respect, the virtual is just as authentic and real as the physical.

Rabbi Baum shares this view of authentic religious experiences in digital religion. For her, “social networking is not about 'hooking' an online audience back into an ordinary synagogue life. She believes that Jews can have a valid religious experience within the social networking communities themselves. 'We appeal to a wide range of Jews who want to participate in meaningful Jewish experiences but haven't found a way to do so in brick-and-mortar congregations,' she explains” (Murray-West). Unlike Kalman and Rosen, Baum believes that the Internet in itself offers an authentic religious experience and doesn't need a goal of bringing congregants back to a physical location. It offers meaningful experiences for Jews outside of a building made up of brick and mortar. Authenticity in Our Jewish Community's digital religion takes place in a third place somewhere between bricks and clicks. With 56 percent of American Jews unaffiliated with any synagogue and with the majority of Jewish websites functioning as 'religion online' as sources of information and discussion boards, Our Jewish Community “seeks to surpass the existing models of Internet and of congregation, and create a hybrid “bricks-and-clicks” synagogue online” (Our Jewish Community). For many contemporary Jews, this form of digital religion in a third space allows for an authentic spiritual experience. It functions as an expansion of post-rabbinic and post-denominational theology. Jewish theology does not have to be found in a building or a denomination. It is happening in a non-localized third space where Jews are hooking up to do meaningful things. Rabbi Baum appreciates this new function. She sees “the value of the Internet as

one of empowerment and breaking down barriers. Our Jewish philosophy fits well with that. Not everyone else's does" (Wexler).

The rabbinic philosophy espoused by Rabbis Kalman and Rosen may not fit well with the form of the Internet, but a non-localized digital function that can cross barriers between people, connecting them in inspiring ways, fits well into Our Jewish Community's form of digital religion. When asked to differentiate between a physical and a virtual community, Rabbi Baum describes it thus:

We have worked hard to make this an online community. This year, we have a Memorial service which will go up on the website. We've asked people to submit photos of deceased family members who they are remembering. So that's a new twist. [...] There are certainly people who have not found community locally and have online. Others find online anonymity frees them to ask questions and explore ideas where they might feel silly asking in a congregation. [...] I used to be a "bricks and mortar" rabbi and I feel I have more interaction with the members of our online community. (Howard)

For Rabbi Baum, physical is no longer more real than virtual. The online world is a place of human culture with community connectivity, memorial services, possibilities for freely and uninhibitedly asking questions and exploring ideas and a high volume of interactivity, an amount higher for Baum than at her former position as a rabbi at a physical synagogue. Acting outside of traditional Jewish institutions, for Baum and the members of Our Jewish Community, the virtual and the physical have become seamlessly interwoven, where the virtual has the same rights and realness as the physical. Radde-Antweiler confirms this phenomenon, "[...] religious experiences and performances can happen in a virtual environment independent of religious institutions. Therefore the answer to the question "What is real?" depends on the actors' perspectives, and mostly on their criteria for "reality" and "virtuality"" (99). The members of Our Jewish Community do not need a rabbi or a code of Jewish Law to tell them what is an authentic spiritual experience. They are defining their own categories and finding their own meaning as the following member quotes demonstrate:

"I was moved, inspired, and felt part of an incredibly large community."

“...this can unite Jews across the globe, give services to people who cannot get to a service, give an affiliation, a sense of belonging...”

“Those who say this can’t survive have never spent a service or two on here. We are a community”

“My husband is a disabled veteran... I cannot tell you how wonderful it was... participating even though we sat in our own living room.”

“Your Memorial Service brought tears to my eyes and heart remembering those dear to me... thank you for the scrolling pictures of those sweet memories!”

“The Memorial Service with the photo display was profoundly moving. At the moment I saw my Mom’s picture, I knew that I had found a home for my beliefs, my hopes, and my dreams. Thank you for helping me to keep Humanistic Judaism in the forefront of my life.”

“It has been a while since I felt comfortable in a synagogue.... Thank you.”
(likeable media)

These quotes communicate how these members’ sense of a third interwoven space between the digital and the physical has become so natural for them that they do not even ask if what they are experiencing is real. These religious actors’ perspectives of the inspiring, moving, connected, wonderful, comforting and comfortable experiences at Our Jewish Community do not need an institution or rabbi to make them real. Their own perspectives are the criteria for authenticity.

Contemplating the authenticity of Our Jewish Community through fourth-wave non-dualistic third space frameworks brings out the progression between the form of this digital Judaism and post-denominational and post-rabbinic functions of a non-authoritarian and non-localized theology. Rabbis, rabbinic codes and institutionalized denominations centralized in brick and mortar buildings are no longer authorities that decide what is real, nor locations in which authentic spiritual experiences can take place. Members of Our Jewish Community decide for themselves if their experiences are real, whether in a physical location, online or betwixt and between these worlds of human culture.

b. Punk Torah (<http://punktorah.org/>), One Shul (<http://punktorah.org/>) and Darshan Yeshiva (<http://www.darshanyeshiva.org/>)

Community

Punk Torah and its sister websites of One Shul, an e-synagogue, and Darshan Yeshiva, an e-learning center, share many of the community features of Our Jewish Community, advertising a sense of community built around social rather than geographic connections as can be seen in the description of one of their prayer services:

On a recent weekday, Rivka Bowlin led mincha, the afternoon prayer service, from her home in Louisville, Ky. Her fellow worshipers were in Atlanta, Detroit and Oakland, Calif., watching her on their computer screens, following along with an online prayer book and keying in “Amen” after each blessing via a chat window [...] Just because participants don’t meet face to face doesn’t make that community any less real, said Patrick Aleph, the group’s 27-year-old co-founder and executive director. “We are a community of real people who happen to meet online,” he told JTA.

(Fishkoff)

Instead of a geographic location defining their sense of community, Punk Torah is shaping and being shaped by a social sense of religious community. It does not matter for a digital prayer service if one member is in Kentucky and another in California. They are real people who meet online to pray together from opposite ends of the country. And by creating an online prayer book and a chat window where “Amen” gives the appropriate social recognition of a prayer, Punk Torah is not only being shaped by technology, but it is also leaving its own mark of digital religion by shaping technology to meet its understanding of religious community.

Like Our Jewish Community, Punk Torah reaches out to the unaffiliated, those who don’t fit into a denominational synagogue in their area and who want to stay independent, especially emphasizing individual spirituality. This is found in the description of their community in the Frequently Asked Question section

of their website:

You matter, and you matter to Judaism. We are here because you are important to us and to God. Simple as that.

PunkTorah, a 501(c)(3) Jewish non-profit, is an online community helping people who have fallen through the cracks of Jewish life. Our multimedia network spreads a message of love, inclusion and hope to thousands of people around the world. No matter what shape you are, at PunkTorah, you fit [...] We are independent and unaffiliated [...] just like you! (Punk Torah/About)

Unaffiliated, independent seekers of religion on the Internet are not restricted to Jews. This is a phenomenon found across religions and locations. For example, Alruna, a 19-year-old student with loose ties to the Church of Sweden, felt quite alone as a practitioner of witchcraft in a Swedish context. She explains:

The problem is that it has been very difficult to find people who share my thoughts, and who are interested in this as strongly as I am... I don't know what or where I would have been today if I hadn't had the Internet, actually. Because it helped me so incredibly in getting contacts and knowing where to find this and that. It wouldn't have worked otherwise... Many times I have said that the Internet has been my salvation, because for the first time I understood that I was not alone. (Lövheim and Linderman 127 – 129).

Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman in "Constructing religious identity on the Internet" maintain that these types of loose networks diverge from previous forms of religious community (132). Just like Alruna finding fellow isolated witches within the institutionally shaped religious landscape of the Church of Sweden, the Internet has allowed many members of the Punk Torah community who had previously fallen through the cracks of institutional Judaism to find each other and form a loose network online diverging from previous forms of localized Jewish community. The Internet is connecting Jews in far-flung regions who previously might have felt isolated to "share their religious beliefs and practices" (Lövheim and Linderman 132). Punk Torah is reaching out to these people who might feel alone in their independent way of practicing Judaism and

in their local context and through the Internet connecting them into one community, albeit one that encourages its members to remain independent and unaffiliated, reflecting the members' theological stances. They are creatively forging their own theology in non-localized and non-institutionalized contexts, fostering theological functions in accord with a post-rabbinic and post-denominational Judaism.

Identity

Just under the description of the community in the Frequently Asked Questions section of their website, comes a description of their identity as punk:

So what is "punk" about "PunkTorah"?

Punk, like hippie, rapper, beatnik or whatever, means outsider. It means independent, DIY, pluralistic, forward thinking. It also means someone who is marginalized. If you feel like that, then you're PunkTorah, too." (Punk Torah/About)

The emphasis on the inclusion of marginalized, independent, pluralistic views is a feature supported by the characteristics of the Internet. Lövheim and Linderman continue in "Constructing religious identity on the Internet" to describe this particular manifestation of identity attributable to the form of the Internet:

On the Internet, the place and time of the gathering can furthermore be more flexible. Thus, even if the activity on the list at times drops considerably, an accessible 'site' for collective construction of religious identity is always possible. The plurality of perspectives that the participants of the list represent makes discussions typically partial and fugitive. This seemingly heterogeneous and contingent character of the opinions and experiences voiced in the postings to the list seems to be an important part of the process of forming collective values and norms on the list. Through advocating tolerance and plurality *in practice*, the list seems to become a place for developing a collective religious identity that gives legitimacy to the right of every member to follow his or her own heart. Rather than a homogeneous body of shared beliefs, it is the experience of

being different or 'strange' in the eyes of mainstream religions, and consequently the values of tolerance and individual freedom of belief, that seems to form the basis of the collective identity." (Lövheim and Linderman 132 - 133)

Just as individual outsider punks gather together to create an alternative identity to the mainstream culture, Punk Torah with its 24/7 accessibility is gathering marginalized, independent, unaffiliated Jews and supporting them in their plurality to create a collective alternative identity to mainstream Judaism. Rabbi Aleph in an interview describes it thus:

What I've always viewed the synagogue and community as is being spiritual and intentional. [We are p]roviding an experience that is transcendent and – unfortunately, I think – really missing in some places. I think that a lot of people who are interested in having a spiritual experience come up against things that stand in the way, like communities with more social intentions and issues of accessibility. One of the great things about all of our projects is that we are available to anyone online with a computer. No synagogue will ever replicate that [...] We call ourselves an "online synagogue," but we are pluralistic. In any given week, you could have an Orthodox rabbi teaching kabbalah and then a transsexual person teaching queer theory and Jewish history. We really run the spectrum of Jewish practice and identities. (Miller)

The flexible gathering time and place allowed by the internet to anyone who has a computer is assisting independent Punk Jews in bypassing the traditional gatekeepers in brick and mortar synagogues and having access to a 'site' where they can collectively fashion a religious identity, similar to the post-denominational Jews in England who used Facebook to negotiate a new sense of a religious Jewish identity. Rabbi Aleph emphasizes how the Internet allows for a plurality of voices at Punk Torah, such as those of Orthodox rabbis and transsexual teachers being able to share the same 'space' during the same week. It is the spectrum of practices and identities that is an integral part of the process of forming group norms at Punk Torah. By practicing a spectrum of identities Punk Torah via the Internet has managed to form a new collective Jewish identity where each member is encouraged to follow his or her own heart. The

flexible form of Punk Torah is strengthening post-denominational identities through a fluid and pluralistic set of opinions, identities and denominations. In this mutable third space Punk Torah is hoping to create a place where each individual heart and soul has the authority to interpret Jewish experiences in whatever form, from completely marginalized voices like those of the transsexual teacher to completely institutionalized ones like those of the orthodox rabbi.

