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### Interview with Douglas Rushkoff

From its inception in 1999, the Jewish Public Forum was to be a different kind of Jewish institution. Seeking to generate fresh thinking about the social, political, cultural and technological trends affecting ethnic and religious identity and community, it is an unprecedented effort to broaden the conversation about the Jewish future by engaging leading figures in academia, business, the arts and public policy, most of whom have not been involved in organized Jewish life.

Douglas Rushkoff, a media theorist, is professor of media culture at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program, and consults, lectures and writes in a wide variety of settings and venues throughout the world on new media and popular culture. He spoke at the Jewish Public Forum's June 2000 conference, "The Virtual, the Real and the Not-Yet-Imagined: Meaning, Identity and Community in a Networked World" about the enormous democratizing possibilities of new media, and about the simultaneous danger that the Internet is increasingly designed to distract individuals from independent thought. He suggested that Jewish ritual and text could help sustain a "media literacy" – a critical distance – that could counter such dangerous trends.

Shari Cohen, Director of the Jewish Public Forum, sat down to talk with him about these ideas, his own struggle with Judaism and his ideas about the Jewish future and the Jewish contribution to an increasingly global society in a period when an orientation toward survival is no longer viable.

Rushkoff (<http://www.rushkoff.com>) is the author of *Coercion*, *Playing the Future*, *The Ecstasy Club*, *Media Virus* and *Cyberia*. His new novel, *Exit Strategy*, will be published next year.

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SC: You engage in a creative interpretation of Jewish text and tradition in a way that very much resembles CLAL's approach. For example, I know that the novel you just finished, *Exit Strategy*, is based on the biblical story of Joseph. In what way?

DR: As I interpret the story, young Joseph was something of a brat who, as a result of a preordained and fateful encounter with his brothers, ended up in slavery. Then, because of his ability to forecast trends, he was elevated to prime minister of Egypt, and ultimately put in a position to invite his own people to join him – down in Egypt, as they say. But he had forgotten the iconoclastic teachings of his fathers – there was no Judaism yet – and, with no ill intention, ended up falling into a different sort of slavery altogether. The Egyptian mindset.

His worldly success inadvertently made him responsible for bringing the Israelites into slavery. He invited them to Egypt to survive the famine, but the only part of the collective psyche to survive was the survival instinct itself. I've always looked at that slavery not as 400 years of physical bondage but as a kind of a mental slavery -- a loss of values and a complete absorption into culture of idolatry, profit and money. This is the only truly negative sort of assimilation -- assimilation in which we lose the ethical template that is Judaism. So I look at Joseph and Moses as bookends to the pit of slavery: Joseph is the guy that forgot and Moses is essentially the same person waking up four hundred years later when he witnesses an injustice.

*Exit Strategy* is about a bratty young hacker -- the brattiest and youngest of his posse. In an attempt to make them proud of him, he ends up taking sole credit for a hack that the group had done together. The hackers, out of anger, arrange for him to get caught by the secret service, and he becomes quite infamous. Instead of putting him in jail, the authorities make him go on TV and confess to how terrible it is to be a hacker. His descriptions of the emerging cyberculture prove so prescient that he is noticed by a Wall Street firm, and he eventually earns a job as a technology forecaster – the Chairman's right-hand man. His success allows him to invite not only his old hacker buddies, but the public at large into the culture of market fascism that I think we're approaching today.

SC: What's market fascism?

DR: Market fascism is a society where the only common denominator is money; where everything has an objectified monetary value and where people think of themselves as commodities. It's a world in which we think of human desire and aspiration as a form of consumption or production.

SC: What makes it fascist?

DR: It's fascist in that anyone who disagrees is considered a traitor -- an enemy of the market. To criticize the values of the market is to question the current valuations. To question those valuations is to risk the collective portfolio. Say whatever you like as long as you don't hurt the stock market.

SC: What would an example of that be?

DR: Even in real life, over the past few years, whenever I wrote an article in a computer business magazine challenging the way the Internet has been used as a public relations tool for the NASDAQ exchange, or showing how most Internet companies have no real revenues, or explaining why an "exit strategy" is really just a carpet-bag, a lot of people would call me, write articles about me and publicly say very, very mean things about me and my work. It was as if my articles in themselves were partly responsible for hurting the American economy and for hurting the investment pyramid ... talk about building pyramids. People who build pyramids are slaves. That's the whole point.

