

**END OF THE JEWS**  
RADICAL BREAKS, REMAKES AND WHAT COMES NEXT

By  
Dan Mendelsohn Aviv



**RPH**

The Key Publishing House Inc

Copyright 2012 © Dan Mendelsohn Aviv

The Key Publishing House Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Title: End of the Jews

Subtitle: Radical Breaks, Remakes and What Comes Next

[www.endofthejews.com](http://www.endofthejews.com)

First Edition 2012

Publisher: The Key Publishing House Inc.

Toronto, Canada

Website: [www.thekeypublish.com](http://www.thekeypublish.com) E-mail: [info@thekeypublish.com](mailto:info@thekeypublish.com) ISBN 978-1-926780-07-8

Copyediting & proof reading Jennifer South Typesetting & Indexing Perseus Design Cover Design Alexander Martin

Author's photo on back cover by ES Photography ([www.esphotography.ca](http://www.esphotography.ca))

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication is available. Printed and bound in USA.

The Key Publishing House Inc. [www.thekeypublish.com](http://www.thekeypublish.com) [www.thekeyresearch.org](http://www.thekeyresearch.org)

**RPH**



Published by a grant and in association with The Key Research Center ([www.thekeyresearch.org](http://www.thekeyresearch.org)). The Key promotes freedom of thought and expression and peaceful coexistence among human societies.

### **Notes on this edition**

This copy of chapter 12 of *End of the Jews*, has been modified from the original published version. Endnotes have been converted to footnotes. This edition is shared with permission of Dan Mendelsohn Aviv and The Key Publishing House with the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license, an open content copyright license.

All transcription errors are those of the transcriber, Aharon Varady, director of the [Open Siddur Project](https://www.opensiddur.org/). If you find an error, please [contact him](#).

# END OF THE JEWS

## RADICAL BREAKS, REMAKES AND WHAT COMES NEXT

(2012, Key Publishing House, Inc.)

by Dan Mendelsohn Aviv

### CHAPTER 12: THE PEOPLE OF THE (OPEN SOURCE) BOOK

For Jews, the People of the Book, the most traditional book is a Torah scroll. It serves not only as the ultimate authority in Jewish law but even its physical form manifests the preservation of a millennia-long practice. Harkening back to the eighth century BCE, the present day *sofer*, or scribe<sup>1</sup> whose job it is to hand-write a Torah scroll works with all-natural materials: *klaf* or *gevil*,<sup>2</sup> parchment produced from cowhide (although the skin of any kosher animal will do)—sixty-two panels in total, thread fabricated from hair or sinew to sew the parchment panels together, three bottles of ink made from gall-nut juice, gum and darkening tints,<sup>3</sup> about twenty quills fashioned from a turkey-feather or reed, and finally, wooden rollers known as the *Atzei Hayyim*, or “Trees of Life.” The *sofer* works with a *sargel* or ruler to delineate the margins and the required forty-two rows in each column. He must reproduce each of the 304,805 letters of the Pentateuch with great care as any transcription error or penmanship malfunction might render the whole scroll *pasul*, or “invalid.” The whole project could take anywhere between twelve and eighteen months to complete. Because of the precision of the craft and the attention paid to detail, popular belief is that the Torah scrolls found in synagogue Arks across the world were written and produced in *exactly the same manner as Moses did over three thousand years ago*.<sup>4</sup>

---

1 Today, women have also started writing Torah scrolls as well. Though there is a commandment for each individual to write their own Torah (based on verse Deuteronomy 31:19), women were exempt as Maimonides argued in his *Sefer haMitsvot* (positive commandment 18) that the purpose of writing a Torah is to study it—and women were not required to study Torah. However, as consensus has shifted in the Orthodox world about women and Torah study, more women have taken an interest in fulfilling the commandment of writing Torah scrolls and training to become a *soferet*. Writing a Torah requires much advanced study as there are about 4,000 rules that guide the process and requires the steady hand of an artist and calligrapher.

2 According to Babylonian Talmud *Bava Batra* 14b, Moses inscribed the first Torah scroll on *gevil*, or unsplit cowhide. *Gevil* differs from *klaf* in that it is made from the *whole* hide after removal of the animal’s hair. Once the cow’s skin has been removed and depilated, it is limed and stretched on a frame. *Klaf* on the other hand, is a segment of tanned skin.

3 Apparently, even the recipe of the ink is considered to be “Torah from Sinai” as reflected in the following anecdote from Babylonian Talmud *Eruvin* 13a:

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel who quoted Rabbi Meir: When I was learning from Rabbi Akiva, I used to add vitriol [i.e., ferrous sulphate] to the ink [used to write a Torah scroll] and he said nothing to me. When I came to Rabbi Ishmael he said to me: Son, what is your profession? I said to him: I am a scribe. He said: Son, be careful in your work, for your work is the work of Heaven. If you leave out a single letter or add in an extra letter— you destroy the entire world. I said to him: I have something called vitriol, which I put into the ink. He said to me: Did they [i.e., our ancestors] place vitriol into their ink? Did not the Torah say ‘And wrote and erased’ (Numbers 5:23)—[which means] writing which can be erased?’

4 See Deuteronomy 31:22ff.

However, for the People of the Book, as soon as their Torah took written form (known as *Torah she'Bihtav*—the Written Torah), an oral tradition of parsing, interpreting and spirited disputing (known as *Torah she'Ba'al Peh*— the Spoken or Oral Torah) emerged to explicate the meaning of the text— or, at least, that is how the Rabbis understood it in their representation in *Mishnah Avot* 1:1. Within four generations, the “spoken” Torah began to accumulate upon and grow the original Torah. (We perhaps might more appropriately be called “The People Who Talk A Lot About the Book”....)

And yet, despite all the protestations about the Spoken Torah’s spokenness, it, like its counterpart, is a *written* text, embracing and straddling both oral and literary conventions. In a sense, the Torah is all about making links; between written and spoken, between God and the Jews, and between individual Jews. By way of illustration, consider the following exchange in Mishnah *Berakhot* (4:3) between three Tanna'im (i.e., Mishnah-era Rabbis) about the *Amidah*, a central pillar of Jewish prayer and the essential part of any synagogue service:

Rabban Gamliel says: Every day a person must pray eighteen [blessings of the *Amidah*].

Rabbi Yehoshua says: [One may say] an abbreviated [form of the] eighteen [blessings].

Rabbi Akiva says: If the prayer is fluent in his mouth, he must say eighteen [blessings]; but if it is not—[he may say] an abbreviated eighteen [because otherwise he may stumble on the words].

These stylized, semi-staccato utterances read almost as tweets in their brevity. Try rereading them without all the explanatory notes inside the brackets with the appropriate hashtags. (The longest, Rabbi Akiva’s statement, comes in at 102 characters, well under Twitter’s 140 character limit.) However, as one conversant in mishnaic or Talmudic discourse, the work of troubadour poets, or Twitter will tell you, these compressions and shorthands are quite common. They make the words easy to remember in sequence and repeat, linking students to each other and to the chain of tradition. For the reader, this philomnemonic style is equally effective.