Ritual and Authority

Punk Torah and its educational sister website Darshan Yeshiva exhibit complex negotiation processes between offline and online worlds in the ritual of conversion and its interaction with institutional rabbinic authorities. Rabbi Aleph originally foresaw the ritual of conversion under the influence of the Internet as an “Insta-Conversion” ritual. In the first anthology of his writings he describes the process thus:

Utilizing the power of the Internet, we can completely re-think how new Jews are brought into the Tribe. The general requirements are a pre-interview, some kind of Judaism 101 class, Bet Din, bris, mikvah and a public ceremony. If we break this down, we find that most of this can be done quickly and efficiently, utilizing e-technology. Pre-conversion interviews between Rabbi and convert can easily be done via IM or Skype. Classes can be modeled after distance learning with e-books to read and online exams. The Bet Din can be turned into a teleconference, or again, another Skype adventure. The bris (for men) and mikvah would need to be in person, but as far as I’m concerned a public ceremony could be a mass update on your Facebook/Myspace/Twitter. We could also use webcams to broadcast this event. (Aleph 50)

This type of transformation of rituals for the Internet has been analyzed and developed by researchers at the University of Heidelberg into a ritual transfer theory. They recognized that rituals are ‘dynamic and ever-changing’ and they developed a framework to analyze which attributes would be altered when relocated into a digital media environment. This process has three categories:

Transformation – take an extant ritual and reshape it to fit into digital culture.

Innovation -new aspects of a ritual may have to be created to fit into a digital environment.

Exclusion – some ritual elements may have to be left out for the ritual to work in an online environment.

Once these three operations act on the ritual, participants will need to decide if the ritual works and is authentic, or if excluding the physicality of the body for example is too great a change and the ritual transfer process fails (Miczek 150).

In rethinking the conversion ritual, Rabbi Aleph followed one step in the ritual transfer process. He wanted to transform the ritual to fit digital culture by having pre-conversion interviews per Skype, classes modeled on distance learning with e-books, a Bet Din (rabbinic court) convened per teleconference and a public ceremony usually held in a synagogue social hall becoming a mass Facebook update. However, Aleph failed to innovate and exclude. The bris, or ritual circumcision for men, and the mikvah, or ritual bath, would still need to be in a physical offline location. He does not attempt to either innovate by creating some new digital aspect to the conversion ritual to replace a bris or mikvah, nor does he exclude either of these elements.

When Aleph's vision of an online conversion became a reality last year, not only did he exclude a bris and mikvah from finding a digital expression, but he also excluded the bet din from convening online per teleconference. For a community-led community that supports pluralistic views and having each member stay independent and following his or her own heart, for the ritual of conversion a rather non-Punklike version of authority in the figure of Rabbi Aleph appeared in a discussion forum connected to the conversion program. The web pages states, "Our conversion program is designed to take six months, with the final conversion taking place with a bet din in Atlanta, Georgia including a cross section of rabbis (Reform and Post-Denominational) and the mikvah at a Conservative synagogue" (Punk Torah/Online Conversion). Andrea, a potential conversion candidate responds to this on the discussion board, "Will there be any way for this to be accessible to those who are unable to travel? There is no way I will be able to afford a trip to Atlanta for now or the foreseeable future [...]"

Rabbi Aleph then responds with, “To convert to Judaism, one needs a bet din and a mikveh. So the question is, without coming to Atlanta where we have that available, how would you like to make those resources possible in your area? Do you have some thoughts, because this is certainly something we want to explore. Thanks!”

Aleph is using the Internet here to assert authority. He tries to support her in finding resources in her area, but he excludes her from being part of the process of deciding what is meaningful and not. He places himself in an authority position over her instead of on the periphery of a community led discussion. The community led punk community has in this instance become a rabbinically led community. This example shows how the Internet can be used to not only challenge institutional authority like having a Punk Jewish group of marginalized people (Jews and seekers of Jewish spirituality alike) bonding together to create an alternative Jewish identity, but it can also be used to reinforce traditional conceptions of religious authority. What is surprising is that it is coming from such an alternatively identified group. Pauline Cheong in “Authority” found that in the negotiation between online and offline worlds, this can often take place and in fact is not unexpected:

[...] religious leaders have also been portrayed as assuming expanded competencies as strategic arbitrators of online—offline religious information, to restore relational bonds and credibility important to the development of convergent multimedia and corporate promotional strategies [...] the Internet facilitates both the weakening and strengthening of religious authority, offering possibilities for conflict, yet also for understanding and accommodation. (Cheong 82)

Aleph has become an arbitrator of this online and offline negotiation, trying to keep the ritual of conversion credible and legitimate in his multimedia Punk Torah project. However, in so doing, he is using the Internet to strengthen his authority even if at the same time he is weakening the essence of Punk Torah as a radical alternative Judaism. He tries to be understanding and accommodating with Andrea by trying to discuss with her possible alternatives that would be available in her location, but in the end it is he alone who takes the authority to decide what will constitute the conversion ritual for Punk Torah.

Nevertheless, Andrea is not so easily deterred from the Punk Torah identity of many different views and denominations under one roof and support for individuals following their own heart. She responds to Aleph by saying, “For those of us wanting to convert to Reform standards, a mikveh is not required (nor is a Beit Din technically), perhaps for those of us that are okay with a Reform conversion, if there are rabbis willing, we could do a Beit Din over Skype?” For Punk Torah members who resonate with a Reform conversion, in theory there should be room for this within such a pluralistic group. For the ritual of conversion to transfer into Andrea’s online world, it would work for her to exclude a mikvah and a Bet Din. Aleph promptly responds that, “Unfortunately our program will require bet din, mikvah and hatafat/brit milah for men.” Andrea is trying to transfer the conversion ritual to the digital world in a post-denominational and post-rabbinic manner, but Aleph is using his rabbinic authority to block this move. Andrea is creatively producing her own digital ritual to conform to her individual theology. She wants to bypass traditional gatekeepers in the Conservative and Orthodox movements who require a mikvah and a bet din and be her own authority for interpreting the conversion ritual. Andrea’s limited access to the physical location of Atlanta shouldn’t hinder her from having a meaningful ritual. Rabbi Aleph does try to remain a caring and inspiring leader for Andrea. However, in conflict with his own ideology, and to keep a basis of credibility, Rabbi Aleph steps back from the periphery into the center of authority. Though the Punk Torah group is identifying itself as post-rabbinic and post-denominational and using the form of the Internet to achieve these theological functions, in the case of a conversion ritual, the form of the Internet is only partially achieving these goals as well as reinforcing particular rabbinic and denominational values.

Authenticity and Third Space

Punk Torah sees itself as a pioneer forging new pathways for a digital Judaism. However, seen through the lens of authenticity and third space conceptions, their claim may be precarious. Grieve’s non-dualistic notion of authenticity in digital religion distinguishes a contrast between a physical body and a virtual

one, but claims there is no difference between them and no hierarchy of authenticity since both are cultural practices. This can be seen in Rabbi Baum's approach to Our Jewish Community where the physical and the virtual are seen as separate, but occupying the same rank on an authenticity scale. Baum personally prefers the virtual, but that it no way causes the virtual to occupy a higher level of genuineness. Hoover and Echchaibi and Campbell also question any hierarchy of authenticity between online and offline worlds and are seeking out how these worlds are intertwined with each other in a third space without prioritizing one over the other.

N. Katherine Hayles, a postmodern literary critic and expert in the interfaces between literature and technology, takes Grieves and Hoover and Echchaibi's notions of authenticity in digital culture one step further. Not only is her notion of authenticity non-dualistic in the sense that both virtual and actual are real and authentic producing a non-hierarchy, flat or otherwise, or intertwined in some yet undefined way in a third space. Hayles in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* states that in our media saturated society "we think through, with, and alongside media" (1). Instead of a hierarchy between physical reality and online worlds she proposes a "dynamic heterarchy:"

Distinguished by their degree of complexity, different levels continuously inform and mutually determine each other. Think, for example, of a fetus growing inside a mother's body. The mother's body is forming the fetus, but the fetus is also re-forming the mother's body, both are bound together in a dynamic heterarchy, the culmination of which is the emergent complexity of an infant. (45)

For Hayles, a hierarchy of authenticities is unimaginable. A hierarchy would entail a separation of the physical and the virtual, a false assumption in her eyes. Like a fetus and her mother, humans and technology grow and change and are changed by each other in a dynamic heterarchy.

This is not a new phenomenon relegated to the digital. For example, the mule for the ancient Israelites became a cultural invention that exemplifies the complex relations between religion, technology and theology. Albert C. Leighton in "The Mule as a Cultural Invention" states, "The ancient Israelites were

forbidden by law to breed mules. Their attitude is exemplified in Leviticus 19:19, 'Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind.' Consequently, the Israelites had to obtain their mules from other peoples. Ezekial 27:14 says that the best mules are obtained from Togarmah (Armenia or Cappadocia)" (50). Israelites and the technology of mules were in a dynamic heterarchy, dependent on each other and changing each other's very existence and meaning. Israelite law forbade the breeding but not the use of mules. As a result, they had to enter into a dynamic with other peoples to obtain the useful mule technology. Seen in this light, it would be absurd to differentiate and prioritize the authenticity of a landscape where mules are allowed to be bred and one where they are not. Both realities are feeding back onto each other in a complex dynamic.

On one side, Punk Torah seems to be embracing a dynamic heterarchy of authenticities in their digital religion. They describe the dynamic that led to the creation of OneShul, the online synagogue sister website of Punk Torah:

OneShul was inspired by a group of PunkTorah volunteers who began meeting online to daven (pray) with one another [...] With the popularity of this "DIY Prayer Service" came the idea for a virtual synagogue without borders, based on collective Jewish values and spiritual independence. "Synagogues are shutting down for the same reason that brick-and-mortar business are closing," says Executive Director Patrick Aleph. "People live online and if you believe in being where people are, then you need to be there, too." (PunkTorah/Arizona Jewish Post)

The online and offline worlds are seen as mutually determining each other just as the muleful and muleless worlds of the ancient Israelites determined each other without one being more authentic than the other. Brick and mortar synagogues are shutting down due to a lack of "business" and membership. The technology of online synagogues are filling this niche, just as Togarmah did many thousands of years ago in providing the best mules.

A complex emergent infant OneShul is being born that is continuously informed by its many environments. However, instead of embracing a dynamic heterarchy that would support meaningful emergent post-rabbinic and post-denominational creative, non-localized theologies, wherever and however Jews link up, Michael Sabani, creative director at Punk Torah insists on prioritizing the

authenticity of online worlds over offline ones. While challenging “the notion that community only exists in neighborhoods” Michael Sabani asks, “Which community is more real? The one where I show up once a week and sit next to what is essentially a stranger, say ‘Shabbat shalom’ and then leave? Or the one I am in constant contact with through Facebook and Skype, who I know I can turn to in a time of need?” (PunkTorah/Arizona Jewish Post). Instead of embracing a deep heterarchy between online and offline worlds, he feels the need to prioritize technology as if it were separate from and more authentic than other forms of human culture.

What becomes even more perplexing is that in regard to the conversion program, Punk Torah backtracks and reapplies a traditional hierarchy of physical location and community over virtual realms. In the section entitled “Is This Right For Me?”, conversion candidates are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

“Have you looked into a local community first?”