SC: So I interrupted you in the middle of the story.

DR: I won't tell you the end of the story, but it's the Joseph story and then he wakes up. It ends a little differently and there's even a little Benjamin in there.

SC: That means that you see the possibility for some kind of rekindling of ethical underpinnings for contemporary society. It is interesting the way you put it because I don't have the impression that you are someone who thinks about going back to what had existed before. Are you saying the Joseph forgot and then Moses remembered, so there was something from the past that was restored?

DR: Well Moses remembered that he was asleep. When you wake up to a new day, you are still, in a sense, returning to the state of consciousness that you were in before you fell asleep. Perhaps my most controversial belief is that the

awake human being is intrinsically ethical. Naturally ethical. And the sleeping human is not. I think we can be hypnotized. I think we are developing technologies specifically for the purpose of hypnotizing people into this market fascist mentality -- into investing more or buying more and that scares me. I don't think it's a matter of going backwards to the ethical template of our fathers, but using the tools of our fathers, resonating with them, even extending them, in order to stay awake while participating in a culture that means to put us to sleep.

This novel marks the end of a search through Judaism for an ethical matrix that could work in modern times. I started to experience Judaism as a watchdog religion, Jews as the "canary in the coal mine." Judaism is the "shit happens" religion -- the religion that says "don't go too far." Or if everyone else is going too far, we Jews stay just a bit on the sidelines, to make sure civilization doesn't run itself off a cliff. Like Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*, watching the campfire while everyone else screamed in the woods. The modern equivalent would be, "If you hang on, if you've still got a bit of Judaism working in you, then you'll never get completely lost in the market reality. At least you are taking Saturdays off, to touch real life."

SC: Do you connect your own Jewishness and the stuff that you take on as a writer to that?

DR: It's certainly a role I play in media theory and hi tech business circles. I have very strong views about media literacy and the importance of media being used to form communities rather than just to push propaganda and marketing. And many of the techniques and safeguards I talk about can be found in Jewish practice.

For example, the Jewish initiation itself is not an act of faith, but a demonstration of media literacy: the bar mitzvah means you can read the code. Only then are you allowed to work with Torah. After you know its language, its very construction can become transparent to you. Or look at the minyan. Why do 10 people need to be present when you read Torah? Because it's not supposed to be an individual's journey, but a group's. As we know now, watching media alone makes you most susceptible to its more manipulative effects. Watching it in groups, and breaking it up into little pieces -- what Jews call parshas -- keep us aware of the meaning, rather than simply entranced by the story. It allows us to deconstruct the narrative. We remain emotionally distanced from our own mythology. Even the cherubs on the ark were meant to keep us from placing an idol there, as our predecessors did.

These distancing techniques keep us from getting hypnotized, or from worshipping some graven image. In Jewish practice, I found many safeguards against the same negative tendencies that emerge from the misuse of computers, media, and networking. I think technologies can isolate us from any sense of community or shared values. They can be used to frighten us, make us tense and competitive – ultimately dropping us way down Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Instead of developing self-actualization or empathy, we are reduced to a survival mode. We feel at risk, hungry and insatiable.

SC: But can't technologies be incredibly enabling?

DR: Of course they can be. That's why their misuse gets me so upset. Technologies are enabling as long as they are hooking up people with other people. But right now most of the money and attention being spent on the Internet is going towards developing techniques to make you feel very alone when you're on line, so that you buy stuff – or, better, invest in Internet companies.

If you have friends and you're enjoying yourself or if you're conversing with other people on a bulletin board, then you've got no need to buy anything. If you're sitting with your loved one watching TV, you're not going to be as vulnerable to an advertisement for the latest sexy blue jeans because you're already getting laid, right? But if you're alone at home watching that same ad, you think, "Maybe if I buy this or if I buy that...then I will get a woman." Sadly, once you're reduced to this mindset, even the object of your desire is reduced to an object.

Marketers, advertisers and others who wish us to worship images use media in very specific ways. These ways almost always involve attacking a person on the level of unworthiness and isolation – to make a person anxious, helpless, and desperate for a solution. Media programmers of this sort mean to induce regression: a childlike, helpless state of mind. That's why they prefer an isolated, passive viewer, who doesn't even understand how the technology has been put together. A person who doesn't know the evening news is an edited program is much more susceptible to its bias. A person who can't read for himself must believe more of what he is told.

