

## Awkward encounters

### Orthodox Jewry and the internet

The role which the mass media plays in modern society means that it has become a sub-agent of contemporary religious identities. This broadens the religious and theological significance of the mass media as an agent for the construction of personal (belief) systems. While in traditional societies, religion is based upon the authority vested in religious bodies, in complex industrial societies individuals construct religious meaning from a variety of sources. In the latter, communication about religious and spiritual issues is increasingly mediated through print and electronic technologies. The search for God has become a surf ride of spiritual discovery on the internet; even as early as December 1998 a search for 'God' produced 3.9 million answers, and just a month later there were already 4.5 million (*Maariv*, 23.9.1999). The internet has accentuated the process of mediation within Judaism by linking Jews, irrespective of whether they belong to physical communal structures, to a virtual, worldwide Jewish community. Yet a key question to be examined here is the impact of the internet upon existing religious communities. This study examines this question by looking at the Israeli case, and the impact of the internet upon the religious identity of Orthodox Jewry.

It is a reflection of the low level of priority which religion enjoys among mass communications researchers in Israel that little applied research has been carried out concerning the interplay of the media and religion in the Israeli Jewish context. This is even more true in the case of interactive media. The synagogue–state relationship in Israel has been the subject of quite a wide range of research attention (e.g., Abramov 1976, Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983, Sharkansky 2000). Much less attention has been paid to non-official actors – such the news media – in research into state–religion relations inside Israel, notwithstanding the existence of a popular, street-level discussion there concerning the media's coverage of religion (Cohen 2012a). Most research on religion and the media has been carried out in the US context (e.g., Abelman and Hoover 1990, Buddenbaum 1990, Ferre 1990, Garrett-Medill 1999, Hoover 1998). The case of Israel contrasts significantly with the US experi-

ence, because religion and the Jewish state are, by definition, interwoven. The coverage of religion in the religious and secular media in Israel has received little attention (Cohen 2005). This is particularly true with the secular media (Cohen 2006, Heilman 1990). The question of Jewish theological attitudes concerning the social role of the media was discussed by E. M. H. Korngott (1993), Avi Chwat (1995) and Yoel Cohen (2001). To the extent that the subject has been researched, much of it has been focused upon the relationship between the Haredim and the media. Shmuel Baumel (2002, 2005) examined the Haredi press by means of linguistic tools in order to generate the Haredi outlook in terms of the social role of the media inside the Haredi community. While the Haredi press has been described by Baumel (2002), Levi (1990), and Micolson (1990), their work preceded the rise of the internet. Horowitz (2000) describes early Haredi rabbinical attitudes to the internet. Cohen (2011) brings this further up to date. Keren Barzilai-Nahon and Gadi Barzilai (2005) examine how the internet has been adapted by the Haredi community to meet their needs, and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (2009) has analysed Orthodox Jewish women's internet forums. Yehuda Schwartz (2005) examines the computer from a Jewish religious law perspective, and Cohen discusses the broader perspective of Jewish cybertheology (2012b).

In seeking to examine the impact of the internet upon religious identities and specifically upon Orthodox Jewry – the single dominant approach inside Israel – it will be instructive to look at the contrasts between the two communities making up orthodox Jewry: the modern Orthodox (*dati leumi*) and the ultra-Orthodox Haredim, accounting for 15 per cent and 8 per cent respectively of the Israeli Jewish population. The remainder of the population is comprised of an estimated 40 per cent traditional, non-strictly religious population, and 35 per cent secular. Two non-Orthodox streams – the Conservative and Reform Jews, which make up over 75 per cent of US Jewry – are not recognised by official Israeli institutions, and so far have a minuscule presence in Israel. The 'religious' are broken into two main groupings: the modern Orthodox and the ultra-Orthodox, or *Haredim* (Hebrew for 'pious ones'). Both religious communities wish the Jewish state to be substantially Jewish, rather than just symbolically so. For the modern Orthodox Jews, the creation of the state of Israel is seen as a positive juncture on the path towards Jewish messianic redemption. For them there is no conflict between modernity and Jewish goals. Their members participate at all levels, including doing national army service and engaging in studies at university. The new state entity should be run along democratic lines as long as this does not clash with Jewish Law. The ultra-Orthodox Haredi population have a more fundamen-

talist approach to Jewish social communication, but remains removed from mainstream Israeli society.