A simple search on Google Maps will help you find a synagogue and rabbi locally. This is always the ideal method, because Judaism is a religion of the home and of the community.

If there is no local community near you, **ask yourself how you feel about practicing Judaism without a community?** While there are online Jewish communities like our sister websites OneShul and PunkTorah (as well as various online synagogues), it’s always a blessing to have people in your life.” (Darshan Yeshiva)

Despite all the utterances to the contrary, suddenly in a conversion context, having authentic people in one’s life means meeting physically. If physical bodies are not available, the practice of Judaism becomes a non-community solitary based practice.

Punk Torah could have answered the call to a third space where authenticity is found in a dynamic heterarchy between online and offline worlds. This form and conception of a digital Judaism could allow for many emergent post-denominational and post-rabbinic functions such as a creative production of Jewish theologies in non-hierarchical and non-localized environments, where

humans and technologies are tightly bound together. However, in the case of Punk Torah, confusion remains as to the nature of the relationship between Jews and technology leaving a muddled and unclear notion of authenticity in this particular manifestation of digital Judaism.

c. Sim Shalom (<http://www.simshalom.com/>) and the Jewish Spiritual Leaders Institute (<http://jsli.net/>)

Community

Rabbi Steve Blane, emboldened by the theological functions made available by the Internet, is, like Rabbi Aleph at Punk Torah, envisioning an alternative global Jewish community. However, Blane has his own particular vision that is becoming a reality through his online synagogue, Sim Shalom, and its sister online rabbinical school, the Jewish Spiritual Leaders Institute. Cheong in “Authority” looks at how leaders like Aleph and Blane are using the Internet to embolden their vision and create alternative global communities:

The Internet, by allowing schismatic leaders to emerge, also helps challenge more directly the ability of traditional authorities to define legitimate teachings and symbols. Turner (2007) stated that “global information technologies and their associated cultures undermine traditional forms of religious authority because they expand conventional modes of communication, open up new opportunities for debate and create alternative visions of the global community” (p. 120). (76)

Though Aleph also used the Internet to reinforce traditional notions of authority and community while at the same time envisioning a pluralistic and unaffiliated Jewish community, Rabbi Blane at Sim Shalom is shaping the Internet with his own alternative global vision of a pluralistic and unaffiliated Judaism. “Sim Shalom is an online Jewish liberal synagogue, which offers online weekly synagogue services for a worldwide community. Led by Rabbi Steven Blane and based in New York City, it welcomes everyone and preaches Jewish Universalism, which holds that all religions are equally holy” (PR Newswire).

Blane clearly describes his alternative vision for the Sim Shalom

community, one based on his theology of Jewish Universalism. It is a Jewish theology that tears at the heart of some of the most basic and traditional rabbinic doctrines. Jewish Universalism affirms seven doctrines. Alongside honoring Judaism as an evolving spiritual practice, recognizing the Torah as a divinely inspired text and respecting the diversity of Jewish tradition, Blane challenges rabbinic Judaism with the following three statements:

- JU [Jewish Universalism] believes all paths to the divine are equally Holy and that one's religion is not the sole and exclusive source of truth.
- JU asserts that all people who follow the dictate to love your neighbor as yourself are "chosen."
- JU welcomes all people to participate in our Jewish worship and rituals.
(Sim Shalom/Jewish Universalism)

Through the Internet, Blane is able to proliferate alternative doctrines for a Jewish community sidestepping traditional rabbinic gatekeepers at the doors of most Jewish communities. In Jewish Universalism, not only is rabbinic Judaism not the sole path to the divine for Jews, religion per se is not the only authority on matters of truth. And cutting rabbinic Judaism to the quick, humans have the possibility of being "chosen" not based on being Jewish, but rather based on if they love their neighbors as themselves. Blane expands on this idea:

Jewish Universalism goes beyond religious tolerance, which is the condition of peaceful existence between adherents of different religions or religious denominations. JU believes that all humankind is under the equal consideration and love of G-d and we affirm that all paths to the divine are holy. As such JU rejects the concept of a G-d that would choose a favorite among G-d's children. We assert that all people who follow the dictate to "love your neighbor as yourself" are "chosen." (Sim Shalom/Jewish Universalism)

For Blane, accepting other religions and denominations isn't enough. Under the precepts of Jewish Universalism, all religions and all denominations are equal. These doctrines stretch the theses of a post-rabbinic and post-denominational Judaism. They break down the walls dividing Jewish institutions from each other

and from unaffiliated Jews and goes beyond that to embrace all of humankind within Jewish theology.

If that weren't revolutionary enough at least in the eyes of many rabbis and Jews, orthodox or otherwise, Jewish Universalism welcomes all people to participate in every part of Jewish religious life, something unthinkable in rabbinic Judaism which strictly mandates a separation between Jews and non-Jews in worship and ritual contexts. With this radical alternative Jewish theology, Blane is shaping the Internet and digital Judaism by expanding post-denominational and post-rabbinic theological functions. Judaism is found wherever Jews are linking up to do meaningful things, and it is found with whomever is linking up to the Sim Shalom community-- Jews, the Jewishly interested, and whoever else cares to join.

Ritual and Identity

The open form of the Internet and the openness of Jewish Universalism are attracting many potential converts to this variety of digital Judaism. Rabbi Blane explains:

It is a natural extension for Sim Shalom, the online Synagogue, to offer Online Jewish Conversion [...] Our online Services Monday through Friday and High Holiday Services now reach hundreds of people every week. Sim Shalom is a vibrant and thriving community and people love our all-inclusive, non judgemental and apolitical style of Judaism. We receive requests to convert every week and it's a great honor to now be able to respond to these requests. (PR Web)

Blane has posted a letter on the Sim Shalom website for those considering conversion conveying the special identity of Sim Shalom and Jewish Universalism. Following the tenets of Jewish Universalism, if one decides to become a Jewish Universalist, an integral part of that identity is in understanding that Jewish Universalism in particular and Judaism in general are only one "beautiful light among many," and that all people "have much to learn and share with each other" (Sim Shalom/Jewish Conversion). This identity deeply resonates with a post-denominational and post-rabbinic non-authoritarian theology. A Jewish Universalist identity is completely non-authoritarian. As for

Jewish Universalists, no Jewish institution or people have a monopoly on the interpretation of G-d's revelation, and the revelation at Sinai is just one glimpse into the manifold revelations found in human religions.

The ease of access of Sim Shalom's online conversion program is enabling this post-denominational and post-rabbinic identity to become available for members of the Sim Shalom community around the world. Blane is assisting in this process by completely adapting the ritual of conversion to an online context. Seen through the theory of ritual transfer, Rabbi Blane at Sim Shalom, like Rabbi Aleph at Punk Torah, has transformed the conversion process to fit digital culture by having online pre-conversion interviews, monthly online study sessions and an online ceremony to mark the candidate's official conversion. They are "issued a certificate of Jewish Conversion and welcomed into the Jewish Community during a live streamed Sim Shalom Service" (Sim Shalom/Jewish Conversion). The ceremony takes place after an interview "with an Online Bet Din (comprised of three Rabbis)," (Sim Shalom/Jewish Conversion) transforming the ritual of Bet Din from a physical location to an online one, fulfilling the unmet wish of some Punk Torah members. It is also noteworthy that no denominational identity is attached to these three Bet Din rabbis. They are simply three rabbis. Blane innovates as well with the mikvah or ritual bath. Where Rabbi Aleph localizes the mikvah to a conservative synagogue in Atlanta, Blane allows this part of the ritual to become neatly non-localized. "Mikvah (ritual immersion) is highly significant, deeply spiritual and required. This can be accomplished in your own area at a local Mikvah, a lake or even the ocean" (Sim Shalom/Jewish Conversion). However, this is not quite as innovative as it may seem at first glance. In rabbinic Judaism a mikvah is defined as "a man-made ritual bath or a natural spring, lake, river or ocean" (Ner David 117). By reappropriating the traditional meaning of a mikvah, Blane is able to extract the mikvah from an exact synagogue location to the possibilities afforded by the numerous locations of natural water. Blane finalizes the transfer of the conversion ritual to digital culture by excluding circumcision for men. "Circumcision or Hatafat Dam (drawing a drop of blood) is not required" (Sim Shalom/Jewish Conversion). By transforming, innovating and excluding

elements of the conversion ritual, Blane has meaningfully transferred the conversion ritual for a digital Judaism.

Moreover, Blane, as opposed to Aleph, is arbitrating between online and offline worlds in a conversion context in a way that facilitates understanding and accommodation without resorting to his position as an authority figure. Unlike Aleph who blocks a discussion with Andrea in her bid to transform the conversion ritual, Blane directly discusses what a controversial issue conversion is within Judaism. He states, “There is controversy within the Jewish Community over Conversion. You cannot count on any particular Denomination’s Conversion to satisfy everyone. Our conversion, or a Reform or even Conservative conversion would typically not be acceptable in the Orthodox Jewish world” (Sim Shalom/Jewish Conversion).

Instead of using the Internet to strengthen his position as a leader, Blane is taking the opportunity to put Jewish Universalism and himself on the periphery and at the same time caring for and inspiring members of the Sim Shalom community. He encourages potential converts with the following words, “It is most important that you are comfortable within your Jewish Community. We are certain that G-d is pleased to welcome anyone to the Jewish faith regardless of their level of observance or denominational affiliation” (Sim Shalom/Jewish Conversion). Blane’s main objective is to inspire people to make meaningful experiences not to authoritatively define what is an acceptable conversion ritual and what is not. He cares for people in inspiring them to find a community where they feel comfortable, independent of institutions and orthopraxis. As such, Blane through the form of digital Judaism at Sim Shalom is able to exhibit all of the characteristics of a post-denominational and post-rabbinic leader: *proactive* -- he creatively produces theology instead of passively consuming it, *non-authoritative* -- in his eyes, no institutions, people or religions are authoritative for interpreting God’s revelations, *non-localized* -- he makes his Jewish theology available wherever and for whomever is connecting to do meaningful things and *inspiring and caring leaders* – as a leader, he enables Jews and non-Jews alike to convene, caring and inspiring them to make meaningful experiences for themselves without putting himself in the middle of the discussion as the purveyor of truth.

Authority

Alongside creating an alternative vision for Judaism and converts to Judaism, Rabbi Blane is using the Internet to create an alternative vision for what it means to be a modern rabbi. An article from PR Newswire notes, "Rabbi Steven Blane isn't one for convention. When he's not skateboarding to Starbucks or officiating at civil or gay weddings in New York's Central Park, he can often be found in his Upper West Side office, using the internet to lead services for his global congregation or train future rabbis worldwide." Breaking with convention began with Blane when he decided to not attend the Conservative or Reform seminaries for his rabbinic ordination even though he had been working within those denominations for years as a cantor. Instead, he chose the Modern Rabbi Program at the Rabbinic Seminary International:

Founded by Rabbi Joseph H. Gelberman, The Rabbinical Seminary International offers a unique individualized program for the training of the Modern Rabbi. This program helps the student cultivate practical skills and knowledge that can enable him or her to serve as a teacher, counselor, worship facilitator, spiritual healer and teacher of faith. The program prepares men and women of the Jewish faith to serve the Jewish and larger communities as spiritual leaders within the context of the Jewish perspective [...] The most important qualification for the Modern Rabbi is his or her own spiritual and ethical value system. Candidates for the Seminary should be committed to a life of personal spiritual development and service to God and humanity. Ongoing spiritual work is seen as an integral part of the program of study. (Rabbinical Seminary International)

Having graduated from the Modern Rabbi Program, Rabbi Blane has incorporated its most important quality. He has created his own spiritual and ethical value system in the form of Jewish Universalism. His studies in a program that cultivates rabbis to be teachers, counselors and facilitators without an emphasis on orthopraxis are reflected in his ongoing spiritual work at Sim Shalom, developing a space for all people to feel at home within whatever Jewish or other theology that speaks to them.