The fact that Jews are not supposed to read the holy texts alone – we're not even supposed to read the Talmud by ourselves – is also fascinating. It forces us to be social and interactive with our stories and laws, rather than alone with them. It's more like participating in a chat room or newsgroup than sitting passively on a Web site. We can maintain some critical distance. We are invited to think and comment. The text is kept alive. Transparent. Open source

religion.

SC: I know that you associated yourself with a group of tech writers who called themselves techno-realists. You were calling for a middle ground between those who were in favor of unfettered development of technology, driven forward by the market, and those who completely opposed the encroachment of new technologies in all areas of life (<http://www.technorealism.org>). Did this fit in with your take on Judaism?

DR: Sure. I considered that perhaps this is what Judaism has been promoting for 5000 years: participation with consciousness. Get as immersed as you want, but don't lose your free will. (Think of Pharaoh and his hardened heart. That's the slave state to avoid.) Basically one foot in, and one foot out. Because the Jews were strangers in a strange land, they always ended up having one foot in and one foot out. So I really related to that as a media theorist – someone who loves what media can do, but sees the pitfalls in its misuse.

And because I was publishing so many books, and lecturing on these ethical questions, many people began coming to me for advice. Advice about their lives. Spiritual advice, really. People take media very seriously -- especially young people -- and they read my books and they want the answers. Although I'm pretty certain there are no final answers, I figured I should at least avail myself of the 5000 years of thinking that's been done on these very topics (even if they didn't call it "media literacy" or the "ethics of technology" at the time).

I was also interested in Shabbat – from a very practical standpoint. I realized a couple of years ago that I was getting too strung out by my work, and too wrapped up in the stakes. I thought that Shabbat would be a good way to disconnect for 24 hours a week from the whole work-a-day, commercial reality. Reset.

SC: Did it work?

DR: Yes, quite well. I think it's helped keep me from falling into the market mania that seems to have gripped so many of my cyber-friends. It's part of what allows me to see it. Now I really advocate Sabbath in my books and my talks. I call it the "one-seventh rule" so they don't think it's too religious and get freaked out by it. It's not about religion, as much as taking one day off a week where you don't buy or sell anything – you don't produce or consume. Twenty-four hours to celebrate the fact that you're okay – even sacred – just the way

you are, without doing a thing (<http://www.rushkoff.com/shabbat.html>).

SC: Do you do that?

DR: For two years, in fact, I did it quite religiously – going to temple every Friday night and Saturday morning. Now I just take the day off, and look for things to do with friends that don't involve spending or working. It's a great challenge. But I used to do a traditional Shabbat.

SC: And what happened, because you tell this in the past tense?

DR: Well, as I said before, I wanted to check out Judaism as an adult. So I joined a conservative shul in Greenwich Village, and went every Friday night and every Saturday morning for a year. It was my commitment to myself, and to the religion of my father. But as I got more involved, I felt that the shul was much more inwardly focused and political than it needed to be. Even cruel in the way officers jockeyed for power or plotted to get the rabbi fired. The institution was spending more energy on itself than it was on its members. And the practice itself – three hours every Saturday morning – started to feel extremely static, even numbing. Unchangeable. Symbolic and not really alive.

SC: Why did you associate what practicing Judaism had to offer with what Judaism had to offer?

DR: Doesn't everyone? It's very hard to distinguish between Judaism and the stuff that goes on in temples. I grew up thinking they were the same thing – that Judaism is this thing that happens in the synagogue.

SC: So where are you now in your thinking about this?

DR: I'm looking at Judaism as something that brings you half way across the great existential abyss. In order to make it the rest of the way, you've got to let go of it. Judaism is a very tricky religion that way. I think Judaism is much more like Buddhism than we give it credit for – which is why we lose so many Jews to Buddhism, most likely. Judaism, too, is a process. It's a scary process – it's a dark one, sometimes.

SC: What's scary about it?

DR: Because I suspect that Judaism is actually the process by which one gets over the belief in God. That's really what I think it might be. Judaism is the process by which we move from child sacrifice to global cooperation – from

fear of God, to worship of God, to expression of God. We are moving into what could be called a "virtual" stage where you realize God is in everything or not at all. Evolution moves us from the concrete – idols – to the words and ideas and, eventually, to pure love.

Moses himself was denied entrance to Canaan because he couldn't make the evolutionary leap. He was of the wrong generation. It's all explained in that moment when God tells Moses to bring forth water from a rock by using his words. Instead of doing this, Moses bangs the rock with a stick – a technique that had worked for him earlier. In short, the reason why Moses couldn't go into Canaan was because he wouldn't stop banging a rock with a stick. He couldn't even get from the stick stage to the word stage.