The Haredi and modern Orthodox reactions reflect a debate among religious educators in both communities about the development of the internet. How have rabbis and educators in these two communities dealt with threats to religious identity presented by the internet? A range of techniques have been used by different religions to block 'unsuitable' materials including, in the Roman Catholic case, the *Index of Forbidden Books* and a later ban on Disney, and the delegitimisation of specific persons, such as Galileo (who was placed under house arrest by the Catholic Church for teaching the theory of heliocentrism – the idea that the planets revolve around the Sun), or bans on literature such as those decreed by the Roman Catholic Church (Stout 2002). The Protestant Church sought to educate the individual to be selective and censor undesirable content. These contrasting Catholic and Protestant approaches to media literacy also characterise how the Haredim and modern Orthodoxy in Israel have fought their culture wars against the wider media social environment.

### **Haredi exclusivism and the internet threat**

The Haredi outlook is characterised by taking steps to distance their members from the wider world by erecting cultural walls to exclude the influence of non-religious and non-Jewish matter. Haredi rabbis have over the years issued religious decrees (*pesuk din*) banning exposure to mass media forms which are regarded as presenting a threat to Torah family values. From the emergence on to the scene of newspapers in the nineteenth century, through to the development of radio and television, and latterly video, computers, the internet and cellcom phones, Haredi rabbis have continued to enact such decrees. When Israel Television was established in 1968, Haredi rabbis banned their followers from watching television because its content was considered to be morally inappropriate; while entertainment *per se* is not invalidated, the Haredi perspective is nevertheless critical of it, regarding it as nothing more than a relief from such higher values as religious study. Those directed at television and secular newspapers were the most successful of the bans against the media, with the overwhelming majority of Haredim respecting them. The earlier ban on radio – based on a prohibition against hearing gossip (*loshon hara*), as well as on the importance of modesty, as radio programming prior to television had a much wider gamut of subjects, including drama – is less respected than

the television ban because Israel's ongoing security problems make it difficult for people to adhere to the ban. When video cameras were produced – with many Haredi families using them to record family celebrations – no rabbinical ban was introduced, initially because its usage could be controlled. However, after it was discovered that television programmes could be seen if videos were plugged into computers, Haredi rabbis also banned videos.

More recently, Haredi rabbis have adopted a similar approach to the internet, where the existence of, for example, pornographic websites is seen to present an even greater threat than any of the earlier media forms. The invention of the internet poses myriad dilemmas for the Haredim. But its centrality in twenty-first century life has left these rabbis in a major quandary as to how to 'tackle' the danger. The internet not only exposes some Haredim to undesirable content, but also threatens the very essence of the Haredi lifestyle as a cultural enclave. The internet widens the marketplace of religious ideas, weakens rabbinical hierarchies, and threatens religious loyalties. If religion in traditional societies was based upon the authority which was vested in religious bodies, in complex industrial societies there is an increased emphasis upon personal choice when it comes to moral and religious matters, with religious and spiritual issues being increasingly mediated through print and electronic technologies. The mass media has, in effect, become a secondary causal agent in the formation of contemporary religious identities. But while some people unaffiliated with a religious community might use these means, the extent to which traditional media such as the press, radio and television have in practice impacted upon religious identity formations remains unclear. The internet, by providing the surfer both with religious information and enabling him to explore beyond the territory of his current religious beliefs, has potentially a greater role to play.