Additionally, and most novel, the way in which the written text was employed and deployed by traditional scholars prefigures the way in which many “use” texts today in the postmodern digital age. For example, one could read the first chapter in Mishnah *Avot* as an email that had been forwarded multiple times, with each sender adding on a comment or two before passing on the attachment (i.e., “the Torah”) to the next. (And each addition could easily qualify as a profound tweet.) Jonathan Rosen noted the similarities between Talmud and the Internet in the appropriately titled *The Talmud and the Internet: A Journey Between Worlds*. But even the most casual glance at any page of Talmud would reveal a deeply embedded network of texts from different places and different centuries. In other words, Talmud text, with its embedded links to other Jewish texts, is hypertext without Wi-Fi—and *what* Next Jews do today with text is not any different from what the *Amora'im* (i.e., Talmudic-era Rabbis) did back then. What is radically different is *how*.

In this light, one can develop a more historical appreciation for the place, role and status of Jewish blogs. Like Torah, blogging as a form of expression also straddles oral and literary conventions. At the most

superficial level, a blog reads like a book but sounds like a monologue. It also crackles with the immediacy of the spoken word, the “realtime-ness of speech as, unlike a book, it can be updated daily, hourly and, in some extreme cases, even minute-ly. It also attempts and invites connections and permalinks. The body of work, otherwise known as ‘Jewish blogs’ might include *all* blogs written by Jews, but even if left to the blogs whose subject matter deals directly with the Next Jew-ish experience in all of its diverse expressions, the numbers are staggering and growing each day. This chapter will look at some of those blogs and bloggers and consider how blogging might become *Torah she’Baal Peh* for the digital age. Blogging is one of the driving forces that animates Jewish-protean tribalism. Its relentless grappling with Jewish tribal meta-issues—or, as some might dismiss it “navel-gazing”—takes many forms beyond the general “*Is [insert trend here] good for the Jews?*” Jewish bloggers ask tough, occasionally irreverent questions about the nature of the Jewish tribe and their own place and participation in tribal affairs. The answers they generate are often unconventional and contentious—but equally illuminating.

### **DIY, FOSS and FLOSS**

The most commonly cited statistic about Michael and Sharon Strassfeld’s *The Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit* is that it sold more copies than any other Jewish book in American history besides the Bible. Published in 1973, it was modeled after the *Whole Earth Catalog* which had been published from 1968 to 1972. Both volumes were all about “access to tools” (as *Whole Earth Catalog* was subtitled), providing individuals with empowering information to “conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested.”<sup>5</sup> *The Jewish Catalog* provided basic information about Judaism and Jewish life in America. It also offered information about Jewish crafts, recipes, meditational practices, and tips on grass-roots activism.

Its do-it-yourself ethos successfully captured the imagination of a generation of young Jews who were searching for a way to connect to Judaism outside of staid institutional frameworks. (Sound familiar?)

And so, thirty-five years later, a blogger by the name of BZ<sup>6</sup> asked: *What will be our generation's Jewish Catalog?* This question gave rise to a rumination about the place of seminal texts in the present moment, with BZ wondering aloud if it “isn’t necessarily a book, and isn’t necessarily a static document.”

This is but one example of how, with the assistance of technology, the People of the Book have gone *open source* and do-it-yourself (DIY). This is a profound and significant move which has implications for proliferation of Jewish engagement and learning.

The methodology and philosophy of “open source” first evolved in the realm of software development. In 1997, Eric S. Raymond, a programmer and shepherd of *fetchmail* (a free email client) began to think aloud about the Linux operating system, free and open source software and the ramifications for radical collaboration. *Fetchmail* was developed to test out “the surprising theories about software engineering suggested by the history of Linux.” Linux (unlike Windows and Mac OS) was designed and distributed as

---

5 See page 3 for the quote and the rest of the *Whole Earth Catalog* at <http://www.wholeearth.com/issue-electronic-edition.php?iss=1010>.

6 See <http://mahrabu.blogspot.com/2008/07/21st-century-jewish-catalog-alpha.html> for the complete post.

free software, otherwise known as FOSS—free and open source software. (The variation, FLOSS, stands for “free/libre open source software”) More important, its source code was open to users so they could tweak the design, make improvements and share them with peers. Raymond’s thoughts eventually coalesced online into the essay entitled “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” which evolved and grew with subsequent feedback and discussions. The website,<sup>7</sup> (as with all open source materials) gives permission “to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the Open Publication License, version 2.0.” Although, as Raymond quickly points out, he sold O’Reilly the exclusive commercial printing rights.

As mentioned earlier, free and open source software makes the source code freely available to users. Where the “cathedral” and “bazaar” metaphors are most illustrative is in between official software releases. Let us say that a new free and open source app was released two months ago, but developers are busily working on Version 2.0 and are set to release the updated app early next year. In the cathedral model, that source code, the one in process, is only accessible to an exclusive group, the bishops, priests and monks of software development. Upon release, it will be available to all. In the “bazaar,” the source code is freely available online to all users at all times. Linus Torvalds pioneered this process in 2006 with Linux and though he wrote the largest proportion of code (around 2 percent),<sup>8</sup> the operating system was developed by a crowd of enthusiastic users for free.<sup>9</sup> Raymond’s main idea and observation about this process is that, in the bazaar, “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow.” Open sourcing and unfettered access also welcomes the crowd to vigilantly test the accuracy of code and maintain the integrity of content. As Raymond also observed, the prevalence of open source is a victory for hacker culture, where once-marginal users have emerged from the fringes to command the center and dominate it.<sup>10</sup>

Jewish users, too, have embraced this do-it-yourself and open source ethos. In coming together to open source a project, users not only produce an evolving and meaningful Jewish artifact, they also construct a Jewish community that often extends both temporally and physically beyond the scope of the original project. Riffing on Raymond, Jewish users are definitely creatures of the bazaar as they revisit, reconsider and, in some cases, rework many of the seminal texts in Jewish life: the Siddur, the Tanakh, the *d’var torah* [sermon], the Haggadah and *The Book of Legends*. These “open source projects” not only invited involvement by users at their individual level of learning and desire for engagement, but created connections and forged bonds between individuals across time zones and denominations. More important, open source projects invite participation from individuals who tend to lurk at the margins of the mainstream Jewish community.

For the Next Jew, empowered with a high-speed connection and a lot of good will, many traditional Jewish experiences (i.e., Shabbat prayer, sitting through a *d’var torah*, sharing the Seder with family, or

---

7 For the essay (and subsequent discussion about Raymond’s ideas), see <http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/index.html#catbmain>.

8 For more about the Linux development process and the philosophy of open source, see <http://openlife.cc/files/OpenLife-aa.pdf>.

9 How big that crowd should be to be maximally effective, see, for example, <http://www.mibsoftware.com/bazdev/>.

10 See <http://catb.org/~esr/faqs/hacker-revenge.html>.

studying *Tanakh*) have been redesigned from the bottom up to include the user's experience, involvement and engagement. So, let us say, the Next Jew is rolling into the weekend. It is Shabbat morning ... what's next?

## The Siddur

Each denomination has its own siddur of choice, although each synagogue within the various movements express their own preference for specific prayerbooks. The Modern Orthodox generally embrace the ArtScroll edition, although many use the *Siddur HaShalem* ("The Complete Siddur") otherwise known as the Birnbaum Siddur (after its editor Philip Birnbaum) or other editions which include the traditional liturgy with little to no English whatsoever in between the covers. If the Next Jew is not so traditionally minded, these volumes might not work for her.