The Rabbinical Seminary International infuses Internet space with its justification for such an alternative rabbinic program. The Modern Rabbi is compared and contrasted to traditional rabbis in three very distinct ways. Firstly, rabbinic training has shifted its emphasis from the intricacies of Jewish law to one of practical spiritual ministry. Secondly, the Modern Rabbi is not the avatar and incarnation of the Torah, the one who knows Torah best and as such whose actions should be emulated and whose decisions become law. The Modern Rabbi is not a judge nor even an interpreter of the law. He or she guides and inspires individuals to seek out the highest level of their souls. Thirdly, the Modern Rabbi is not limited to the Jewish community. He or she is encouraged to contribute to all of humanity. This type of rabbinical school philosophy is a far cry from traditional rabbinic schools as seen in the case of the partnership minyan where a rabbinic student was withheld ordination until he deferred to his teachers as authorities.

The Internet is allowing alternative visions of rabbinic training and rabbinic identity to emerge. Paul Emerson Teusner explains this phenomenon:

For those who feel excluded or silenced in their local faith communities, the blogosphere provides a public voice and a space to be heard. Of key importance here is how the blogosphere offers emerging church bloggers the potential to create alternative voices of authority on issues of theology, leadership and polity in religious institutions. Blogging presents an opportunity to explore and develop religious identity in an open and public forum that allows one to question cultural, symbolic, economic, and theological practices of modern church life in ways not often possible within traditional religious institutions. (183)

Though the Rabbinical Seminary International webpage is not technically a blog, the various alternative rabbinical school philosophies popping up on the Internet are occupying a discursive space for voicing new theologies and practices within Judaism. In this case, the Rabbinical Seminary International has used the Internet to get their vision heard and realized. They have created a Modern Rabbi identity and program that questions traditional rabbinic training and authority and aims to develop individuals into caring and inspiring leaders.

As a graduate of this program, Blane used the open space on the Internet and its multi-modal capabilities to create a rabbinic training program based on his own values and spirituality. Many potential rabbinic students, even those who may have already committed years of study towards the rabbinate, often cannot complete the requirements of denominational rabbinic schools such as spending a year in Israel nor pay for the huge expenses attached to such a training. Through a complete online training program created by Blane, the Jewish Spiritual Leaders Institute (JSLI), rabbinic students are now able to bypass these blockades:

JSLI classes meet weekly online via an internet conferencing application in which they can see and hear each other. Throughout the year, students must meet other requirements in order to complete the program and obtain Semicha (Rabbinic Ordination). These requirements include, leading weeknight and Shabbat services, teaching a session in an area of their expertise, writing a research paper on an approved Jewish topic and by writing and delivering weekly sermons or Divrei Torah (words of Torah) to the entire class. (Sim Shalom/JSLI)

By shaping the Internet via an Internet conferencing application to rabbinical students' needs, students are able to fulfill the requirements for ordination easily, inexpensively and from wherever they happen to be. Leading services, teaching in their field, writing on a Jewish topic and delivering sermons can be done from their home or anywhere they travel using the appropriate technology. JSLI also stresses the importance of a new type of rabbi for Judaism, especially for Jews who feel excluded or silenced in their local denominational synagogues:

"Traditional denominations of Judaism exclude more than 50 percent of Jews who are unaffiliated or in interfaith marriages. Many people take great joy in Jewish holidays and life-cycle rituals, but simply cannot – or will not – regularly attend synagogue. And they often feel excluded by religious and financial requirements of the mainstream denominations. There's a huge need for rabbis who can provide spiritual leadership that serves this large and important group, and JSLI fills that need," says Rabbi Blane. (Sim Shalom/JSLI)

Through the Internet, JSLI is questioning the effectiveness of mainstream Jewish life. JSLI provides an opportunity for a new rabbi to emerge, one that can provide meaningful and spiritual leadership that is hard to find within institutional Judaism. An example of this can be found in Sim Shalom's creation of a digital Hametz Form. Hametz is any form of leavened bread that is forbidden on Passover. Traditionally, Jews "sell" their hametz to their rabbi who then acts as a middleman and resells it to a non-Jew. But relying on gentiles and rabbis to perform this ritual is not in line with the tenets of Jewish Universalism.

Accordingly, they state on their webpage:

And while we respect this tradition, we prefer to encourage each person to enjoy the gratification of fulfilling their own religious requirements. We therefore encourage our community to personally commit to the fulfillment of our own mitzvot. Please fill out the following Personal Responsibility for Respecting Passover Form and don't forget to click "Submit" at the end of the form. (Sim Shalom/Passover)

In keeping with the Jewish Universalist vision and with the intention of using the Internet to reconnect Jews to Jewish holidays, Sim Shalom is subverting rabbinic roles and authority. A transaction that traditionally proceeds between an individual, his or her rabbi and a gentile, now proceeds between an individual and the "submit" button following the completion of the Hametz Form. The rabbi is not in the middle of the transaction, but rather on the periphery encouraging individuals to find their own meaning and to perform their own religious duties. Through these types of updates on the authority of the traditional rabbi and through training Jewish clergy to personify the Modern Rabbi, the form of the Internet is enabling a switch from rabbis as traditional authorities to a modern rabbi who supports post-rabbinic and post-denominational functions and whose training itself operates as an expression of these theologies.

Authenticity and Third Space

Authenticity and a separation or inbuilt hierarchy between online and offline worlds seems to be a non-issue for Rabbi Blane and the Sim Shalom community. Since 2003 studies have found that "Internet users conceptually and practically

connect their online and offline social lives, rather than seeing them as separate or disconnected spheres” (Campbell, “Community” 63). From the advertisements about Sim Shalom’s religious activities, there also seems to be conceptual and practical connectivity between online and offline Sim Shalom religiosity. Here are a few examples, beginning with an advertisement for High Holiday services:

Now Blane is combining his great loves - music and technology - by holding two "Jewish Jazz" events at famous New York City jazz club Smalls to mark the High Holidays (Rosh Hashana on Monday September 17 and Yom Kippur on Wednesday September 26). The services will also be streamed online to a worldwide congregation. (PR Newswire)

Connecting music and technology comes naturally to Blane as well as naturally connecting online and offline religious worlds. These worlds are already conceptually integrated for Blane so there is no need to even discuss authenticity hierarchies between them in this advertisement. In fact it is almost impossible to find any statements from Blane where he discusses the authenticity of digital Judaism. Another example is an advertisement for a Hanukah celebration:

Hanukah Jazz Concert Candle-Lighting Celebration on Weds. Dec. 4th. “Sim Shalomers” in New York City and around the world are invited to join in the festivities online and also IN PERSON at Stand Up New York, the comedy club where they held recent High Holiday Services. “It was a sellout crowd for both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and we think Hanukah is the perfect holiday for people to come back and rejoice with family and friends for this wonderful light filled festival!” says Blane. “Come and hear and sing your favorite Hanukah songs: Maoz Tsur, Hanukah Oh Hanukah, I Have a Little Dreydl, etc. and light the candles with the world’s Sim Shalom Community!” (Sim Shalom/Hanukah)

In person in New York City and digitally from around the world there are no boundaries of authenticity between “Sim Shalomers.” Both are authentic and connected spheres in the Sim Shalom community. Sim Shalomers can come back in person or online and celebrate in an international crowd that doesn’t differentiate or prioritize between online and offline worlds. Hearing one’s favorite Hanukah songs and singing them with other members of the community

wherever they may be and however one is connected to them is now so commonplace that there is no need to even discuss if one is more authentic than the other. Both domains are integrated into the same conception of a Hanukah celebration. A final example showcases different liturgical possibilities at Sim Shalom:

Online and in-person we sing, smile, welcome each other, and pray from the siddur that is projected on the screens of our online Havurah's computers. The entire International Sim Shalom community says Torah Blessings and then reads from the Torah and the portion of the week, using the traditional trope (melody). We also sing a prayer for the sick and say a Mourner's Kaddish for those who have passed. Come to an International Synagogue Service. Come to Sim Shalom! Online Kabbalat Shabbat Services are every Friday at 7pm. (Rabbi Blane)

Here, Sim Shalom is conceptually and practically connecting the online and offline spheres through song, prayer, and online prayer books. The entire international Sim Shalom community together says blessings, reads from the Torah, and grieves for their dead through the Mourner's Kaddish. In this advertisement, there is no division between the online and offline religious crowds. They are seamlessly connected in an authentic international religious experience. The form of integration of authenticity in a digitized world that does not separate between "real" and "virtual" allows post-denominational and post-rabbinic theological functions of non-localization on an international scale. For Rabbi Blane and Sim Shalomers, authentic Jewish religious practices are found in this third space, freed from bondage as it were to a place or building or even a separation between "real" and "virtual."

Sim Shalom is continuing to make this conception very practical by adding weekday Ma'ariv or evening services to their offerings. Now Sim Shalomers can say Kaddish, the traditional prayer for the dead every day of the week. The following introduces this new possibility:

Say Kaddish Weeknights Live Online at Sim Shalom

Sim Shalom- the Jewish Universalist Online Synagogue offers live weeknight Jewish Prayer Services for the world to say Kaddish with an online minyan.

Sim Shalom, the innovative online Jewish Universalist synagogue is at it again!

Due to the overwhelming success of their weekly Online Shabbat Services, Sim Shalom is proud to offer live online weeknight Maariv Services beginning March 4, 2013.

“These short evening worship services offer the Jewish community the ability to say Kaddish,” says Rabbi Steve Blane, founder and Spiritual Leader of Sim Shalom. “Mourners who are sitting shiva or those observing ‘Yahrtzeit’ (the yearly anniversary of the passing of a loved one) are often in need of an online option as attending a local house of worship is not feasible or possible. The technology and our wonderful rabbis affords the Jewish Community this wonderful opportunity!”

In the Jewish tradition, the Mourners Kaddish is a prayer of sanctification. It is meant to be said daily for up to eleven months to mourn a death. This prayer is observed even by the most unobservant Jews to show respect for loved ones who have passed. According to custom, the Mourners Kaddish is only said in the presence of a Minyan (ten people). According to the custom of the Sim Shalom Jewish Universalist Online Synagogue, people are welcome to say Kaddish regardless of the number of people in attendance.”
(SB Wire)

With this new custom of not needing the physical presence of ten men (or ten men or women in non-Orthodox denominations) for a minyan, nor even the virtual presence of at least ten people, Sim Shalom is creating new ideas of authenticity for Jewish religiosity. Yoel Cohen in “Jewish cyber – theology” discusses possible new frontiers for Judaism opened up by the Internet. However, he finds that for the Orthodox and Conservative denominations where minyans are still a necessary minimum for an authentic prayer service, online versions are not an option:

A fundamental criterion for communal prayer for the Orthodox is the physical presence of 10 men. This is similarly true with Conservative Judaism, with the exception that some communities recognize that women may also form the minyan. According to the Jewish law code, Shulkhan Arukh , Orah Hayyim 55, "the 10 men (who constitute the minyan) must be

in one place and the prayer leader (chazan or shaliah zibbur) with them.”

