

Is it Real or is it Memorex? A Shabbat Riddle

By Jennifer Krause

On a recent visit to my hometown of Tucson, Arizona, I attended Friday night services with my family at our local synagogue. Tucked away in my prayer book was a neon green sheet of paper with various announcements. Alongside all of the usual fare—the name of the bar mitzvah boy, the acknowledgment for the donated bouquet of flowers gracing the *bimah*, and an invitation to a brown bag lunch-and-learn with the rabbi—was a notice that caught my attention:

Videotapes of Friday night services available.

Although I have grown up in the age of video, this particular manifestation of the form was something new to me. I assumed the idea behind the tapes was fairly simple—that they were primarily intended for those homebound by sickness or disability, and probably most often requested on a one-time basis by relatives of the bar or bat mitzvah who couldn't attend. Still, the image of people watching the Shabbat service on video struck me as somehow curious, and as the service began, I found myself trying to put my finger on why.

What interested me, I realized, was that the idea of videotaping these services suggested some interesting dilemmas and possibilities for Jewish practice. What, after all, would be the *torah* for watching—the way to watch—a videotape of a Shabbat that had already come and gone? Is it meant for participatory viewing—like a Tae Bo exercise video? Do you follow along with a prayer book and say the prayers? Or do you just watch it, as if it were a taped episode of “*ER*”? Do you really feel, watching a video from your couch, as if you are experiencing a service? Or are you just catching up on something you missed, sort of like watching the tape of a wedding you couldn't attend? Is there something odder about recording Shabbat than recording a wedding, a graduation, or the nightly news? If Shabbat is exactly about distinguishing sacred time from weekly time, about cordoning off a day of heightened awareness from the rest of the week, isn't it strange to try to save Shabbat and import it into another time—say, Wednesday afternoon? Are these videos just the product of a culture so saturated in instant replays, so obsessed with its own ability to record and re-broadcast events that it even tries to capture something essentially uncapturable? Or are these videos—particularly for those unable to attend the live service—helping make the synagogue a more open, inclusive institution, one less bound by a brick and mortar existence than it might otherwise be?

In other words, I found myself wondering about how video technology might change our experiences of time and of community. Of course, my questions about Shabbat videos are really part of a larger public discussion about whether and how new technologies affect our daily routines, our social patterns, and our sense of self. There is so much talk these days about new media—virtual reality games, Internet, cyberspace, and what we do “there.” These conversations often

assume that the virtual media world is separate from what we would deem the face-to-face, or the real, world. They assume that it constitutes some disembodied realm where time and space don't matter—a world that is appealing because it allows us to transcend our bodily limitations, and gives our fantasy and imagination free reign. The downside, according to this line of thinking, is that the virtual world isolates us from “the real world” by cutting us off from our physical selves, from grounded social relationships, and from the moorings of communal support and responsibilities.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that we rethink this dichotomous construction. The virtual worlds we participate in do not constitute a separate universe. Even while we interact virtually, she reminds us, we continue to exist in real time and in real physical space. And our experiences of the physical world, in turn, are profoundly shaped by all sorts of media, from telephones to public address systems to giant sports stadium monitors. The question, she suggests, is instead: How do our worlds—virtual and physical, the “real” and the “imaginary”—intersect and interact?

This is, in a way, the issue at the heart of Shabbat: the plastic relationship between the real and the imagined, the world as it is and the world as we imagine it might be. After all, Shabbat observance is about setting aside time to enact and create, though briefly, a utopian world, a world of plenty and peace. The “record-rewind-hit play” Shabbat might seem like a pale imitation of the “authentic” experience, but Shabbat is, in many ways, already a construct in and of itself. It teaches us that we can move between profane time and sacred time, between the world of work and the world of rest; in so doing, it deconstructs the dichotomy between the “real” and the “imagined,” and helps us see the ways we construct both of these categories. Shabbat *is* sacred, but our own actions and imaginations are the key to making it so.

As much as the rhythms of time shape our lives, we also shape time's rhythms. Even as Shabbat demarcates temporal borders, it teaches us that these borders can be fluid. By custom, we end Shabbat on Saturday evening, but tradition acknowledges that we can extend the holiday as much as another three days if we wish. The solar calendar may dictate that a certain Shabbat starts at 7:58 p.m. on Friday evening. But I know that what 7:58 p.m. Friday evening feels like depends a great deal on what I am doing. When I am lighting candles, closing my eyes, saying the blessing, and then opening my eyes and seeing that it has become Shabbat, I participate in creating, with light and dark, with sound, the temporal shift from week-time to Sabbath-time.

The primacy of perception is so critical to Jewish ritual that rabbis debate about “virtual reality” in the Talmud. In *Berachot* 47b, they ask: If only nine are present, can the Torah count as number ten to make a *minyan* (a prayer quorum)? Rabbi Huna says, “When nine look like ten, they may be joined together.” That is, if you *experience* the Torah as the tenth of the group, and thus the group as a group of

ten, then you have a *minyan*. The imagination of the people involved plays a critical role, even in creating an experience that seems to be only about real physical presence. The Torah, this passage suggests, can count as a “person” if the conditions are right. In this discussion, the Torah—the quintessential media form shaping Jewish life---does not stand for disembodied virtualness. Rather, it stands for presence, for liveness; it helps knit together a live, embodied community. Moreover, the debate reminds us that services already involve interacting with media—prayer books, the Torah—even before we get to the question of the videotaping.

At the same time, the rabbis’ debate also draws our attention to the fact that “live community” is a more elastic idea than the ten-body minimum of a *minyan* at first suggests. Just as the debate teaches us that the distinction between the “real” and the “virtual” is not hard and fast, so it teaches us that what constitutes “groupness,” or community, is always, to some extent, a question of perception and imagination. Ten people do not make for a magical, critical mass that somehow forms an organic whole; rather, ten people constitute community because it is understood that they do.

All of this is not to say that distinctions between what you see on video and what you experience “live” don’t matter. The fact that I was in Tucson, after all, reflects the reality that I, like other people, still go to visit my family in person. Because I live far away in New York City, I email them and talk on the telephone, and this does, indeed, texture our relationships in certain ways. Nevertheless, it is still important to me to see them, to touch them, and to sit with them during Friday night services at our synagogue.

According to a Jewish mystical tradition, human beings exist in two temporal axes simultaneously. The linear/historical axis is a string of finite moments, moments that can never be recovered in any tangible way. The cyclical axis, on the other hand, is an infinite circle of non-static moments that are replicable and/or recurrent throughout time. Human existence is the intersection of these two axes, and the heart is the hinge around which they turn. Because the heart is the crossroads, it privileges neither axis and knows both in intimate detail. According to this conceptualization, every being, every body, exists both in time and out of time. Both axes are in play in our lives. Thinking of ourselves as beings who move between different kinds of times and communities—with or without the aid of technology—helps us think more richly about the ways our own understanding shapes our experiences and perceptions of these realms, and of the borders between them.