Likewise, we Jews used to have a God who could actually smell the sacrifice: "that's good, thanks for the goat." We moved past that, and it's time to move again. Just look at the way God changes throughout the Torah. That's an indication of the direction we are to go.

SC: Why is the God-is-in-everything-or-nothing-at-all phase necessarily problematic for Judaism?

DR: It's not problematic for Judaism, it's a problem for temples and nations. Judaism will always remain as a primer – an instruction manual – on how to get through this phase. It can serve individuals or whole societies. But I think that a certain part of Judaism is over. It's only our attachment to the pain and suffering of our ancestors that keeps this part alive. We endured so much pain, and we have experienced such terrible persecution, that we feel responsibility for the Jewish word, the Jewish name, and our connection to our tribe. But I fear that tribes eventually serve as cults – directed more towards their own preservation than the preservation of the people within them. While tribes do allow for a certain sense of warmth and connection, they ultimately cost us more than they give us in a modern, cooperative global culture.

I know this is a terribly arrogant way to address the survivors of the great tortures. My own grandparents. Survivors of the pogroms and the Shoah. They worry that without a Jewish State, and a Jewish tribal identity, we will be flushed out and killed. But how dare we let the actions of the world's most deranged people dictate how we practice our religion? We are not just a race, no matter what Hitler believed. Judaism is something that gets thought up. Remembered. Realized – just as Abraham and Moses did. Its obsolete tribal function is detrimental to its very life.

I believe we're moving into a global culture now, anyway. In a sense, there really is the potential for a great, positive "Jewish conspiracy." As I practice this religion, as I analyze Torah, meditate on the Shema, I become increasingly convinced that the object of the game is for us to become one world. That we are really supposed to. Only what we have to do in order to make that happen, I think, is give up on the idea of making it one "Jewish" world. We actually have to drop our ownership of Judaism in order to get what Judaism wants. We gift it to the civilization of which we are a part. Choose everyone.

SC: What would be left? There would be a process that people were going through that might or might not be pushed forward by people who have historically been called Jews?

DR: The books will still be there. I think the books will survive. There will be people practicing Jewish ritual. People are going to do that because they love it – or grow through it. People will practice Judaism or study certain aspects of Judaism for what it has to offer. You do it for what the process offers you.

SC: So you have a tribal form of Jewishness, to which a lot of people don't necessarily subscribe. You have a ritual form of Jewishness where people might decide Shabbat is a good thing and they institute it in their lives – it might do great things to make them more human in their lives. And there's a sensibility – something that is being done for the world, which is dismantling tribalisms?

DR: The kind of Jews I imagine emerging in the near future are Jews who are iconoclastic to the core. They reject any tendency towards mindless worship or idolatry. I think Judaism today, as an institution, is as responsible and as guilty of that sort of worship as any other religion on the block. And I do believe there is a path prescribed by Torah that allows an individual to liberate from his or her own tribal and ethnic allegiance into something much broader.

SC: You have said that what you try to do in your work is to help diminish peoples' fear of an uncertain future – a future that doesn't look like the past, and to help encourage a sense of play.

You seem to want to help overcome the problem of institutions – which come to be devoted to their own preservation – in order to get to a place where it is possible to exist in a much more disorderly institutionless environment. How would that world look?

DR: There would be very few maps – static maps. You'd end up moving

through the world more by navigating by your awareness of currents and your recognition of patterns than by referring to static, archaic pictures. It's the difference in the way a cartographer looks at the ocean from the way a surfer does, who is actually navigating the waves.

SC: But where is the ethical underpinning in that? Is it fluid? Is it internalized?

DR: I think that it has to be internalized. That means growing up – as individuals and as a people. Children need parents to tell them what's ethical. Adults should know it from the inside. But an ethical sensibility is internalized only by people who have the luxury and ability to move out of survival mode. Many Jews are unnecessarily caught in survival mode: even though they are financially fine, and anti-Semitism is at an all-time low, they are worried about their survival because they think the Cossacks or the Nazis are going to come around the corner. They are worried about the survival of Jews as an officially listed "people." When they're stuck in survival mode people don't have fun, and can't touch the beauty of existence. They experience only existential despair.