(6)

For communal prayer to be authentic ten people must be physically together. Even someone in a physically adjacent room is not considered part of a minyan, rendering the service inauthentic and invalid for such prayers as the Mourner’s Kaddish. Cohen concludes that “Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, bound by limits of Halakha, are, therefore, unable to benefit fully from the benefits of the modern information technology. All the other benefits, whether religious educational websites or other websites, fade into the background given that the synagogue service remains in the physical realm” (7).

However, by proactively creating a new Jewish theology, one where a minyan online is just as authentic as one offline and one where a minimum number of participants is unnecessary, the Internet is catapulting Sim Shalom into new post-denominational and post-rabbinic waters. The online Sim Shalom minyan as a communal prayer experience is giving authenticity to their own religious experiences without deferring to halacha, the guiding force of rabbinic Judaism. Prayer leaders and participants can link up in non-localized minyans for authentic prayer. The prayer leader through the Internet is allowing Jews to convene wherever they may be and inspiring them to make meaningful experiences of prayer, especially for the Mourner’s Kaddish, a prayer the majority of non-observant Jews still want to be able to perform or recite.

d. Jewrotica (<http://jewrotica.org/>)

There are many lists categorizing rabbis, from the 50 most influential rabbis of North America to the top ten female religious leaders in the United States. Jewrotica.org, an online Jewish erotic site, has come up with a new twist – the ten sexiest rabbis:

They have the stellar IQs of Mensa members. They’re also compassionate, kind — and smoking hot. They’re rabbis, people whom most of us think of as men with graying side curls, not guys and gals with washboard abs. After more than 5,000 years of Jewish existence, creators of the cheeky Jewrotica.org Web site thought it was time to honor Jewish leaders not just

for their wisdom, but for a quality that the Jerusalem-based site's co-creator David Abitbol calls "badassery." (Peyser)

Jewrotica's deviation from the rabbinic model of rabbis as avatars of the Torah to rabbis as avatars of "badassery" is a complicated one as sexiness and sexuality have a rich and complex history within Judaism. Jewrotica aspires to use the Internet to give voice to Jewish sexual expression across practices, genres and denominations. The sexiest rabbis are one example. They include a brilliant orthodox rabbi who uses Twitter and Facebook to connect with his congregation, a Reconstructionist rabbi who caters to the GLBT crowd, a 63-year-old rabbi with many ex-wives, a Conservative rabbi who mixes prayer with jogging, a Reform rabbi who is the mother to five children, a Conservative rabbi who is also a lesbian Hebrew Priestess, as well as a Grateful Dead fan rabbi (Peyser). This diverse crowd of rabbis exist easily side-by-side on Jewrotica's website.

Ayo Oppenheimer, the founder of Jewrotica describes the website as "a spankin' new project with the power to provide a voice for Jewish sexual expression and meaningful conversation. Jewrotica is an online community-in-the-making and a database of delicious and grin-inducing Jewish stories and confessions" (Johnson). Giving a voice to Jewish sexual expression in itself is nothing new to the Jewish community. The Talmud abounds with rules and advice about sexual practices where almost nothing is taboo as long as it takes place within the bounds of marriage. Take for example the wedding contract. The husband agrees to feed, clothe and bring his wife to orgasm on a regular basis. The Talmud goes into detail on what exactly defines a regular basis and connects the frequency of intercourse to the husband's occupation. For independently wealthy men, it is every day, for common laborers twice a week, for donkey drivers once a week, for camel drivers once every thirty days and for sailors once every six months (Boyarin 143). The rabbis of the time felt it was necessary for women to understand that depending on their husband's occupations their sexual needs might be met on a more or less frequent basis. Based on this example, giving a voice to Jewish sexual expression is deeply ingrained in the rabbinic tradition, and at the time of writing it was revolutionary for women's rights in the context of Middle Eastern culture.

However, the Talmud not only contains uplifting passages for women's

sexuality, but degrading ones as well. Take for example the ritual of Sotah. When a husband suspects his wife of infidelity, he takes her to the Temple in Jerusalem and forces her to drink a potion. If she is guilty her stomach will enlarge (Lev 8). In the Talmud Mishnah 1:5 and 1:6 this practice is discussed at length and becomes pornographic:

If she says “I am innocent [pure],” they take her up to the eastern gate which is at the entrance to the gate of Nikanor [...] and a priest grabs her clothing. If they are ripped, they are ripped, and if they are undone, they are undone, so that he reveals her breast and uncovers her hair. Rabbi Yehudah says: If her breast is beautiful, he does not reveal it, and if her hair is beautiful, he does not uncover it. (Lev 14)

The degradation of public humiliation and exposure for women which at the same time serves as titillation for the male readers of the Talmud points to the other side of the spectrum in the complexity of sexuality in rabbinic culture. The Talmud as a text written by male rabbis never gives voice to women’s sexuality from women themselves. And a women’s voice itself is considered a source of sexual stimulation leading to many Halachic bans on women singing in public, in choirs and even lullabies to their children when men are present (Berman 45).

Today this has changed across the denominations at least for non-orthodox Jewish women, where women themselves have become the authorities and the voice of their own sexuality. Unfortunately, the situation has remained virtually unchanged for orthodox and ultra-orthodox women and this is one area where Jewrotica and the Internet are providing post-rabbinic and post-denominational theological functions for these women’s sexuality and sexual expression. Ayo Oppenheimer, through the capabilities of the Internet, intends to extend this Jewish sexual voice beyond rabbis and yeshiva students staying up late in houses of study examining in detail tantalizing pages of the Talmud. The Internet and Jewrotica are enabling a safe place for all men and women to express their sexuality. Oppenheimer explains the reach and possibilities of her website:

Jewrotica is a hub for Jewish sexual expression. Erotica is a key part of what we do and there is something new, rich and – yes – arousing about using our cultural heritage and vocabulary in the writing of quality erotic work.

But Jewrotica is so much more than just the erotic stories – we are a starting point and a platform for all things pertaining to relationships, romance, sex, sexuality and gender as they relate to Jewish culture and tradition. In addition to the erotic fiction and poetry, we feature a sexual education series, a weekly Jewrotic commentary on the parsha (Torah portion) called Double Mitzvah, an advice column, reflective essays, true confessions and more. We provide a safe and positive environment for our community to explore sexuality in a Jewish context, and we serve as a catalyst for frank, educational and positive conversations about sexuality in more traditional communities. (ck)

Through the Internet Jewrotica is allowing Jewish sexual expression to burst out of the confines of the Talmud and the marriage bed and empower men and women to explore their sexuality in light of Jewish tradition, but where the interpretation of and decisions related to their sexual experiences is left to them and not to Jewish institutions or rabbinic authorities. According to Aviva Woolf in “50 Shades of Jew,” “the website is making an effort to give people a voice and permission to ask questions and to really decide for themselves what they think is sensual, interesting or downright weird.” Through the anonymity of the Internet, Jewrotica lends a safe and positive ambience for sexual exploration and conversations for all Jewish communities, but especially for the traditional orthodox and ultra-orthodox communities. The anonymity afforded by the Internet allows writers to have a safe space to explore their sexual experiences, interpretations and fantasies, especially if they are uncomfortable openly sharing them.

Oppenheimer in her editor’s column broaches how “[...] that despite being part of a sex-positive religion, many Jewish young adults often feel uncomfortable broaching the subject with teachers or religious leaders” (Woolf). Many young Jewish adults found their Jewish day schools ill equipped when it came to sexual education and when it was discussed it was only discussed within the confines of marriage. One young adult, Amalia Marks, puts it this way, “[Jewrotica] provides a necessary forum for people to submit their experiences as religious (or not so religious) Jews struggling with or rejoicing in their sexuality [...] I think this website offers the modern Orthodox community a

healthy way to face the elephant in the room—pre-marital sexual activity in the Jewish community—that is widely ignored” (Woolf). The open form of the Internet and the anonymity provided by it is allowing Jewrotica to bypass rabbinic and denominational theologies and give space to publicly explore theological functions, such as pre-marital sex. Pre-marital sex as such is not new, but providing a space to speak about it is and can help integrate pre-marital and other sexualities into contemporary Jewish theology.

As demonstrated here, the form of digital media is shaping Jewish theology, but as seen in the previous three case studies, Jewish theology is also shaping digital media which in turn enables more and more post-rabbinic and post-denominational theological functions. Heidi Campbell in *When Religion Meets New Media* explores these dynamics in detail and has created a new methodology for studying them – the Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) approach. Her approach is taken from the Social Shaping of Technology (SST) method that studies the intersection of sociology and media studies. However, unlike SST, Campbell focuses on the conditions connected to religious users’ negotiations with new media, especially within given social contexts and how individuals and groups of users feel bound by their particular world views and belief systems when negotiating with new media. RSST explores the spiritual, moral and technological codes that influence these negotiations (58 - 59). Though technology is often seen in conflict with religion, most religious communities do not merely dismiss new technologies, but instead engage in a complex negotiation process with them. The typical assumption is that, “[...] media users are passive and do not make thoughtful choices about how, why and to what end they will use the media technology that they are presented with” (6).

However, Campbell begins from a different starting point. She sees “religious individuals and communities as active, empowered users of new media who make distinctive choices about their relationship with technology in light of their faith, community history, and contemporary way of life” (6). Instead of passive receivers of technology, humans actively form and use technology based on their theological beliefs. An extreme example that makes this point strikingly clear is made by Jay Newman in *Religion and Technology: A*

Study in the Philosophy of Culture in conjunction with the Inquisition. Based on the theology of the Inquisition, inquisitors proactively created new technology:

[They created] highly intricate torture devices used on victims of the Inquisition. Such elaborate machine technology, put to the service of the cruelest forms of dehumanization centuries before the invention of the steam engine, centuries before the Nazi death camps, is well worth remembering in an investigation of the relations of religion and technology. If the religious antitechnologist insists on seeing it as one more example of how technology has corrupted religion, the rest of us still have the prerogative of seeing it as also in part a powerful example of how religion has corrupted technology. (31)

The Inquisition inordinately brings out the uttermost negative side of the human theological influence on technology. Nonetheless, the human capacity to shape technology can also be used for positive purposes as well as everything in between. As part of the RSST approach Campbell looks at religious communities as families of users who create marked moral economies of meaning that then guide their choices with new technology and how they want to interact with them. This family of users usually share certain core beliefs and identity markers but at the same time may embody a rainbow of diversity from gender to age to class. Campbell states that, “By members choosing to come together into a shared space, be it physical or ideological space, they create a ‘moral economy’ that requires them to make common judgments about the technologies they will appropriate or reject and rules of interaction with these. As a ‘family of users’ they transfer symbolic meaning onto these choices” (58).