The Conservative movement employs *Siddur Sim Shalom*, which provides a translation of the prayers on the left-hand page with annotations and instructions in English (e.g., "Congregation [recites], then Reader:"). *Sim Shalom* retains the traditional Hebrew text throughout except when, for ideological reasons, some key passages (like those about the hope for the restoration of sacrifices) are taken out. Also, the Matriarchs are included in a parallel rendering of the beginning of the *Amidah* prayer. *Sim Shalom* also includes prayers for Israel's Independence Day and Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Some congregations in the Greater Toronto Area have adopted *Siddur Hadash*, which is regarded as "more traditional" than *Sim Shalom*.<sup>11</sup> (Toronto's Conservatives swing more conservatively than sister congregations in the United States.) Though *Sim Shalom* might be a good fit, depending on the Next Jew's facility with Hebrew, she might be interested in something a bit more accessible.

The Reform has traditionally employed *Gates of Prayer* which was originally published in 1975. Though including prayers in Hebrew, it offers substantially more English on each page. Additionally, the siddur includes alternative versions of every service. However, since 2007, a new siddur entitled *Mishkan T'filah* has been embraced by hundreds of congregations across North America. *Mishkan T'filah* differs from *Gates of Prayer* in four significant ways. First, *Mishkan T'filah* has a Hebrew title, which reflects its greater emphasis on Hebrew language. It reads from right to left like a Hebrew book. (*Gates of Prayer* could come that way too, but you would have to special order it.) Second, it does not refer to God as "He," opting for more gender-neutral language. Third, or arguably an extension of the previous point about gender-neutrality, *Mishkan T'filah* is also gender-equal, including the Matriarchs as well as the Patriarchs in the *Amidah* prayer. And, finally, while *Gates of Prayer* offered variations of whole services, *Mishkan T'filah* also offers four variations of an individual prayer on the same page spread. The curious Next Jew will find the Hebrew prayer on the right side, accompanied by an English transliteration and a literal English translation, but on the left side, she will find more poetic renderings with passages to ponder, meditate and consider on her own.

The Reconstructionists prefer *Kol HaNeshamah*, a compendium of the movement's weekday, Shabbat and

---

11 For the complete story of *Siddur Hadash*'s launch, see [http://www.cjnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=14163&Itemid=86](http://www.cjnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14163&Itemid=86).

Holyday prayer book. As Rabbi Peretz Rodman noted in his review of the gamut of siddurim, *Kol HaNeshamah* is “traditionalist in form, but radical in ideology”<sup>12</sup>—and rather bulky. Would its purported radicality or significant heft be a deal breaker?

But what if the Next Jew does not comfortably fit into any of these denominational boxes? What if none of these options seems like a good one for Shabbat morning? “Imagine,” writes a blogger named The Hierophant,<sup>13</sup> “a printing press and book arts studio shared by everyone in the world looking to design and craft their own siddur.” He continues:

Imagine a social network focused on publishing built around privacy, collaboration, and a public database and digital library of Jewish liturgy in a format that can easily show historical variations and changes across Jewish traditions, manuscripts, and facsimile editions. Imagine a collection of text and recordings, freely licensed for creative reuse in every language Jews pray in or have ever prayed. Reimagine your siddur, custom tailored to your practice, replete with your insights and those selected from your friends, family, and the complete corpus of Jewish tradition, and a record of your family’s and community’s *minhagim* and *nusah*.

There is much to unpack in The Hierophant’s vision, but what I found curious was the order of the bedrock principles of the *Open Siddur* social network. I wondered: Why privacy *first*? Aharon Varady, one of the project designers, told me that *Open Siddur* “is not Wikipedia,” which is anything but private. The project’s goal is for users to employ technology to improve “a spiritual practice which is at its core, personal, although personal practice is often framed within a communal structure.” He went on to observe that:

[i]f we really respect that the siddur is the traditionally technological means by which Jews mediate their spiritual and thus personal practice, then we must ensure that their creative work is as private as any personal journal or diary, until they wish to share their content.

Varady is deeply steeped in the thinking and practice of Open-Source. Indeed, he prefaced his communication with me by letting me know that the content is licensed with a CC-BY-SA 3.0 Unported license, which means that I am free:

- 1 **to Share** — to copy, distribute and transmit the work
- 2 **to Remix** — to adapt the work
- 3 to make commercial use of the work

But I am only free to do so under the following conditions:

1. **Attribution** — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

---

12 For the complete review, see

[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Liturgy\\_and\\_Prayers/Siddur\\_Prayer\\_Book/Choosing\\_a\\_Siddur.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Liturgy_and_Prayers/Siddur_Prayer_Book/Choosing_a_Siddur.shtml).

13 A *hierophant* is someone who guides congregants into sacred encounters.



2. **Share Alike** — If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.<sup>14</sup>

(I hope I am living up to the terms of this agreement!)

Though the *Open Siddur* website, as Varady indicates, is really a “placeholder for a much more interactive web application,” its premise is an interesting one, compelling to many and only possible in the present moment: the sharing of liturgy-related content in real-time, created and annotated by the user. The user’s content serves as both a resource and repository for traditions at the individual, familial and national levels, tracking changes and variations across time. In other words, the *Open Siddur* is a truly living siddur. It is born and matures with each use. And, hopefully, it will never die. Most importantly, the user connects with others through this process of maturing ritual practice.

Where the *Open Siddur* works at the macro level, *Build a Prayer* works on the micro. Described as an “online space where Jews of all ages and backgrounds can connect on a deeply personal level with prayer and Shabbat,” *Build a Prayer* facilitates the creation and customization of the Shabbat service “in a fun and interactive way that is meaningful for you and your community.” Despite the interface’s ease of use, the experience of putting together a service exposes some of the limitations of this user-created prayer experience. First, the organization providing the server space for the user-interface will most probably frame the extent of the user experience. For example, BBYO, an historically secular organization and sponsor of *Build a Prayer*, opted to provide its members with this DIY experience. However, for example, the user can only select the traditional format for the *Amidah* prayer without an option to add the Matriarchs alongside the traditionally lauded Patriarchs. (This emendation is standard in most progressive minyan and in many of the siddurim mentioned above.) Was leaving this out a sin of omission or commission? Was BBYO sending a message or simply not clued in?

Second, and most important to someone like Aharon Varady:<sup>15</sup> *who ultimately owns the content?* If I am building a prayer, is it truly *my prayer*? Can I share it without getting permission from the folks who paid for the server space? Can someone else remix my prayer or must they wait until seventy years after I die? That remains to be seen ... but if Aharon Varady has his way *and a lot of help from informed Jewish users*, *Open Siddur* will be *the* one-stop and source for online Jewish liturgical content of all stripes and shapes.

## The D'var Torah

Having designed her own (limited) Shabbat morning service with *Build a Prayer*, the Next Jew’s Shabbat morning tefillah experience would probably be incomplete without a *drash*, otherwise known as a *d’var torah* (“a word of Torah”) or sermon. As the handy guide in *The Kosher Pig and Other Curiosities of Modern Jewish Life* succinctly stated,<sup>16</sup> the *d’var torah* is meant to be a short speech highlighting the

---

14 For the full extent of the license, including waivers, public domains and other rights, see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.