When I talk to groups of wealthy people (meaning almost any Americans), I tell them – look: if you know you're not going to starve to death and you know you're going to have a roof over your head no matter what, and your kids are going to go to school no matter what, then the rest is pure self-actualization. It's all about how much fun you're going to have before the grim reaper comes and takes you away. And fun is not trivial at all.

Because if you start looking at life this way -- as play -- then you're freed up to do a lot of truly meaningful stuff. Let's say you're worried about the people starving in Rwanda and you decide you're going to fly down there and work with them. Well, for them it's survival, but for you it's "play" because you don't have to go down there at all. Anyone who does that kind of charity work is doing it because they find it rewarding on a level of self-actualization.

When you're not worried about your survival as an individual – or as a race – you have the luxury to behave ethically because it's just more fun to live that way. It is more fun than the compunction to behave ethically because some cop is going to put you in jail for stealing the bread or some god is going to throw you in purgatory for screwing someone else's wife.

SC: You are frustrated with Jewish institutions. What can an organization like CLAL do in your opinion – from what you've seen?

DR: I think the best thing that CLAL can do is determine what it is we want to

contribute to society and civilization at large: in other words, what is the Jewish contribution to the whole? Should our ethical and spiritual insights be gifted to the world as Judaism or as something else? In other words, could we be so humble that we give away our religion to the world without even taking credit for it? I think that's the way it's going to have to work. We are not going to get credit for it – it's the only way other people will accept it. They won't take it if we insist on branding it "Jewish." So it should not be gifted as this Jewish package with our return address on it -- but we should give its great jewels as anonymous charity. It's a higher act of mitzvah to give charity when no one knows you gave it. It has to be sort of like that. We have to give our greatest gifts to the other religions and other peoples. That's one thing CLAL can do. And two – you can figure out a healthier way to preserve Jewish texts and the essence of Jewish rituals than synagogue. I think we have to figure out what comes after synagogue.

SC: Why is it hard to know what that looks like?

DR: It's hard because I can't really picture it – it's hard for me. What is spirituality without the building? I've been so trained to think that Judaism happens in a building. Programmed to give money to keep the building going.

SC: Does it happen with ten other Jews?

DR: I don't know.

SC: Does it just happen everywhere?

DR: If we're lucky, it happens everywhere all the time. That's why I think that the stage we have to move into is a pollination stage: where the flower that we think of as Judaism will die, but the seeds are going to get spread everywhere. I think what we have to do is decide what those seeds are – what are the seeds of Judaism that we are going to now pollinate the rest of the planet with. We can't mistake the flower of Judaism for the essence of its life. I don't know what the seeds are, exactly, or what they will be called. I'm a pretty bookish person, so I always think of Torah as our gift.

SC: You just said the gift was the process of getting people to give God up.

DR: That's what's taught in the Torah. And maybe we have to do that by example. Be the first religion on your block to pollinate. Shed its skin.

SC: Just to clarify – you're saying this because this is what you think has to

happen in the world more generally, not because you care about the specific, more narrow question of what the Jews should be doing?

DR: It's the same argument I made to the Lutheran priests when they had me keynote address their World Christian Convention last year. I spoke to a thousand Lutheran priests and told them the same exact thing.

SC: What you are proposing is radical, even given CLAL's long-standing claim that Jewishness in this era will not be experienced and expressed primarily in the synagogue, but instead in work, play, family and community life.

DR: We have been victimized for so long. It's so hard to accept that it seems to be working out for us. And everybody is scared that if they admit it's working out, they're going to get clobbered in the back of the head by a board. It happens every century, right? It's just that darned Jewish experience. There are people alive today who experienced something like that in Germany. They probably read this, and think I'm making an argument for assimilation – which certainly didn't work out too well for German Jews of the 20th century. But I'm not arguing for conversion to Christianity – not at all. I'm aiming for the ultimate mitzvah for the Jewish people.

It's going to be hard to openly discuss what the Holocaust was – what Shoah was – until after everyone who experienced it is gone. Even the kind of conversation we're having now – it's premature, when there are so many people alive today who have suffered so greatly for being Jewish. These people are our own parents – who suffered so we might live. The kinds of things we're talking about can so easily be interpreted as disrespectful or ungrateful for their great pain. But thanks to them, we live in a different world now. A world that not even they can fully appreciate. Read the end of the Torah from Moses' point of view, and you'll see what I mean. It's a different generation that's going to have to do this.



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