The RSST approach reveals how this negotiation process unfolds. The users who engage with the digital religion of Jewrotica are a diverse family of users. They share core beliefs of the value of Jewish tradition and culture in understanding and practicing their sexuality, but they also come from every denomination and sexual orientation. Their moral economy is based on having a new approach to Jewish sexuality, but one based on tradition and Jewish culture. One that is safe for everyone. Valerie Steinfeld, a young professional located in Southern California had this to say about the family of users and the moral economy of Jewrotica:

Jewrotica is awesome. It expands the mind and for people who were raised with narrow views on sexuality. Whether you are Jewish or not, or in different sects of Judaism like Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, no matter what your background or where you're from, Jewrotica gets you to see Judaism and how it relates to sexuality in new ways. I really appreciate Ayo being here and helping us learn different ways to connect with our sexuality. (Jewrotica/Testimonials)

The diversity of the family of users is shown by the prevalence of non-Jews, orthodox Jews, conservative Jews and reform Jews who visit and use the site. They all share a core belief and moral economy – that Judaism can have something new to say about sexuality and that it can help this diverse family of users connect with their sexuality. Ayo Oppenheimer sees the moral economy and value of Jewrotica in the ability of the Internet to provide a safe, healthy and positive framework for sexual expression. She finds that this is desperately needed as a counter to what is mostly found in Jewish communities today – silence. She maintains:

[...] silence leads to ignorance, shame and embarrassment. Many of our readers have reached out to us to thank us for making them feel less ashamed and less alone [...] We have between 3,000 and 15,000 readers visit Jewrotica each day, and we have had over 100 writers contribute to the site thus far. Our readers and writers hail from all around the world and are representative of the various flavors of Judaism. We even have an octogenarian writer who was the president of a Martha's Vineyard Reform temple for many years [...] I try to see to it that Jewrotica is a fun experience for everyone involved. (Arbeit)

Again, the diversity of the family of users is seen here, with people contributing to Jewrotica from all over the world and even an octogenarian president of a Reform temple finds her place among the contributors to Jewrotica. The moral economy is also stressed, being an outlet for sexual expression as a counterbalance to the silence that is the norm in the rest of the Jewish community. But how does this translate into the negotiation between Judaism and technology for Jewrotica? In the shared ideological space of Jewrotica how is this moral economy being translated into the choices being made about

members interactions with the Internet? What kind of symbolic meaning is connected to these choices?

One aspect where the negotiation process becomes clear is in the rating system developed by Oppenheimer. She has carefully shaped the technology of the Internet to meet the needs and the moral economy of the family of users that make up Jewrotica, facilitating a customized online experience that can cover the different streams of Judaism and different sexual appetites from quite modest to completely unfiltered. In this way Oppenheimer hopes to make Jewish sexuality less of a taboo subject and more a constructive and empowering experience.

Under “The Good Stuff” section of the website, the rating system is described:

Also, in order to be sensitive to our diverse audience, each piece of writing is rated and correspondingly tagged for your reading convenience. You can sort pieces by rating as follows:



PG pieces are considered to be appropriate for all adult audiences



PG-13 pieces may reference kissing and touching and include mild sexual jokes. PG-13 pieces are considered to be appropriate for most adult audiences



R pieces may reference sex directly and may contain descriptions of explicit sexual scenarios. R pieces are considered to be appropriate for many adult audiences



XXX pieces contain explicit content and graphic detail. XXX pieces may reference non-traditional sexual practices including kink and BDSM. These pieces push boundaries and are considered appropriate for some adult audiences

Please note that posts under the Confessions category are quite short and audience-generated. These pieces are unrated.

CHOOSE YOUR EXPERIENCE:

PG PG-13 R XXX (Jewrotica/The Good Stuff)

By shaping Jewrotica's technology to include a rating system from PG to XXX, from kissing and touching to BDSM (Bondage Discipline Sadism and Masochism) Oppenheimer has allowed a diverse family of users to gather under the same sexual umbrella. However, she has done much more. She is putting the decision making process into the hands of the users instead of the authoritative voices of rabbis and denominational institutions. Each individual user can choose which rating category they feel comfortable with and which gives voice to their individual sexuality. By proactively shaping technology, Jewrotica is making post-denominational and post-rabbinic theological functions possible. Jewrotica is proactively shaping Jewish sexual ethics instead of passively consuming what is taught at Hebrew school and buying into a moral economy of silence around sexuality. It is taking the power away from Jewish institutions and Jewish rabbinic authorities to decide what constitutes Jewish sexual experiences and putting it into the hands of the family of users of Jewrotica. It is empowering Jewish sexuality to take place outside of the institution of marriage and sanctioning Jewish theologies of sexuality to be found wherever Jews are linking up for meaningful sexual experiences even if they take place outside the marriage bed. Moreover, Oppenheimer typifies a post-denominational and post-rabbinic caring and inspiring leader. She is enabling Jews to make their own decisions about their sexuality and inspiring them to have meaningful Jewish

sexual experiences whether they are PG or XXX or a combination of different categories.

The rating system is one area where Jewrotica is shaping technology and negotiating and innovating in a shared ideological space that reflects the moral economy of the family of users of Judaica and the deep symbolic meaning inherent in such negotiations with and reconstructions of technology. Now that Jewrotica has completed this negotiation process at least for some aspects of its website, the RSST approach calls for another level of analysis to understand the means Jewrotica and its members are using to justify their use of technology for the Jewish sexual domain. Campbell has named this process 'communal framing and discourse.' Campbell argues that discourse must be considered in order to reach further into the justification processes communities employ regarding their use of technology. Researchers into new media use in religious communities need to not only pay attention to how religious communities use new technologies, "[...] but to the language which surrounds its use and introduction into the community as an act of value setting and boundary maintenance" (62).

Campbell gives an example of an online fertility forum for Orthodox Jewish women that provides a safe and open space for women to talk about these usually taboo issues. The forum is similar to Jewrotica in that it encourages open and frank discussions without authority figures and provides anonymity for those women who might feel ashamed or scared to discuss these issues publicly. Women are encouraged to decide for themselves how to deal with their infertility. Learning of this, an orthodox rabbi raised the issue of how complex the Internet is in regard to religious leaders' authority and how such forums affect the orthodox community in general. He states:

The Internet poses a spiritual as well as an ethical challenge. We do need to make a place for the rabbi online, and the emergence of new rabbinical laws to address these issues [...] But if we have a rabbi in every forum that will also discourage some conversation and people will move to other more private places [...] We need to encourage our managers to serve as guides to the conversations and hard issues. We need to encourage these conversations so we know what our community thinks. (Campbell 181)

Campbell looks at this rabbinic discourse as highlighting several points of tension within the orthodox community such as stronger networks and open rather than private dialogue that may challenge rabbinic authority and pose a threat to normative behavior. By creating an online open forum for orthodox Jewish women managed outside the jurisdiction of rabbinic authority, religious attitudes are called into question and the boundaries defining orthodoxy start to become blurred. By analyzing the communal discourse and framing used by, for example, the aforementioned orthodox rabbi to justify the use of technology for a fertility forum, one can deduce that the orthodox community will be confronted with questions of the boundaries of rabbinic authority in new media and of the advantages of encouraging open conversations that may undermine that very authority.

Campbell asserts, “As boundaries become blurred by new media communication – which is anonymous, instantaneous, and not easily monitored – negotiations regarding media practice become more and more complex for many religious communities” (182). The managers and family of users of the online fertility forum are blurring the boundaries of rabbinic authority and expanding the scope of Orthodox Judaism by making a safe space for women to voice their concerns and questions regarding infertility. Jewrotica’s communal discourse and framing also stresses how the Internet is making a safe space for orthodox women as well as all Jewishly-interested people to explore their sexuality. However, Jewrotica is partially using an ingenious discourse to justify their technology use outside the reach of rabbinic authority. It is using rabbinic discourse itself. Jewrotica is claiming that what they are doing is deeply entrenched within rabbinic Judaism as it takes Talmudic discourse as one of its forerunners. One example of such framing and discourse comes from Monica Osborne, a Jewrotica user:

It has never been the Jewish way to avoid talking about sexuality. Even the Torah abounds with narratives of sex and desire. [...] And the Talmudic rabbis engaged in vigorous discourse about everything from how to conduct oneself if a woman begins to menstruate during intercourse to whether or not the Yeshiva boy hiding under his teacher’s bed during lovemaking acted inappropriately. But like most good Talmudic

discussions, the ones pertaining to sex often remain open-ended.

(Osborne)

By reaching back into the rabbinic tradition and discursively portraying it as one filled with open-ended discussions about sexuality, the communal framing of the online, anonymous, instantaneous, and not easily monitored Jewrotica can justify itself and its use of digital media since it is actually reinforcing already established rabbinic traditions of open and open-ended discussions of sexuality. By using this type of communal framing and discourse, Osborne is portraying Jewrotica as a digital Judaism that is not in actuality pushing the boundaries of rabbinic Judaism. Rather, Jewrotica is being depicted as bolstering them and honoring age-old rabbinic discursive traditions about sex.

Another example frames Jewrotica within a more general discussion of Judaism as a whole rather than within specifically rabbinic and Talmudic discursive practices. David Abitbol states that with Jewrotica he and his fellow community members wanted to “[...] inspire conversation about great ways to project and manifest Judaism. While some of our material is admittedly a little risqué, Jewrotica is really all about inspiring conversation about the scope and nature of Judaism” (The Jerusalem Post). Here Jewrotica and new media are framed as somewhat pushing the boundaries of sexual propriety, but purporting that the reality of Jewrotica is in providing inspiration about the essence and the future of Judaism in general. With this discourse and framing Abitbol is able to assuage fears related to the promiscuity of Jewrotica enabled by new media technologies. This discourse frames Jewrotica as a new digital Judaism, but one that promotes and inspires the conversation about Judaism itself, staying neatly within the confines of established patterns of Jewish conversational behavior.

A final example comes from Ayo Oppenheimer herself. In this example, Oppenheimer reaches out to the users who are not orthodox. Tellingly, she frames Jewrotica as a place that respects traditional discourse on sexuality, especially the ritual sanctification of sexuality within marriage, but that there is also room for those who rather see sexual traditions and rituals metaphorically:

For those who are less fond of the strictures of traditional Judaism and the dictates of marital relations, the ritual practices that govern physical interaction can be understood metaphorically as a framework to elevate

sexuality. Many Jewish communities encourage individuals to personalize their Judaism. So, even if you aren't "waiting until marriage" and immersing in a ritual bath, you can still take the Jewish value of sanctification and apply it to your life in a way that feels right for you. (ck)

In this discourse Jewrotica is framed as a digital Judaism that reaches into the depths of the sanctity of sexuality within Jewish tradition, but from a metaphorical and personalized point of view instead of a strictly legalistic and binding stance. Here, instead of framing the community of users of Jewrotica as continuing in the rabbinic and Talmudic discursive traditions where rabbis decide on the normative behavior allowed within the marital bed or where rabbis demand that Jews wait to immerse themselves in their sexuality until they are married and properly purified in the ritual bath, Jewrotica is framed as a Jewish community like so many other Jewish communities that foster personal pathways within the tradition. In this framing, authoritative rabbis have disappeared and have been replaced by a 'feel good' Judaism where each individual applies Jewish tradition in the way that feels right to them at any given moment.