15 For Aharon’s complete comment, see <http://davidsaysthings.wordpress.com/2010/02/18/bbyo-build-a-prayer-thing/#comment-2141>.

16 See [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah\\_Study/Preparing\\_a\\_Dvar\\_Torah/Dos\\_and\\_Donts.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah_Study/Preparing_a_Dvar_Torah/Dos_and_Donts.shtml)

weekly Torah portion. It generally requires some research into the simple meaning of the text as well as perusing some ancient and modern commentaries. Additionally, it is usually delivered from the *bimah*, or lectern during the morning service so it involves an activity compared to which death is preferable: public speaking.<sup>17</sup>

With the assistance of and inspiration from the Darim Online Blog *Jew Point 0*, the Next Jew can participate in “The Social Sermon.” This project was designed to address some of the realities inherent to Jewish living in the present moment: the intensely programmed lives of individuals and families with two working parents, a latent interest and desire to learn Torah in an active, meaningful way (i.e., a non-lecture), and the prevalence of connectivity and social networking technologies. And, it is also worth noting, it does not require participants to speak in front of people. Here is the concept:

Imagine a Saturday morning sermon that’s the work of not only your rabbi, but *you* as well. Let’s take it a step further: what if it weren’t just you and your rabbi, but also your fellow congregants, young and old, those new to the community and the stalwarts of your city? By the time your rabbi delivers his Shabbat remarks, he or she could be drawing inspiration from, or even representing the discussion of, hundreds of his congregants!

The open-source sermon had first been piloted in evangelical Protestant churches in early 2008, although the first attempt at an open-source sermon dates back to 2006 at wikilectics.com.<sup>18</sup> Some synagogues have used “The Social Sermon” very successfully. On January 10, 2011, Rabbi David Levy of Temple Shalom in Succasunna, New Jersey blog-posted an invitation to his congregants to collectively write the *d’var torah*.<sup>19</sup> He provided a number of entry points into the topic of “Judaism and the Environment”; they could contribute to the conversation by leaving a comment on the original blogpost, sending an email, adding a note to the “Take Part in The Sermon That You Help Write!” Facebook page, or tweeting with the hashtag #tsnjss.

Throughout the week, Rabbi Levy hoped the following would happen:

- New people will have engaged in Text study, as it is likely that a portion of the online participants will not be from among our adult education regulars.
- Participants will have formed new relationships through the online discussion, perhaps following each other on Twitter, friending each other on Facebook, etc., thus strengthening our community;
- [He would] have a better understanding] of what aspects of the texts resonate with the

---

for the reprinted list of *d’var torah* tips or

[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah\\_Study/Preparing\\_a\\_Dvar\\_Torah/Seven\\_Approaches.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah_Study/Preparing_a_Dvar_Torah/Seven_Approaches.shtml) for “seven approaches” to the sermon.

17 See Dogbert’s comment to Dilbert in <http://dilbert.com/strips/comic/1999-03-03/>.

18 Although the wikilectics site is currently defunct, one can check the Internet Way Back machine for snapshots of the site. The earliest can be accessed at [http://wayback.archive.org/web/20060915000000\\*/http://www.wikilectics.com](http://wayback.archive.org/web/20060915000000*/http://www.wikilectics.com).

19 For the complete explanation, the sources and questions that served as fodder for the *d’var torah*, see <http://rabbilevy.wordpress.com/2011/01/10/the-temple-shalom-social-sermon-has-arrived/>.

community, and be able to design a Shabbat sermon that is the most relevant for the congregation, and will have ideas, quotes, context to make the sermon even more rich; and

- More people may show up for Shabbat services, feeling more educated, connected and having some ownership over the sermon that evening.<sup>20</sup>

On January 21, Rabbi Levy delivered the sermon at Kabbalat Shabbat on Friday night, then two days later, posted it on his blog.<sup>21</sup> He mentioned five contributors by name in his talk, though others probably “lurked” the discussion. From the comments on his blog, it seemed that both the process and the product were well received. The positive Social Sermon experience also garnered media attention from *The New Jersey Jewish News*.<sup>22</sup> Though Rabbi Levy was pleased with the *d’var torah*, he admitted that “[t]he social sermon is not something I’d want to do every week ... But it’s a nice addition to the variety of sermonic material people hear over the course of the year.”

### The Haggadah

Perhaps the most popular of all Jewish observances is the Seder.<sup>23</sup> And though, for many, food is the main attraction, it is the collective reading of the Haggadah that structures the Pesach dining experience and the re-telling of the Exodus tale as articulated by the single-lined commandment to tell children about the paschal sacrifice in Exodus.<sup>24</sup>

The Haggadah as a text evolved over the centuries following the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. The oldest passage is thought to be the “*Ha Lahma Anya*” (lit. “This is the bread of affliction”) from that period.<sup>25</sup> There are also numerous quotes from the Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, and midrash as well as passages from already existing prayers and blessings. The exact date of the Haggadah's compilation is unknown, though according to noted Jewish historian Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, the canonization of the basic text is believed to have taken place in Babylonia. Over the course of centuries, however, the Haggadah underwent substantial changes, specifically in terms of child involvement. The popular hymns appended to the end of the text derive from the Middle Ages, and the favorite “*Had Gadya*”—“One Kid” and “*Ehad Mi Yode’a*”—“Who Knows One” were only added after the fifteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

---

20 See [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=117045871702204](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=117045871702204) for the complete page.

21 For the complete text, see <http://rabbilevy.wordpress.com/2011/01/23/last-shabbats-social-sermon/>.

22 For the complete article, see <http://njewishnews.com/article/metrowest/rabbi-taps-into-social-media-to-write-new-kind-of-sermon>.

23 As Jewish historian Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi ([1975] 1997), 14, observed, the Seder: has suffered the least erosion in modern times ... [continuing] to be celebrated not only by Jews committed to religious tradition, but across the spectrum of religious modernism and revisionism, among secularists of every stripe, even by seemingly alienated Jews whose knowledge of Judaism has otherwise atrophied to that of the Fourth Son in the Haggadah ‘who knows not what to ask.’

Statistics also bear out this observation, indicating that the Seder continues to be one of the few Jewish ritual-meals observed by the greatest number of Jews in Israel (e.g., Elazar [1996]) as well as the Diaspora (e.g. Kosmin, Goldberg, Shain, & Bruk, [1999]).

24 See Chapter 12, v. 26-27.

25 See Fredman (1981), 8.

26 See Yerushalmi ([1975] 1997), 16.

The oldest complete version of the Haggadah hails from the tenth century as part of the prayerbook compiled by Sa'adia Ga'on, head of the Talmudic academy of Sura in Babylonia. The earliest stand-alone edition is from the late thirteenth-early fourteenth century, though fragments date from an earlier period. Numerous additional fragments have been recovered from various "genizahs,"<sup>27</sup> particularly the Cairo Genizah discovered in the twentieth century, but because of their incomplete character, their place in the liturgy remains unknown.