But by far the biggest question with which the rabbis have failed to grapple is; how to deal with the sexual content of internet websites? Religious leaders raise concerns that the internet provides access to undesirable sites, such as pornographic ones, which are not dissimilar from the perception in the fifteenth century on the part of the Catholic Church of the dire danger which the development of printing posed (Eisenstein 1983). In the Kippa poll, 43 per cent of Haredi surfers said that the internet influenced their religiosity negatively. The 'Eda Haredit' (or Committee of Torah Sages, the umbrella group of Haredi rabbis) established a special *bet din* (or religious law court) of rabbis to deal with questions concerning communications-related matters. The internet was regarded by them as a far greater moral threat than television: whereas television content was monitored, the internet enabled free ac-

cess to pornographic sites. The *bet din* banned the internet. Drawing upon the biblical edict that ‘the camp shall be holy’ (Deut. 23:15), Judaism believes that the mass media should be characterised by sexual modesty. That the Israelite camp in the Wilderness in ‘which God walked shall be holy . . . that God should not see anything unseemly and turn Himself away from you’ (ibid.) is an allusion to nudity being regarded negatively.

But rabbinical attempts to erect a barrier between internet and their Haredi followers have not been successful. Haredi rabbis have had to face the realisation that the ban on computers and the internet has not been entirely accepted. One survey in 2006 found that 50 per cent of Haredi households possessed a computer at home, in contrast to 90 per cent of secular Israelis (Geotopographica survey, *Mercaz Inyanim*, 23.5.2006). But only 20 per cent of Haredi households were linked up to the internet. In 2007 according to the government’s Central Bureau for Statistics, 23 per cent of Haredim were linked up to the internet – compared to 92 per cent of secular Jews, 83 per cent of traditional Jews, and 74 per cent of modern Orthodox Jews. Drawing on the hermeneutical standard in Jewish lawmaking (*halakhah*) of not legalising anything which would not be acceptable to the community (and which would therefore raise questions about the legitimacy of their rabbis and the Torah itself) Haredi rabbis have come to recognise that the internet is an integral factor of the contemporary business world. Some Haredi rabbinical forums, therefore, distinguish between prohibiting the use of the internet at home and allowing Haredi businesses to be linked to it. By only allowing the internet in business premises it was hoped that children would be prevented from surfing the web at home and in an attempt to enforce the ban on the internet, some of the stricter Haredi schools in Israel refuse to accept children from homes which have computers. While most Haredim in Israel adhere to the internet ban, somewhat fewer Haredim outside Israel, notably in the US, are believed to do so.

Parallel to the rabbinical discussions about computers and the internet have been a number of commercial attempts by Haredi entrepreneurs to create computer-filtering programmes. One early attempt, ‘Torahnet’, undertook to process requests for clearance to websites within 24 hours.

Broadly, three approaches could be identified in the discussions of the Haredi rabbinical committee for communications affairs and among other Haredi rabbis. According to a lenient approach, access was given to all internet sites except for those sites known specifically to have problematic content. According to a stricter approach, the content of all sites had to be examined. A disc comprising some 3,000 approved sites was prepared by a Haredi body.

A third approach recognised that different people have different internet needs: a businessman will need access to different sites than those required by, for example, a school principal. Accordingly, each person would submit the sites of which they require access to a computer-screening committee, to approve the contents of each site. This third approach has an in-built contradiction. Moreover, different approaches within the Haredi world means that some Haredi sub-communities are stricter than others; thus Haredim of one community may find themselves given access to sites which are not approved by the rabbis of other Haredi sub-communities.

Haredi opposition to the internet took on wider dimensions which might potentially have affected the entire Israeli population, when in the Israeli Parliament in 2007 the Shas Haredi political party called for a ban on internet servers providing surfers with access to pornographic sites, unless the individual specifically gives his or her approval. No access would be available for anybody aged under 18. Heavy fines, including imprisonment would be imposed on any server providing sex-related content to those people who had not requested it. The law passed its first reading in the Israeli Parliament with 46 votes in favour and 20 against and with all the religious parties as well as the Arab parties supporting it; some other members of the government also gave it their support. The bill floundered after a government committee that examines upcoming parliamentary legislation decided that more pedagogic methods should be used to educate the young about the dangers of internet. In truth, given the overall antipathy felt towards Haredim in the Israeli parliament, the bill might have had better chances had it been initiated by a non-Haredic party.