By using the RSST method to analyze the form of Jewrotica's communal framing and discourse, post-rabbinic and post-denominational theological functions come to light. A spectrum of discourses is used to justify Jewrotica's online presence to a diverse family of users. A discourse that implies that Jewrotica is following in an age-old rabbinic and Talmudic discursive tradition allows more orthodox users to feel at home in this digital forum. However, this discourse ingeniously inserts post-rabbinic and post-denominational functions into Jewrotica's digital theology. It relies on the understanding that Talmudic discourse is open-ended and unafraid of facing sexual taboos. Yet it seamlessly hands over this discursive tradition to anyone who wants to use it, contradicting its original intention for rabbinic use only. In this way, the discourse enables non-authoritarian functions, allowing anyone to be part of the theological discussion of sexuality, not just established institutions or rabbinic authorities. The discourse that implies that the somewhat risqué digital boundaries of Jewrotica remain neatly within the established Jewish community enables non-localized theological functions. It is not important where conversations take

place, whether online or offline, nor is it important that the conversation is somewhat about sexuality. What is important is that through this digital media, Jews and non-Jews alike are able to link together for inspiring and meaningful conversation about the essence of Judaism itself. In the last piece of discourse, Oppenheimer lithely and seamlessly leaps between a traditional rabbinic discourse on sexuality to a framing of Jewrotica as a 'feel good' Judaism that enables post - denominational and post - rabbinic functions. As a caring leader of the multi-faceted group of users of Jewrotica, she inspires non-orthodox Jews and others to create their own theological pathway regarding sexuality instead of passively consuming it from rabbinic authorities. She encourages each individual to make their own personal framework for sexuality integrating Jewish tradition in whatever way and wherever they see fit. The form of these discursive practices and the form of the digital Judaism of Jewrotica are enabling a range of post-denominational and post-rabbinic functions to infuse the digital religious culture surrounding Jewrotica and its disparate family of users.

e. The Open Siddur Project (<http://opensiddur.org/>)

The Scriptorium was in turmoil. Brother Paul, the precentor in charge, had detected a murmur from the back row and, furious that the rule of silence was being compromised, strode down the aisle just in time to see Brother Jacob tuck something under his robe. When he demanded to see it, Brother Jacob shame-facedly produced a codex, but not one that the antiquarii of this monastery had copied – or of any monastery, for this Psalter was *printed*. Shocked as much by the sight of the mechanical type as by Brother Jacob's transgression, Brother Paul so far forgot himself that he too broke the silence, thundering that if books could be produced by fast, cheap, and mechanical means, their value as precious artifacts would be compromised. [...] And how would the spread of cheap printed materials affect the culture of the Word, bringing scribbling into every hut and hovel whose occupants had hitherto relied on priests to interpret writing for them? (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 1 – 2)

This fictitious sketch from N. Katherine Hayles in *Electronic Literature: New*

Horizons for the Literary evokes the present day tumultuous dynamics surrounding electronic literature and the search by humans to find meaning within it whether with or without the help of religious or other authorities. The setting is a Christian one, hundreds of years ago, but it could just as well be applied to the Jewish context today. Many contemporary Jewish scholars like Rabbi Dr. Abraham Lifshitz in his article “Tefilla mitokh Siddur Electroni [Praying from an electronic prayer book]” are debating the acceptability of electronic prayer books that can be found on computers, iPods or mobile phones. Lifshitz argues that praying from an electronic siddur (Jewish prayer book) is not an acceptable medium for prayer. He bases his ruling on an injunction that Jews should not hold anything while praying. The person praying may become distracted by the object and by a fear of losing it forcing the person’s attention away from prayer. Lifshitz reasons that electronic devices like iPhones that house electronic siddurs can cause the same lack of concentration during prayer due to incoming messages or calls that might be “lost” during prayer (Cohen 10).

The shift is not just about going electronic. It is about how the electronic form of the siddur is allowing for new theological functions. Like religious authority, where digital media can be used to either reinforce traditional forms or open up new landscapes for alternative visions of leadership, the Internet also offers both possibilities regarding the siddur, one of the most precious ritual objects in Judaism. The Open Siddur Project, as its name implies, is aiming to open up previous conceptions of the siddur by shaping and fine-tuning the possibilities of the Internet to make the siddur accessible and personalized for everyone. Reaching back into the rich history of print media in describing the mission of the project, the welcome page of the website compares their goals for the siddur with a printing press:

Imagine a printing press and book arts studio shared by everyone in the world looking to design and craft their own siddur. The Open Siddur Project is building it, online, on the web: a collaborative digital-to-print publishing application where you can make your own siddur, share your work, and adopt, adapt, and redistribute work shared by others — work intended for creative reuse and inclusion in new siddurim and related works of Jewish spiritual practice. (The Open Siddur Project/Welcome)

One can only imagine how Brother Paul or a Jewish version of him would react to this, in his eyes, further transgression of the culture of the Word, bringing personalized siddurs into every hovel in the world without any rabbinic authorities to control the process. However, the Open Siddur Project finds that this is exactly what is necessary to preserve the culture of the siddur and revitalize Jewish spirituality. The Open Siddur Project wants to provide a platform where creative and inspiring prayer texts can remain in the public domain free for reuse and redistribution.

This emphasis on creative production and free distribution of theological texts supports post-rabbinic and post-denominational functions, in this instance that of proactively creating theology instead of passively consuming it, particularly within collaborative arrangements between experts and amateurs. In another of N. Katherine Hayles' works, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, she presents how, unlike in the time of the introduction of the printing press, worldwide collaborations between expert scholars and expert amateurs are now possible (36). She cites Willeke Wendrich, director of the digital *Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, who often worked with archeologists. In his experience they regularly hoarded artifacts and refused access to them to strengthen their power bases. In contrast to these offline artifacts, Wendrich argues that "[...] database forms and web dissemination mechanisms allow for increased diversity of interpretation and richness of insights, because now the data are freely available to anyone" (39). Scholars and amateurs alike can access the databases and disseminate their work on the web, invigorating the possibilities for creative collaborations like the Open Siddur Project in its production of theological texts and new interpretations of prayer.

In an interview with Alan Jacobs entitled, "The Potential and Promise of Open-Source Judaism," one of the founders of The Open Siddur Project, Aharon Varady, describes his project as "open-source religion." He wants to see the digitization of extant works in the public domain and enlarge the circle of "students, scholars, practitioners, and communities that were already adopting, adapting, and distributing their inspired creativity and scholarship -- but were only doing so in the highly restricted channel of copyrighted work." He sees

copyright laws as one of the main barriers to keeping culturally collaborative religious projects like the siddur creative, alive and robust and not technological barriers that are being overcome especially in an age of web dissemination. However, “By using free-culture and open source licensing, everyone who wants to participate in Judaism (or any religion) as a collaborative and creatively vital culture, can do so” (Jacobs). Open source licensing safeguards the attribution of creative work until they become part of the Public Domain. This makes a significant difference particularly in the US where copyright laws remain in effect for the life of the creator and another 70 years, dragging out a process that then keeps creative works obscure and ultimately forgotten.

The form of open source licensing in conjunction with web dissemination of creative works allows for the collaboration of authorities and amateurs alike in keeping religious and cultural artifacts alive and relevant. To this end, Varady counters dialectics that place religion in a separate sphere from culture, keeping religion uninspired. In Varady’s discourse and communal framing of the Open Siddur Project, he justifies the use of technology for Jewish religion by stating, “We liberate religion when we return it to culture, as a creative and relevant force for helping to shape our individual and collective consciousness [...] If its creativity isn’t maintained, its relevance is ceded to other systems to function in its place — or it is ceded to social elements and authorities who might use it to sustain self-serving agendas” (The Open Siddur Project/Radio 613). Varady’s discourse and communal framing are justification for the Open Siddur Project. Through digital media and open licensing it frees individuals and communities to be creative and collaborative in their religiosity and acts as a counter to the appropriation of religious meaning and interpretation into other spheres or to selfish authorities who take the power of creativity away from the collective and control it in their own hands and for their own mercenary ends.

David Piff and Margit Warburg in “Seeking for truth: Plausibility alignment on a Baha’I email list” also support Varady’s claims that religion is competing with and potentially losing out to other systems. They state, “In pluralistic situations, religions have to compete not only with one another but also with the reality-defining agencies of society at large – government, the media, the scientific establishment, and so forth” (87). Secular systems such as

governments and scientific institutions pose a threat to religions, not just other religions. To stay competitive in this fierce environment of clashing meaning making structures, the Open Siddur Project offers to conjoin creativity with religiosity anew. The conclusions of Rachel Wagner in “You are what you install: Religious authenticity and identity in mobile apps” likewise supports Varady’s claims for the connection between creativity, religiosity and non-authoritarianism in the digital sphere. She found:

As our use of religious apps places control of religious interpretation and ritual performance increasingly in the hands of individuals, it also suggests a fluidity, hybridity, bricolage, and flow that gesture against traditional notions of fixed religious authority. The questions raised about authenticity by our use of religious apps also gesture toward a renewed sense of ownership and awareness of who we are and what we choose to believe, and thus presage a new kind of individualized, personalized authenticity of religious experience. (199)

Technology is bringing religious interpretation and control over rituals and ritual objects into the hands of individuals away from the control of authorities and the reliance of amateurs on experts to guide their religious lives. The Open Siddur Project as a religious app is placing the control of the construction of the siddur in the hands of individual Jews no matter their level of expertise. The software of the Open Siddur project allows for the fluid and hybrid construction of individualized prayer books outside the bailiwick of Jewish institutions, denominations and rabbinic authorities that have had a monopoly on the production of siddurs. It is countering any self-serving agendas of reified authoritarian structures that can be found in Jewish denominations and rabbinic institutions and keeping Jewish religiosity vibrant.

An example of prayers from expert amateurs and experts that can be found and mixed together at the Open Siddur Project is a prayer for Abraham Lincoln and one for Thanksgiving. Isaac Goldstein the Levite, an American Jewish novelist, wrote the prayer for Abraham Lincoln. He was an expert writer, but an expert amateur in Jewish liturgy. His prayer was written in the form of an acrostic and published a few weeks after Lincoln’s death in *The Jewish Messenger* on May 25, 1865 under the title, “ACROSTIC On ABRAHAM LINCOLN,

Assassinated Nisan 18th, 5625" (The Open Siddur Project/Abraham Lincoln). The prayer highly resembles prayers of exultation towards God, but replacing God with Lincoln. The prayer begins:

Exalted are you Lincoln. Who is like you! You were highly respected among Kings and Princes. All that you accomplished you did with a humble spirit. You are singular and cannot be compared to anyone else. Who among the great are like Lincoln? Who can be praised like you?

This prayer takes the liberty of creatively infusing standard liturgical features of God's greatness with appreciation for Lincoln's governmental accomplishments. Rather than religion competing with governments, Goldstein is incorporating government and one of its most historic leaders within Jewish liturgical structures. In this way the author, as a novelist, is preserving the creativity and culture that is part of religion instead of ceding it to other realms and keeping religion alive, healthy and liberated from self-serving agendas.

Using the Open Siddur Project's software, this prayer for Lincoln from 1865 can be set side by side in a personalized siddur with a contemporary prayer for Thanksgiving, but this prayer comes from an expert, the Rabbi David Seidenberg, the founder of NeoHasid.org. He has received two rabbinic ordinations, one from the Conservative movement and one from the Jewish Renewal movement. Rabbi Seidenberg shared this prayer with the Open Siddur Project on November 25th, 2013. Thanksgiving is replaced with Thanksgivukkah, a blending of Hanukah and Thanksgiving since Thanksgiving fell on one of the eight days of Hanukah during 2013:

May the next Thanksgivukkah be a time of health and abundance for all of you who will receive the world from our hands.

May we together find a way to make sure that there is health and wealth and beauty not just for our family,
not just for the Jewish people and humanity,
but for all living creatures who share this planet with us.