Before the second half of the fifteenth century, all Haggadahs were hand written, but by the 1480s, Hebrew printers embraced Gutenberg's invention and (as mentioned earlier) began to publish the Jewish classics. And yet, the Haggadah was surprisingly not among those incunabula. The origins of the first printed Haggadah, like its first written edition, remain obscure but over 3,500 extant editions have been catalogued and more continue to be uncovered with the passage of the years.<sup>28</sup>

I recount this history to support two assertions about the Haggadah. First, although it is used to structure a much-beloved and critical aspect of Passover observance, the Haggadah is not a sacred text on par with, say, the Torah or the Mishnah. Second, (and perhaps therefore,) it is arguably the *least* canonical text on the Jewish bookshelf. It was open to sharing and remixing throughout the centuries. This century is no different, however with the Internet's reach and a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License, the Haggadah can be utterly remade in a way unimagined in previous generations. Two examples will demonstrate this last point.

Jewishboston.com's April 16, 2011 blogpost entitled "Haggadah Blues? JewishBoston Presents: Your FREE Downloadable Passover Haggadah" offered Seder leaders an opportunity to (re)mix it up a little with the cleverly named "The Wandering is Over Haggadah." Besides being downloadable in .pdf format for easy printing, it also offered a bare-bones yet surprisingly not dumbed-down *thirty-minute Seder* with optional supplements, discussion questions, and Passover songs. This Haggadah was also available in Word format for the more ambitious who wanted to individually customize the text.

Haggadot.com also offers a similar option. For the Next Jew-ish user interested in crafting her own unique Seder experience, she can access classical texts as well as contemporary interpretations, combine them with her own commentary, artwork, "selections from homemade or non-copyrighted haggadot," and pages from other users. Then, she can save "her" Haggadah as a .pdf and print as many copies as she needs for the Seder. As users contribute more material to the Haggadot.com database, users will be able to create even more personal and more unique texts, with:

[p]ieces from a Feminist Reconstructionist version [co-existing] with selections from a haggadah from the 1500's. A family of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews can include both traditions in one haggadah. A family separated by distance may collaborate online to create a shared haggadah for their separate seders. Families may also access their folder over the years to track their changing

---

27 A genizah is a depository for used holy books and written materials.

28 See Yerushalmi ([1975] 1997), 13-16ff.

history.<sup>29</sup>

Both these efforts, as well as the countless other personalized Haggadot available online,<sup>30</sup> are designed to impart the message that, as Haggadot.com concludes: “whatever their background, [Jews] have a place at the global seder table.”

## The Tanakh

Unlike previous examples of Jewish texts (i.e., the Siddur, the D'var Torah, the Haggadah) for which designers invited tweaking, the Tanakh is less amenable to personalized emendations. The Torah was the first Jewish text to be canonized, that is, its content, down to the individual letter, cannot be added to or edited down in any way. As a closed text, it is also totally authoritative. “Torah from Sinai,” that is, a central tenet in Orthodox belief that God gave the Torah *in toto* to Moses at Sinai, captures this idea quite well—with some important caveats. Orthodox Judaism situates the Torah’s canonization post-Exodus instead of sometime during the Babylonian Exile, and ascribes sole authorship of the Torah to God instead of authors grouped under the letters “E,” “J,” “P,” “D” and “R.” (If these letters do not mean anything to you, you might want to re-read Chapters Two and Three.) In a sense, the canonization of the Torah was, for Jews, probably the most significant religious event since Abraham left Ur for Canaan on God’s behest. This being said, could the Tanakh be remixed under a Creative Commons license? The short answer is: It cannot. However, it can be tagged and tweeted. Enter the *Tagged Tanakh*.

Launched in 2009, the *Tagged Tanakh* is an attempt by the 120-year-old Jewish Publication Society to boldly embrace emergent technology and, by implication, Next Jew-daism. In taking the Tanakh online in this unique form, it has turned Judaism’s most important text into an open platform where user-created content augments ancient words. JPS was not the first organization to take the Tanakh online. Bar-Ilan University uploaded the Tanakh, Mishnah, Talmud and Jewish *responsa* in 2007 under the name “The Responsa Project.”<sup>31</sup> Its database of “Torah literature,” the largest in the world, is fully searchable and hyperlinked. However, it positions the user as a passive consumer of information. In other words, you can listen in to the three thousand-year-old conversation about Torah, but you cannot contribute to it.

The *Tagged Tanakh*, like the Mishnah and Talmud which incorporates the thoughts and musings of the great commentators on each page, has its folio page but no limiting margins. It can include the thoughts of all users. As such, it is an experiment both in radical democracy (where the users themselves structure the commentary, the rules of debate and interpretation) and radical inclusion (where, as J.T. Waldman, director of JPS Interactive and *Tagged Tanakh* said, “we want to allow everybody to have a space at that table.”<sup>32</sup>) (“Having a place at the table” seems to be a recurring meme....)

---

29 See <http://haggadot.com/about>.

30 See <http://velveteenrabbi.com/VRHaggadah.pdf>, <http://scheinerman.net/judaism/pesach/haggadah.pdf>, <http://www.eszter.com/Haggadah.pdf> or <http://bparnes.com/haggadah/seder.pdf>. There are countless additional examples from the different denominations (e.g., the first part of the Reform Haggadah called *The Open Door* can be found at [http://ccarnet.org/\\_kd/go.cfm?destination=ShowItem&Item\\_ID=279](http://ccarnet.org/_kd/go.cfm?destination=ShowItem&Item_ID=279)) as well as numerous versions used in the Messianic Jewish movement (e.g., <http://www.jhu.edu/gcf/lessons/Haggadah.pdf>).

31 See <http://www.responsa.co.il/home.en-US.aspx>.

32 For the complete article, see <http://www.forward.com/articles/103387/>.

*Tagged Tanakh* employs a similar workflow as do many social networking and bookmarking applications. After signing in, pick a verse, any verse in the whole of the Tanakh. You can pick at random, search for a specific verse or idea, or take up this week's Torah portion. The choice is yours. Once you have found your verse, highlight it and write your comment. After applying some identifying tags, post it to that verse. Other users can reply and comment to your comment. In the spirit of DIY and Open source, participation is voluntary and unlimited, and though there are no bugs to squash, the more eyes, accompanied by more words, make the discussions about the *Tanakh* all the richer.

### ***Sefer HaAggadah*—The Book of Legends**

*Aggadah*, meaning “lore” or “legend” in Aramaic, is a collective term for homilies and non-legal interpretive texts found in the Mishnah, two Talmuds and external midrashic literature. Haim Nahman Bialik, one of Israel's national poets, collaborated with Yehoshua Hana Ravnitsky to collect *aggadot* and organize them into a user-friendly collection. After three years, they produced *Sefer HaAggadah—The Book of Legends* in 1908.

In honour of the hundredth anniversary of publication, and in acknowledgement of the beginning of the 2008 National Havurah Committee (NHC) Summer Institute, a group of havurah-affiliated bloggers began to blog *Sefer HaAggadah* under the name *Sefer HaBloggadah*. The group divided the vast collection into weekly portions and each week, over the course of two years, bloggers would be invited to post their impressions and thoughts and invite online discussion in the comments section.