Haredi leaders faced a new internet challenge with the creation of Facebook. True, Haredim have always emphasised the importance of interpersonal relations, both in terms of family and community. And Facebook did not pose a direct threat in terms of access and exposure to internet sites with sexual content. But social networking did breach the Haredi rules of conduct, notably by providing a platform for building relationships between men and women. It also resulted in the free passage of information and gossip in a society where rabbis have traditionally supervised the information flow – such as through the supervised Haredi daily papers. The free passage of information threatened the grave prohibition of social gossip (*loshon hara*). The danger of Facebook went further than social gossip, however, because it also created male–female relationships outside the marital sphere. “The development of Facebook is a tragedy. It is not possible that the Haredi community – trained from a young age towards a separation between men and women

– should have a mixed social network,’ said Rabbi Mordechai Blau of the so-called ‘Committee for the Purity and Sanctity of the Camp’ (Kikar Shabbat website). Some members of the community got around rabbinical bans on Facebook by using anonymous names lest they be detected – the penalty for which could involve such social excommunication tactics as threatening a child’s chances of a *shidduch* (literally, an arranged marriage), or of being admitted to a school or *yeshiva*. But like the earlier internet battles, the chances of rabbinical bans against Facebook being wholly accepted throughout the community were limited. Instead, it lay with grassroots Facebook users to themselves develop their own Haredi Facebook code of networking– not dissimilar from the codes which the unofficial Haredi internet websites like ‘Hadrei Haredrim’ produced.

Haredi control over the media was threatened from within the Haredi community by the growth of Haredi news websites. By 2012 a handful of Haredi news websites operated which were independent of rabbinic supervision. These include Kikar Shabbat Haredim, and LaDaat. The websites drew upon the prototype model of [www.BeHadreiHaredim](http://www.BeHadreiHaredim.com) (a play on the word Haredim, meaning the inner sanctums [in Hebrew *hadrei*] of the Haredi world), established towards the end of the nineties by journalist David Rottenberg. Originally taking the form of a website forum, appropriately called ‘Hyde Park’, Hadrei Hadarim evolved into an independent news site. By 2008 it had an estimated 6,000 entries an hour. While there were no pictures of women, and aware of the acceptable social limits within the Haredi religio-culturo enclave, the sites were inclined not to subject themselves to the rabbinical censors, who in the case of the Haredi daily press, for example, nightly inspect the following morning’s copy of the newspaper. The news sites print uncensored information about the political infighting within different sections of the Haredi world such as between rival Haredi hassidic communities. At times the information transgressed the prohibitions of *loshon hara*. The sites are forums for expressing criticism – sometimes vehement – of the positions and behaviour of Haredi leaders. In light of the Haredi ban on the internet, some Haredi leaders refuse to be interviewed by the sites, and the names of those sponsoring the sites, and editing them, have been hidden from public view.

The interactive nature of Haredi websites has challenged the exclusivist monopoly which Haredi rabbis have enjoyed among their followers. Indeed, the growing rifts which exist today within the Haredi community between grassroots Haredim and their rabbinical leaders who have failed to grapple with the revolution which computers and internet except by banning it cannot be camouflaged.

It has also weakened the insularity of the Haredi communities. Whereas in the Haredi newspapers each community newspaper covers their own goings-on – Askenazi Haredi or Sephardi Haredi, European Lithuanian or Hassidic, or a specific Hassidic stream – the websites are intra-Haredi in content. In fact, the Haredi websites have – as has the independent Haredi weekly press, which began in the 1980s – contributed, within the confines of the limited resources of the Haredi media, to an in-built competition among Haredi media organisations, and ultimately to greater professionalism.

