

CLAL on Culture Archive

Welcome to **CLAL on Culture** where you will find the latest thoughts and reflections by CLAL faculty and associates on contemporary culture: high and low, material and etherial, trendy and retro, Jewish and otherwise. Every other week you will find something new on this page.

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Will Anything Be Sacred in a Digital Age?

By Daniel Brenner

In Woody Allen's classic *Sleeper*, his character enters the future and explores the latest technology. One machine, the Orgasmatron, is a porta-potty shaped electric pleasure hut. Allen enters and, when he emerges, his smoking hair looks something like Don King's. His body shakes like a construction worker running a jackhammer. The Orgasmatron has done its trick.

In the future, the assumption is that machines will replace the human contact we now rely on.

As Y2K approaches, many have begun to think that we have already become too dependent on machines. Virtual worlds have supplanted human contact -- librarians are replaced by search engines, bank tellers by ATMs, and security guards by video camera networks. Our computer commerce has eroded the sense of community and personal contact that we once had.

But virtual worlds have also become places where people do some of their most meaningful activities: grandparents interact with their grandchildren

across continents, the sick find support groups in times of need, and many do their most advanced learning. If the trends continue, computers may be the places where we go for surgery, where we experience sensual pleasure, and where we seek spiritual insight. In the sci-fi movie Total Recall, computers are the place where people go for vacation.

New technology has raised some tough questions: To what extent will computer contact replace human contact? And how do we separate the real from the virtual?

As more of our experiences begin to take place in a virtual environment, Jewish leaders will have to ask themselves whether or not computers are capable of being holy "places." Will our religious life be at odds with virtual reality or in harmony with it?

Some Jewish leaders have already been thinking along those lines. In a recent rabbinic ruling that was briefly noted in the Los Angeles Times, Israeli Rabbi Moshe Shaul Klein of Bnei B'rak declared that it is permitted to erase the sacred Hebrew word used for God's name from a computer screen. While the sacred name written on a piece of paper must be buried in a special box, computer images, the rabbi declared, are not real, but are "an assemblage of pixels, dots of light" that may be discarded.

This story, which got little more than a mention in the press, may be the most vital rabbinic ruling in decades. The question 'What is real and what is virtual?' is obviously on the rabbi's mind.

Can virtual places be sacred places? Could we find a minyan on-line and say kaddish? Could we ask the four questions at a global seder? Some might say that these places are not places at all. They would argue that no matter what computers do, they are simply a medium, a technology, that presents the illusion of community. Or worse, that they are cold, dead, machines which threaten to rip our already threadbare social fabric.

The same, though, has been said of books. Books, like computers, are a technology. They are constructed devices created to present information through the use of symbols, letters and images. Books are lifeless, and like computers they can pose a threat. When the oral traditions that comprised the Mishnah were first written down there were strong objections that the books would undermine the tradition. Writing the law down, the rabbis argued, would destroy the need to both debate and transmit the tradition in person.

But now, eighteen hundred years later, these books are revered objects, often

made with leather bindings and gold jacket lettering. Even prayer-books that are mass-produced on modern presses are considered holy objects, with worshippers planting kisses on their covers.

Jewish books are treated in this way not because of their technological value, but because of the words that they contain -- most importantly, the Hebrew name of God. But aren't those the same words that computers can now contain? Doesn't the CD-Rom of the Mishnah or Siddur contain the sacred words? And what would be the status of a virtual reality which taught us to chant those words, pray them, or even understand them?

What if computers are more effective at transmitting and preserving our religious and cultural tradition than schools and books have ever been?

Imagine sending your great great grandchildren to the virtual room for their global Hebrew school. They learn from the best teachers, archaeologists, artists, and musicians. They make friends with children from around the world. They never have to suffer carpool or the embarrassment of falling asleep and drooling during a filmstrip.

But what would that do to our communities? Would synagogues survive without Hebrew schools? Would a virtual experience of Judaism be compelling enough for the next generation to pass on? What do we need to preserve as "real"?

The division between virtual and real is not clear. One of the reasons that the ruling on God's Hebrew name by Rabbi Moshe Shaul Klein of Bnei B'rak is so important is because it assumes that it is.

The debate has just begun. Should we see the virtual world as sacred? Will we create Judaisms that are in opposition to the virtual world or in harmony with it? It's a safe bet that these questions will be on our minds and screens in the years ahead.

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