May the One bless us with the power and wisdom to birth a society that shows love to the world around us,
that lives with love towards all beings. (The Open Siddur Project/Thanksgivukkah)

Instead of competing with the secular holiday of Thanksgiving, through this prayer, Rabbi Seidenberg uses his creativity to produce liturgy that shapes Jewish individual and communal consciousness to extend to all people and to all creatures. By openly sharing his creative use of liturgy he becomes an agent in defining reality and meaning in contemporary society. The free-culture and open source software that is shaping this technology is allowing for prayers from experts like Seidenberg and amateurs like Goldstein to be used side by side, supporting post-denominational and post-rabbinic functions. By shaping the Internet to support these theological functions, the Open Siddur Project allows authorities to interpret religious experience, but amateurs as well, mixing and matching prayers for their own personal liturgy. Additionally, within the Open Siddur Project, Jewish theology and liturgy are not localized in a building or denomination or even a time period. Their software is helping Jews link up to do meaningful and inspiring liturgical work across cultures, expertises, geographic regions and time periods. The founders of the Open Siddur Project and the volunteers who are creating and shaping the software to make it work are akin to caring and inspiring leaders in a post-denominational and post-rabbinic sense. They are helping and inspiring Jews to create meaningful experiences for themselves by crafting their own siddurs instead of being given a preset liturgy from on high. These types of leaders are helping to bring 'the Word' into every Jewish hut and hovel, empowering amateurs and experts alike to interpret liturgical writing without having to rely on institutions or religious authorities.

The Open Siddur Project as a form of digital Judaism highlights a shift in writing liturgy from the written word to the printed word and from the printed word to the electronic word. The shift to the medium of the electronic written word has also revolutionized our reading practices. N. Katherine Hayles sees reading as a complex practice that needs to be rethought within the "rich mixtures of works and images, sounds and animations, graphics and letters that constitute the environments of twenty-first century literacies" (*How We Think*, 79). One scholar who has spent years rethinking reading practices is James J. Sosnoski. In "Hyper-Readers and Their Reading Engines" he speculates that reading electronic texts will become our main reading practice. He terms this practice hyper-reading which is a constructive act similar to constructive

hypertexts used by writers to connect bits of information for their own needs. He finds that hyper-reading differs from reading printed texts in many ways. For example, a few characteristics of hyper-reading are:

1. **filtering**: a higher degree of selectivity in reading [& therefore]
2. **skimming**: less text actually read
3. **pecking**: a less linear sequencing of passages read (2)

Many anti-technologists view this new mode of reading as a loss of meaning, coherence and authorship. By contrast, Sosnoski states, “I am concerned with the ways in which hyper-readers can ‘dismantle the technology of the print book.’ I subscribe to the notion that we live in a postmodern era and that we cannot operate on the conventions that governed the reading practices of previous generations” (3). Part of how hyper-readers dismantle the technology of the print book is by becoming de facto writers. The practice of hyper-reading is almost the same as hyper-writing since hyper-readers “tend to assemble the texts they read” (7). They are comparable to textual burglars who “break into electronic texts and once they have found the source codes hidden from sight, steal them away with their cut&paste tools and reassemble them (minus the serial numbers so to speak) in their own home pages” (7).

Through techniques such as filtering, skimming and pecking, readers no longer follow a linear sequence given by an author to a text. They, like writers, steal bits and pieces of various texts and reassemble them in a sequence of their own choosing. These bits and pieces were previously held together in an apparently seamless manner giving the appearance of coherence to a text. Source codes now make these seams visible, but similar processes were undertaken before the advent of hyper-reading and writing. Part of the inspiration and vision for the Open Siddur Project was Rabbi Jacob Freedman’s *Polychrome Historical Haggadah*. A Haggadah is the accompanying prayer book for the seder ritual of Passover when the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt is recounted. With the polychrome haggadah and an additional polychrome siddur, Rabbi Freedman departed from institutionalized reading practices by engaging in a type of hyper-reading in a pre-digitized age:

[He represented] the text of the Haggadah and Siddur as aggregate texts with different authors and periods of composition [...] In a pamphlet

illustrating his vision for a Polychrome Historical Jewish Prayerbook, Rabbi Freedman wrote:

This is perhaps the first attempt to present for publication a polychrome historical prayerbook. The author herewith presents a random selection of prayers in colors merely as examples to show the various levels of historical development [...] The marginal symbols, also in color, indicate the period when certain prayers or phrases were first formulated and/or introduced into the prayerbook. The references are not to be considered exhaustive. (The Open Siddur Project/Project History)

Previous to Freedman, the seams of the haggadah and the siddur were invisible to almost all amateurs and to many experts as well. Yet he brought the seams to the fore through color-coding.

In the digital context Sosnoski characterizes this type of reading practice as “de-authorizing.” As seen through Freedman’s color-coded liturgy, hyper-writing in the sense of splicing bits and pieces of text together, at least in the Jewish liturgical context, is nothing new. However, digital media allows for new religious and theological reading practices alongside hyper-writing. In a de-authorized reading practice ownership of texts as intellectual property is often ignored and texts are seen as public property. Moreover hyper-readers go one step further. They ignore any authorial intentions as to the sequence of a text. As hyper-readers/writers their own intentions are the guiding force behind how a text should be read or written (Sosnoski 8).

The Open Siddur Project has realized the transformative potential of this new type of de-authorized reading practice. Dan Mendelsohn Aviv in *End of the Jews: Radical Breaks, Remakes, and What Comes Next* devotes a chapter to the Open Siddur Project entitled “People of the (Open Source) Book.” He describes how individuals at the Open Siddur Project are putting their mark on the digital sphere by facilitating complex de-authorized reading practices:

All of the individuals mentioned in this chapter—designers, bloggers and innovators—are engaged in a transformative endeavour. The digitization of seminal Jewish texts with the ability to remix, share and annotate them has changed the way in which they are perceived as texts. In the eyes of the Next Jew, these documents are no longer static artifacts to be passively

consumed. They are vibrant, dynamic entities that grow with each user's engagement. (180)

Digital practices that de-author texts grant new theological approaches to texts such as siddurs. "Next" Jews proactively create the theology of their liturgy becoming part of a dynamic evolution of the text. This dynamic reflects another characteristic of hyper-reading according to Sosnoski – fragmenting. Hyper-readers often prefer fragmented texts to long linear texts and arrange new texts according to associative patterns rather than conventional structures and genres. "In other words, many hyper-readers may be more comfortable selecting textual details and reassembling them in their own virtual frameworks than using the frameworks imposed upon them" (Sosnoski 8).

The Open Siddur Project is quite aware of this reading/writing practice and is shaping their software to help readers and writers realize their creativity within the digital sphere. The Open Siddur Project makes clear that when authors share their work it should be with the intention of letting others modify and adapt it as long as they correctly cite the work and any changes they may have made to it. For potential contributors to the Open Siddur Project, the guidelines emphasize:

The CC BY and CC BY-SA require that derivative works state that they are modified and that there is no implication that any of the contributors endorse the modified work. (Additionally, the license preserves the chain of attribution by requiring all derivative works to be shared with that same license.) If you want to share your work but remain concerned about how your work might be modified, you may also choose to contribute the work anonymously or pseudonymously. Within the Open Siddur web application we are developing, your work will only be editable by individuals or groups you have permitted. (The Open Siddur Project/Frequently Asked Questions)

The Open Siddur project regulates the modification of works, recognizing hyper-reader tendencies of de-authorization and fragmenting and giving some control back into the hands of the original writers to decide if they still want to have their names as authors attached to altered texts or if they rather publish anonymously or with a pseudonym. Moreover, they are developing software

where authors can control which individuals or groups can edit their work. All of these efforts on the part of the Open Siddur Project counterbalance de-authorizing reading practices that tend to assume that all texts are public property.

The Open Siddur Project is shaping the digital sphere to give a platform for creative hyper-reading and writing practices of liturgy and in so doing the digital sphere is shaping new and meaningful functions for Jewish theology. Mendelsohn Aviv affirms that for Jews at the Open Siddur Project hyper-reading/writing leads to a deepened sense of ownership of the siddur and meaningful liturgical practices rather than a loss of meaning and ownership as feared by many anti-technologists:

This engagement is also continual, ever-evolving and, though personal, also connects the individual to the broader Jewish learning community. In other words, every text is accompanied by a threaded discussion and more Jews are taking part, be it through creating their own religious texts or adding their voice to the emerging “Spoken Torah” of the Jewish blogosphere. Though Jewish community was historically maintained by the work of elites, be they the priests, *soferim*, or rabbis, the Next Jew no longer relies on scholars sequestered in yeshivas to carry the weight of the tradition. All one needs today is commitment and a stable Wi-Fi connection. (181)

Individuals who commit to the broader learning community of the Open Siddur Project and have a Wi-Fi connection are benefiting from the post-denominational and post-rabbinic theological functions enabled through this form of digital Judaism. They get to creatively bring their hyper-reading and writing practices to Jewish liturgy proactively and dynamically producing new theologies. They are adding their voice and their interpretation of Torah through threaded discussions and collaborations in the blogosphere. The work of these amateurs and experts is a new form of collaboration within Jewish tradition. The work rests in the digital sphere instead of in elite institutions like brick and mortar yeshivas or denominations. The digital Judaism of the Open Siddur Project is augmenting Jewish experiences and the holiness of Jewish liturgical texts, keeping siddurs as precious and evolving artifacts and cultivating the culture of the ‘Word’ for generations to come.

Conclusion

The new technology of digital media is shaping Jewish theology in unprecedented ways. Digital media is being used by traditional Jewish authorities to maintain strict boundaries around the conclave of Jewish theology. At the same time, the form of the Internet is allowing Jewish theology to break free of many strictures of rabbinic and denominational Judaism, creating new theological functions that are helping Jews and Judaism remain vibrant in our complex information age society. For some Jews, digital media will remain at best an extension of ourselves, like eye-glasses that help them focus better on the words of the Torah, or at worst an impediment that blocks a true connection to God. Yet, for other Jews, digital media is opening up new worlds and spaces for their theological yearnings and helping them approach and encounter their very own individual or communal 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans.'

Digital media is creating new messages for Jewish theology allowing for the innovative production of theology outside institutional constraints and offline spatial and temporal limitations. The medium of digital media can be an extension of ourselves. However, it can be so much more as we engage in a dynamic heterarchy with it. Digital media is invigorating post-rabbinic and post-denominational meaning making practices and in turn these practices are shaping digital media. It is an exciting time with many possibilities.

N. Katherine Hayles in her discussion of electronic literature is concerned about the future of the Traditional Humanities. According to public opinion and declining enrollment, the future of the Traditional Humanities might be bleak, though Hayles also sees an opportunity. For Hayles, the key to the survival of the Traditional Humanities is the Digital Humanities. She states, "Neither the Traditional nor the Digital Humanities can succeed as well alone as they can together" (*How We Think*, 53).

Hayles' vision is a role model for the future of Judaism and Jewish theology. Many reports on the future of traditional Judaism decry the declining enrollment at synagogues and the high rate of assimilation. If "Jewish Theology after Google" asks what Judaism and Jewish theology can become in a Google-

shaped world, it can and is becoming post-rabbinic and post-denominational. However, neither traditional Judaism nor digital Judaism can succeed alone as well as they can together. Instead of post-denominational, post-modern, post-halachic, and post-rabbinic Judaisms awaiting a name, these Judaisms can seek a path and a name together with traditional Judaisms for a vibrant contemporary Jewish theology. The theological messages in our digitized world are just waiting to be found betwixt and between mysterious, fascinating and awe-inspiring revelatory spaces.

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Hiermit bestätige ich, dass ich vertraut bin mit den von der Philosophisch-Historischen Fakultät der Universität Basel herausgegebenen 'Regeln zur Sicherung wissenschaftlicher Redlichkeit' und diese gewissenhaft befolgt habe.

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