### Challenging the ‘modernity’ of modern orthodoxy

By contrast to Haredi rabbis, the rabbis of the modern Orthodox (*dati leumi*) stream have not issued legal injunctions against exposure to newspapers, radio and TV, a fact which reflects a broader philosophy of seeking to create a synthesis between Judaism and modernity (Cohen 2005). Yet the internet has nonetheless been a subject of debate within the modern Orthodox community. In contrast to the Haredi’s blanket ban on the internet, the modern Orthodox debate about the issue went even deeper ideologically because by nature they seek to reconcile modernity with Jewish values. Rather than living in a cultural ghetto, modern Orthodox Jews believe in the inherent virtue of living in full harmony with modern technology. Yet given the presence of pornographic material on the internet, they, no less than the Haredim, have been faced with the question of whether to compromise their views about being culturally open in order not to be exposed to it.

Three approaches to the internet have developed inside the modern religious community. The most traditional view concerns media literacy: confidence that the faithful Jew has the self-discipline and maturity not to visit forbidden websites. A more cautious view involves external means of self-discipline. In the case of children or young people, parental supervision of access exercises control by means of the filtering processes. The most extreme position – identified with a subsection of the modern Orthodox Jewish community known as ‘Haredi leumi’ – is one in which the internet is banned in its entirety. The Haredi leumi are characterised, on the one hand, by ideological support for the modern Zionist state and see the Israeli state as a religious act, in contrast with other Haredim who are critical of the state because its establishment should be contingent upon the messianic era, and should be run in accordance to Jewish law. On the other hand, Hardal schools characteristically offer only a limited study of secular topics, and their pupils’ homes do not have televisions. Travel abroad is discouraged.



The debate about the negative impacts of the internet has been complicated even more by consciousness of its pluses. The internet hosts online access to the Torah and other Jewish educational software. Torah databases comprise comprehensive collections of traditional texts from the Bible, biblical commentaries, Mishnah, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and later Jewish codes, covering 3,300 years of Jewish written scholarship. Beyond narrow religious sites, the internet also has other sites of a broader Jewish affiliation, including community news, Israel news, Jewish dating, genealogy (Romm 1998). Usage of the Torah websites has been a feature of the modern Orthodox community, but individuals in the Haredi community have also increasingly recognized their value. The debate within modern Orthodoxy about benefitting from the internet mirrors the broader discussion about media and technology in the literature on media and religion. Whereas technology is generally seen as value-free or neutral, with society choosing how to deploy it, Clifford G. Christians argues that technology is value-oriented, with a perspective on the sacredness of human life. Quoting Jacques Ellul, Christians (2002) critique contemporary society for allowing the power of machines to define social institutions such as politics and medicine – with their technological progress becoming a social goal in itself – and calls on humanity to seize control and channel technological means towards human goals. Thus technological means such as printing, video and computers should be deployed by religious organisations as religious educational tools.

It may be asked whether the view that religion-related websites may serve as a source of religious inspiration for religiously unaffiliated persons (Hoover 1998), as raised at the commencement of this article, is also true in the Israeli Jewish context. Notwithstanding the practical use of websites with community data, there is no evidence in the Israeli Jewish case to support the theory that non-religious Jews look for their religious identities on the internet. According to the Gutman Survey, only 17 per cent of Israeli Jews (2,571 respondents) polled in 2009 surfed the internet for material on the Bible, the Talmud and other Jewish sources. Only 5 per cent of those who are ‘non-religious but not anti-religious’ surf the net ‘a lot’ or ‘considerably’ for Jewish religious information like the Talmud and Bible’. Moreover, 0 per cent of non-religious anti-religious said they did so. Just 12 per cent of ‘traditional’ (i.e. non-strictly religious but observe varying degrees of religious ritual) said they did. The Israeli Jewish case, therefore, suggests that contrary to expectations, the internet has little significant impact upon religious identity.