As with the Shabbat service, *d'var torah* and Hagaddah, there was an articulated hope and designed intention that the online learning and activity carry over *into the offline*. (In the case of *Sefer HaBloggadah*, face-to-face learning groups or workshops at NHC regional retreats were organized to discuss whatever *Sefer HaAggadah* selection was being blogged that week.)

This hope and intention raises some compelling questions about the relationship between online and offline. Is the latter preferable to the former? Is the latter *better* than the former? If so, then is one merely a standin or place-holder for the other?

If we consider the language we use when describing the online (as opposed to the offline), we tend to use descriptors that imply or openly condemn the experience as artificial (in varying degrees), both in the sense of employing artifice as well as being *not-real*. How many times have new users been warned that an online friend is not *really* a friend and that you never know who you are *really* chatting with online? That schools do not invite police officers into classrooms to make similar warnings about offline friendships and casual conversations indicates that we have a better handle on the offline. We appreciate its nuances and understand its ramifications as it has been the primary mode of human communication since the first human turned to the second human to comment on the rate of thawing glaciers. It is the online that gives many of us pause, or at least those of us that conducted all of our significant human interactions (i.e., schooling, courtship, job searching, etc.) face to face. I am convinced that, as Next Judaism takes deeper root, that as more children grow up with connectivity technologies (that, for them is

not really technology according to the classic definition<sup>33</sup>), the answers to these questions about which is preferable, which is better, and if there is a difference between the online and the offline will move from an unequivocal “yes” to a qualified “no.”

## **Blogging**

*Sefer HaBloggadah*, as much as it embodies the DIY, open-source ethos in reconceptualizing *The Book of Legends*, or the *Tagged Tanakh* as it invites users to comment on individual verses functioned essentially as a blog. Though the hundreds of posts may have focused on a single text, single verse or a single word, each post was personal and idiosyncratic, and if analyzed closely, revealed as much about each blogger as it did about the legend or text in question.

“Blog” blends the terms “web” and “log.” First used by Jorn Barger in 1997 to describe his collection of web links, blogging is today’s dominant publishing mode.<sup>34</sup> According to Blogpulse.com, a site dedicated to tracking blogs and blogging trends across the Internet,<sup>35</sup> over 160 million blogs were up and running in June of 2011. Technorati catalogued over 127 million blogs. Blogs are essentially Internet-based “news” delivery sites. In the previous century, “news” was produced by professional reporters who collected information, funneled it to a small group of editors who decided whether and how to publish it. Editors’ decisions were based on a notion of general yet limited categories (i.e., International News, National News, Local News, Sports, Business, Entertainment, etc.) and their collective sense of what was, in the words of the *New York Times*’ motto, “fit to print.” In the present day, “news” is still largely produced by professionals, but there are no more gate-keeping editors. Nor are there general categories or limits to categorization. “News” today is highly personal and personalized. Anyone can report and publish—and do it for free on webplatforms like WordPress, Blogger or Tumblr. Additionally, today’s “news” is open to comment. Through the “talkback,” readers can do just that in real-time with almost unfettered access. They can not only engage with the writer, but also with other readers. In so doing, communities (or, in some less civilized cases, anarchic rugby scrums or loot-hungry mobs) are formed around topics of mutual interest and meaning. These communities might evaporate in a click, but they are opportunities for individuals to connect with each other.

For North American Jews, with a leadership preoccupied by continuity and engagement issues, blogging seems like the perfect anodyne for many of the ailments plaguing the Jewish community. Jewish bloggers use their blog as a confessional, soapbox, water-cooler, straw-dog run, salon, umbilical cord or some variation thereof. What percentage of the 160 million are dedicated to Jewish matters is difficult to determine. But if mainstream blogs expanded and exploded the notion of “news,” Jewish bloggers did the same to “Jews,” establishing a postmodern *Anshei* (sic) *Blog HaGadol* (or Bloggers of the Great Assembly) to carry the tradition forward into the next century and next medium. But where the second century BCE original was an exclusive meritocratic body, limited to a membership of 120 sages, *soferim*

---

33 Alan Kay famously quipped that “technology” is anything that was invented *after* you were born. For me, born in 1970, the iPod is technology. For my daughter, born in 2005, it is as remarkable as a folding chair.

34 For more about the origin and proliferation of blogging, see [http://www.wired.com/entertainment/theweb/news/2007/12/blog\\_anniversary](http://www.wired.com/entertainment/theweb/news/2007/12/blog_anniversary).

35 See <http://www.blogpulse.com/> for an up-to-the-minute count of Internet blogs.



and prophets, today's version is organized along different principles. Democracy is a cornerstone of the Internet as well as the Jewish blogosphere. Anyone with an Internet connection can set up a blog and speak, but the *Anshei Blog HaGadol* is meritocratic in the sense that the more well-trafficked, better connected and better written blogs will carry more weight in the discourse than those rarely perused. In other words, all can speak but some will be heard more than others.

Of the 188 newsfeeds I regularly follow, sixty-five deal explicitly with Jewish issues and matters pertaining to the Middle East. (The others are about technology, sports and "other news.") These blogs are in no way a representative sample of all the Jewish blogs out there as research has demonstrated<sup>36</sup> that most people who read political blogs tend to read those that reflect their own political views—myself included. However, for a previous piece I wrote on Jewish blogging,<sup>37</sup> I began to follow bloggers who populate other tranches of the Jewish political spectrum. The experience has been eye-opening because it shattered many expectations and assumptions I had about the other tranches. Though I may vociferously disagree with the output of those bloggers, the fact that they exist and address substantive issues of great import to them and do so fearlessly and honestly is testament to the power of the medium and its reach. They also testify to the present moments variant of that old Jewish adage: two Jews, three blogs.

As I did in Chapter Eleven with Next Jew-daism and Jewish protean tribalism, I present here a number of tendencies that I have noted in my experience with Jewish bloggers and blogging. Again, in the spirit of Linus' Law, I invite more eyeballs to make shallow the bugs.<sup>38</sup> So let us begin with one of the distinctive features of Internet usage: the veil of anonymity.

***The more frum the blogger and the more inward-looking their blog, the chances that the frum blogger will choose to obscure their identity approaches one hundred percent. Especially if they are female.***

Of all the bloggers I interacted with, a not-insignificant number of *frum* bloggers refused to disclose any biographical details. Anonymity is one of the cornerstones of free speech, providing individuals with an opportunity to express controversial ideas without fear of punishment. This is especially important for *frum* bloggers who write social commentary and criticism of their tightly knit societies. Exposure of one's "secret identity" could not only result in social ostracism of varying degrees (at best) or rabbinic sanction (at worst); one's family could be impacted as well, with financial security, education and marriage prospects cast into jeopardy.

Even *frum* bloggers who eschew the political but write about their personal experience cling to the veil of anonymity. In my sample, these bloggers were predominantly female who wrote about their experiences with courtship, *shidduchim* (marriage-matches) and married life. These blogposts, though highly personal, could also be read as a profound social critique of an entrenched gender-based social system—despite claims otherwise.