On the other hand, the religious Israeli Jew, the modern Orthodox and even the ultra-Orthodox *did* do so. Twenty-six per cent of modern religious

or *dati leumi* Jews surfed the internet for Jewish religious content ‘a lot’ or ‘considerably’. The biggest group was the more intense form of modern Orthodoxy, called Hardal: 41 per cent of Hardal did so a great deal or considerably. This was also noteworthy given the general reservations which Hardal’s rabbis have about the internet. The same was true with the Haredim, where despite their rabbis’ general ban on the internet, it was surfed for Jewish religious content by 20 per cent of Haredim ‘a lot’ or ‘considerably’. Yet, even this is one of the less significant roles which the internet plays even for religious audiences. It is difficult to evaluate the effect of the internet on religious life. In the above survey, most Orthodox Jews who participated in the Kippa poll, used the internet for electronic mail (25%), chat (26%), work (22%), and following the news (17%). Only 7 per cent used it for studying Judaism. Asked whether the internet had improved or damaged their religious commitment, 69 per cent of modern Orthodox surfers said there had been no change, 14 per cent said that there had been and for the bad, and 17 per cent for the good (Kippa 2006).

The Gutman Survey of 2009 confirmed the age gap which characterises worldwide patterns of exposure to the internet: surfing for Jewish religious information was done most by the 20–30 age group. Overall, there was a considerable difference between the under-fifties and over-fifties. No difference was found between male and female surfing. It is noteworthy that there was no difference in socio-economic terms between surfers from high-income, average-income, and low-income backgrounds. Another noteworthy difference was between the Sephardi or oriental Jews and the Ashkenazi or European Jews: 14 per cent of Sephardim surfed the internet for Jewish related content in contrast to less than 10 per cent of Ashkenazim.

Another development on the internet is online rabbinical counselling. Rabbis – identified with the modern Orthodox communities – reply to questions on Jewish law and offer counselling. Online counselling exists to a much lesser extent within Haredi communities; most Haredim preferring to consult with their community rabbi, reflecting a strict adherence to rabbinic authority. Online rabbinical counselling has nevertheless generated a debate among modern Orthodox rabbis about the pluses and minuses of the phenomenon. On the one hand, it offers anonymity, which the local community rabbi does not, and in that way enables people to raise questions they perhaps would not otherwise feel comfortable doing. It also offers non-affiliated Jews access to rabbis, which they would not otherwise have. On the other hand, online answers offered by rabbis are too short. When the rabbi is unacquainted with the questioner, personal circumstances cannot be taken into consideration,

even though sometimes the personal circumstances of the questioner can be crucial in particular instances. Instead of accepting the Jewish law decision of one's own community rabbi, people might be inclined to 'shop around' to different online rabbis to find the reply most acceptable and comfortable to them. The ease of online counselling discourages the Jew from studying the original sources in the halakhic literature.

## Conclusion

It is early days for evaluating the full implications of the internet upon religious identity. This study found that there is a surprising similarity between all the rabbis – not just Haredim and modern Orthodox – in taking the view that internet is injurious to religious belief. The difference between them is less to do with attitude and more with the practical measures to be taken. Even if the Haredi leadership today recognises that the cultural enclave of old requires certain modifications – with some Haredim going to work and raising their economic lifestyles – the essence of cultural isolationism that characterises Haredim remains. Notwithstanding the wide, ongoing, and, at times, challenging discussions which have taken place among religious communities in Israel over the last fifteen years regarding the danger of the internet, the extent to which it has actually changed religious life should not be exaggerated. Religious life centres around the synagogue, the Jewish home, and Torah study, particularly in the case of the Haredim, but also to a considerable extent for the modern Orthodox Jews. The superior status of traditional Jewish religious values in these religious communities means that media have less influence and are rebuffed by the religious community as it seeks to maintain at all costs its true religious identity. As was the case before the internet era, the synagogue still remains the centre of Jewish spiritual life. If Jewish study has been enhanced through the application of technology such as Torah educational websites, the traditional frameworks of Jewish study such as the rabbi's *shiur* (religious lesson), and off-line yeshiva study, remain paramount.

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