---

36 For example, see Bishop (2009) or <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.158.8925&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

37 See Mendelsohn Aviv (2009).

38 Again, feel free to agree, disagree and comment at [danmendelsohnaviv@gmail.com](mailto:danmendelsohnaviv@gmail.com).



Anonymity is thus a tool in the struggle, but so, too, is the stripping of that anonymity. In a 2007 case unrelated to the vicissitudes of *frum* living, a tussle at a local school board set the *frum* blogger Orthomom<sup>39</sup> against Pamela Greenbaum, a board member. The former was unhappy with the position of the latter, and after writing that Greenbaum had “no interest in helping the private school community” in her blog,<sup>40</sup> elicited some unflattering comments from anonymous commenters. Greenbaum sued Google, who hosts Orthomom’s blog, and demanded that they expose Orthomom’s identity so that “the appropriate lawsuit can be filed against the responsible parties.”<sup>41</sup> The New York Supreme Court dismissed Greenbaum’s case, stating that “the statements on which [Greenbaum] seeks to base her defamation claim are plainly inactionable as a matter of law.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, one cannot unmask an anonymous critic because the critic wrote something legitimately critical that you did not like.

Another blogger who writes under the pseudonym “The Wolf”<sup>43</sup> flirted with the idea of “coming out” in August 2009, but delayed the decision not because of fear of censure. Other bloggers have written similarly critical posts about the *frum* world without obscuring their identities.<sup>44</sup> However, because his children were applying to high schools and he did not want potential principals rejecting them because their parent was a blogger, he did not disclose. His cover was potentially blown in June 2011 when a reader identified him after reading a recent, moving blogpost about a bar-mitzvah boy with Down’s syndrome.<sup>45</sup> And yet, he decided to cling to his pseudonym—although, by this stage, he was not trying too hard to keep his identity a secret. Another *frum* blogger, DovBaer, whose blog often serves as a forum for criticism of figures in the *frum* community, also remains anonymous. In other words, men in traditional societies, though still subject to the same rules, often have more leeway and license to transgress than women.

***For progressives, blogging about Israel is fraught with peril.***

In more liberal Jewish circles, there is no overt threat of sanction for saying too much about one’s personal life or critiquing communal leaders, nor is there a digital ceiling which keeps women cowed into a mildmanneredness that only anonymity might remedy. People can generally speak their minds under their own names. However, some of the progressive bloggers remarked about their hesitation and struggles with writing about Israel. Female bloggers like the Velveteen Rabbi did not write about the

---

39 See <http://orthomom.blogspot.com> for the archive.

40 For the complete post and comments, see [http://orthomom.blogspot.com/2007/01/sd-15-news\\_11.html](http://orthomom.blogspot.com/2007/01/sd-15-news_11.html).

41 For the complete complaint, see <http://www.canonist.com/wp-content/uploads/plugins/orthomomlawsuit.pdf>.

42 For the complete judgment, see <http://www.citmedialaw.org/sites/citmedi-alaw.org/files/07-10-23-Order%20Dismissing%20the%20Petition.pdf>.

43 See <http://www.wolfishmusings.blogspot.com>.

44 For example, *The UnOrthodox Jew* (at <http://theunorthodoxjew.blogspot.com/>), an ordained Orthodox rabbi, states at the outset that his “critiques are in no way to be construed as critical of Judaism. My intent is to expose the practices and the conflicts that have so denigrated our religion; hopefully leading to a drastic change in the way we select our “leaders.”” Harry Maryles (at <http://haemtza.blogspot.com/>) affirms the values of Orthodox Judaism but communicated to me that he “also seek[s] to publicly protest wrongdoing by anyone who calls himself an Orthodox Jew.” Heshy Fried (at <http://www.frum satire.net/>) is a satirist, and, as such, his social criticism is perceived as shtick.

45 For the complete post, see <http://wolfishmusings.blogspot.com/2011/05/and-i-sat-down-and-cried.html>.

subject *for several years* because of its “incendiary” nature and the topic’s uncanny ability to polarize and inflame. Sue Swartz, at *Awkward Offerings*, also expressed some concern about the topic and how writing about it honestly might “unnecessarily [piss] people off.” Many male bloggers who willfully engaged the topic reported that were not deterred by controversy. (There’s that gender thing again... .) Harpo Jaeger was one blogger who admitted to being “very drawn to writing about IsraelPalestine issues,” and still does but “recently [he has] begun to feel like I’m just writing the same post over and over again.” Harpo’s remark reminded me of a blogpost I bookmarked way back in 2006 about why liberal bloggers do not write more about Israel. Kevin Drum, who blogged at *Political Animal* for *Washington Monthly* and now blogs for *Mother Jones*, compiled a “top five” list of what he called “both predictable and banal” reasons for silence on the subject.<sup>46</sup>

1. It sparks unusually vicious comment threads, something this blog hardly needs since comments here spin out of control often enough anyway....
2. The fight between Israel and the Palestinians is over half a century old and seems intractable. It follows the same rhythms decade after decade, full of hypocrisy and posturing from both camps, and there seems little to say about it that doesn’t eventually boil down to, “Both sides need to ratchet down the rhetoric and rein in their own extremists.” Aside from being pointless, there are only just so many ways you can say this....
3. The conflict is fantastically complex, and the partisans on both sides are mostly people who have been following events with fanatical attention to detail for many decades. Ordinary observers can hardly compete in this atmosphere—do *you* know the detailed history and long-accepted norms of behavior that have developed in the conflict over the Shebaa Farms since 1967?—and this has produced an almost codelike language of its own over the years. One misuses this code at ones peril.
4. As with the conflict itself, punditry is heavily dominated by extremists on both sides. I normally take my cues on subjects I’m inexpert in from people whose sensibilities are similar to mine, but it’s nearly impossible to figure out who those people might be in this case.
5. Related to 1 and 3, posts that display any sense of sympathy for the Palestinians run the risk of provoking a shitstorm of accusations of anti-semitism. (I gather that the opposite is more frequently the case in Europe.) Language is actually as big a problem as substance here, since words and phrases that are used innocently often have specific meanings to longtime partisans that are unknown to the rest of us.

Even five years later, the list reads like it was written this morning.

So why do progressive bloggers bother when the “shitstorm,” like gravity, will surely rain down hard upon them? One might say that this effort, often frustrating and painful, is an attempt to break the Manichean mindset in the discourse about Israel. Though these bloggers may be writing about the legality

---

46 For the complete post, see [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2006\\_07/009179-php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2006_07/009179-php).

of blockades, military operational practices or the minutiae of parliamentary procedure, they are also presenting a view of the world that does not divide neatly into two warring camps: *Them against Israel* and *Us for Israel*. For many of these bloggers, their love of Israel is apparent as is their distress at specific Israeli policies. According to Peter Beinart, the North American Jewish establishment sees love of Israel as a Faustian choice (“Zionism or liberalism!”). These bloggers do not. (Neither, too, does Beinart.) They are not cowed or silenced by accusations of self-hatred or giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Their struggle to reconcile two conflicting emotions and two conflicting “isms” provides a way for the Next Jew to confront disaffection. In these blogs, the Next Jew can find a place where she can express her pride as well as her discomfort. Here she can support Israel and revel in Israel’s successes as Dan Senor and Saul Singer describe in *Start-Up Nation*<sup>47</sup> while also disagreeing with her policies. Most importantly, she can do both with the knowledge that there is a new and different banner under which she does not stand alone.

### *Jewish blogging is a form of “spiritual practice*

When asked why they blog, my sample of bloggers provided a wide variety of answers. Yet, like the seventy faces of Torah,<sup>48</sup> their replies were variations of a single theme. On the micro-level, blogging fulfilled different personal functions, kvetching being prominent on the list. Bad4Shidduchim wrote that blogging her angst “keeps [her] from venting in real life”—which pleased her family immensely. Frume Sarah, a former pulpit rabbi, saw blogging as an opportunity to continue sermonizing. Others blogged to share their experiences, be it about parenting a special-needs child (e.g., Jodi Samuels at metroimma.com) or traveling in Israel (David A.M. Wilensky). RafiG blogged to “vent” about politics and local affairs.

But on the macro-level, blogging was a way of sharing and connecting with other Jews. It was, in the words of the Velveteen Rabbi, a *spiritual practice*. For her, blogging enabled her to engage in “Jewish conversations” she was not having offline with people who cared about Judaism as much as her. Harry Maryles blogged to “spread the message” about Orthodox Judaism. Sue Swartz blogged to “{put} more Torah out in the world.” For these bloggers, this mode is the most rewarding but also poses the greatest, ongoing challenge because, as a spiritual practice, it is tied up with *engagement of and with others*. (Meditation or yoga, for example does not depend on others being engaged with you.) This engagement further provided an opportunity for participants to test out and clarify ideas, applying the adage of Ben Zoma who said: “Who is wise? He who learns from anyone.”<sup>49</sup>

The blogger’s desire for connection also has an educational component. Lisa Colton (at Darim) saw blogging as a way to disseminate expertise and resources with the broader Jewish community. Bloggers identified with a particular denomination strived to represent their movement in a dignified manner. Reb

---

47 For excerpts of the book, see [http://www.startupnationbook.com/#!\\_excerpt](http://www.startupnationbook.com/#!_excerpt).

48 This phrase first appeared in the introduction to Ibn Ezra’s commentary to the Torah, where he wrote: “For the purpose of *drash* [comparative meaning], the way of the literal meaning does not diverge / the Torah has seventy faces.” For a scan of the original page, see <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=21871&st=&pgnum=3>.

49 See Pirkei Avot 4:1.

Chaim HaQoton started blogging after reading a “nasty article against orthodoxy in claiming that the famous question of the Beis Yosef (why Chanuka is eight days not seven days if the miracle was only for seven days) is erroneous based on an account from Josephus.” Part of his self-defined mandate is to address “[i]gnorance on the part of my readers. Many of them come in with some weird assumptions which impedes on their ability to fully understand my posts.” Frum Sarah seeks to “correct misconceptions” that readers have about Reform Judaism.

Some bloggers also saw spiritual value in fulfilling the commandment of “Rebuke your neighbour”<sup>50</sup> in their pursuit of denominational integrity. Harry Maryles’ blog *Emes ve Emunah* (lit. “Truth and Faith”) evolved out of a desire “to seek truth as a believer in God and in Judaism ... [and] publicly protest wrongdoing by anyone who calls himself an Orthodox Jew.” DovBaer and Failed Messiah pursue a similar *musar* (lit. “discipline” or “conduct”) mandate although they would probably not use that term nor ascribe any spiritual component to their activity. As DovBaer wrote:

[P]lease consider this blog a very large shabbos table, where we sit together and discuss the parsha, the news, and other events of the day. Sometimes we yell, often we gossip, and, once in a while, the talk turns salacious. Our arguments are lively, but at the end of the day, it’s all just talk.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, it is all just talk—but can anything be constituted, considered or valued outside the realm of talk?

### ***Serious Jewish bloggers kept blogging after 2008.***

In March 2011, Seth Godin, ubiquitous tech savant, declared: “RSS is dead. Blogs are dead. The Web is dead. Good.”<sup>52</sup> Though this declaration came to me while I was goofing around on the Web, having received the blogpost via RSS, what Godin was trying to say was twofold. First, these media forms are no longer interesting to the “drive-by technorati.” The novelty has worn off (So, is that a good thing? I am unsure....) Second, with the novelty having worn off, the *real work* can now begin. People can dedicate their time to saying *something* instead of being preoccupied with *how* to say it.

Godin’s obituary for RSS and blogging, it seems, was a bit overdue. DovBaer, in a 2009 online interview,<sup>53</sup> said that the Jewish blogosphere was killed in 2006 by Facebook and Twitter who provided convenient platforms for disseminating the “short quick little nothing comments” that made up the earliest blog posts. “Everyone is a blogger now,” he continued, “so blogging got harder, and the posts became less interesting.” Indeed, many of the blogs I tracked within the last thirty-six months have gone defunct. *1000 Frum Blogs*<sup>54</sup> was last updated in 2009. *Orthomom* made her last post was in 2009 as well. *Am Kshe Oref’s* last post was in 2010. JRants.com, the self-proclaimed “Premier Source for Jewish and Israeli News and Commentary,” has a substantial blogroll (i.e., their roster of bloggers) of 176. Of those, as of June

---

50 The verse in Leviticus 19:17 commands: “Do not hate your brother in your heart; rebuke your neighbour and do not bear sin because of him.”

51 For the complete post, see [http://dovbear.blogspot.com/p/about\\_27.html](http://dovbear.blogspot.com/p/about_27.html).

52 For the complete post, see [http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2011/03/bring-me-stuff-thats-dead-please.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2011/03/bring-me-stuff-thats-dead-please.html).

53 For the complete transcript, see <http://dovbear.blogspot.com/2009/10/dov-bear-live.html>.

54 See <http://1000frumblogs.blogspot.com> for the aging archive.

2011, more than 30 percent were defunct.<sup>55</sup>

As further evidence of the “official” demise of the Jewish blogosphere, the Jewish and Israeli Blog Awards, which went through a series of transformations between 2004 and 2006,<sup>56</sup> presented its last awards in 2008.

Though JRants.com's blogroll might not have been refreshed in years, it maintains hundreds of pages of blog post updates. A quick perusal of this list reveals another trend in Jewish blogging. Take June 29, 2011 as an example. JRants.com's first page consisted of 135 blog and news updates, over 80 percent of which came from one source: *The Jerusalem Post*. Even though blogs may be dead (or are they?), traditional news outlets have (re)fashioned themselves in the image of bloggers. Indeed, *HaAretz*, Israel's “newspaper of record” maintains a stable of in-house bloggers as does *The Forward* and *Jerusalem Post* as well as every other major newspaper *across the world*. One might justifiably wonder not when blogging ended, but where blogging ends and reportage begins.

\* \* \*

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. 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.

---

55 By “defunct,” I mean that the blogger had not posted anything new nor updated the blog in the last three months.

56 *The Jerusalem Post* took over hosting the awards in 2005. The 2005 award winners can be found at <http://info.jpost.com/C005/BlogCentral/JIB.2005/index.html>. In 2006, the Jewish and Israeli Blog Awards were renamed The People's Choice Jewish and Israeli Blog Awards. The 2006 award winners can be found at [http://www.israelforum.com/blog\\_pc\\_award\\_results.php](http://www.israelforum.com/blog_pc_award_results.php).