The Text and Technology

by Steven M. Brown

It's just not the same thing! How can you compare sitting at the feet of a great teacher, holding a *sefer kodesh*, a thick tome, printed in Hebrew with commentaries around the margins, with studying Talmud on the Internet? How can you compare the rich, sensual experience of feeling aging paper, smelling newsprint, ink, and a leather binding, with looking at a computer screen? How can a digital representation on a flat screen possibly compare to sitting in class with a "real" book and a "real" teacher?

This nostalgic assumption about how true Jewish text learning occurs is belied by most of Jewish history. If we assume a beginning to our tradition of reverence for story and embellishment of early text by newer commentary around 1000 B.C.E., then for more than two thousand years of recorded Jewish history, through the Middle Ages until the invention of the printing press, most Jews never touched a tablet, a scroll, a hand-copied manuscript, or a printed book. Most learned orally from someone who had memorized the text. Many of our prayers and Psalms were constructed as acrostics for easy memorization in the absence of written texts. Only a very few people had real texts to handle.

In an age when the methods of delivery of knowledge and information are rapidly changing, we must not confuse the medium with the message, the technology with the content. The technology of learning has been changing throughout history, and its impact has been profoundly important in the democratization of learning and the access to knowledge by the masses. The move, for example, from parchment scroll to books was an enormously powerful intellectual change. It physically represented the change from linear, sequential narrative to random access. Rolling a Torah scroll quickly from Genesis to Deuteronomy to check a parallel passage is far more difficult than checking a bound *Chumash*.

The construction of the traditional Talmud page - with text in the middle and commentaries around the sides, with cross-references and implied conversations among scholars across the ages - was another giant step in intellectual reorganization, made possible because of flexible print technologies. (Do you know why Rashi's commentary always appears on the inside margin near the spine of the book? Visualize what happens to the outer edge of a scarce book touched by many hands over many years. The pages start to get smudged, fray, and tear. So the most revered commentary is placed deep inside the page to protect it from physical harm.)

This talmudic arrangement - of the text and commentaries that are linked and cross-referenced to the rest of the Talmud - is the original CD-ROM without electronic technology. It foresaw, or preceded by centuries, the random access CD-ROM now so popular in this evolving computer age. Our hyperlinked Internet technology is only the latest electronic twist on a very traditional mode of study: pointing to

another source or text connected to or extending the meaning of the first text. So why not harness this new technology to further democratize and provide universal access to Jewish teaching and learning?

But don't most people learn best in the presence of a live teacher? The traditional nostalgic paradigm of teacher and students huddled together in a classroom has been challenged by cognitive research that is shifting the emphases from teaching to learning. Solid research has shown that people learn best in emotionally safe, socially cooperative settings, where they can actively process information and draw personal meaning from it. Many classroom situations lack this possibility, and although teachers are "teaching," students may not necessarily be "learning."

The Jewish Theological Seminary is experimenting with making learning more accessible via the Internet. For the past three years, the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education at JTS has been developing distance learning courses for graduate academic credit, professional educator growth, and general adult and teenage *Torah L'shma* learning. We combine the strengths of a great scholar and pedagogue, Dr. Joel Roth, with the talents of a technology design team to break the bonds of time and space, thus allowing students around the world to enter an exciting, interactive sea of Talmud study.

The course is rooted in the *chevruta* model of peer-mediated instruction. Through use of a webcross bulletin board server, students may post comments or ask questions any time of the day or night. Photos of the students appear alongside their posted comments, creating a sense of an extended classroom. Responses are added by other students as well as the class teaching assistant, who is usually a third or fourth year rabbinical student, thereby exposing the learners to another teaching personality who helps the students wrestle with the meaning of the text. Professor Roth rejoins the students midweek to engage their collective issues and questions. Virtual office hours are provided using a chat server that enables students to engage in real-time typewritten conversation with the professor when he is in his virtual office. (For faculty convenience, our Distance Learning Project enables them to access the course and respond to students from office, home, or even when traveling - wherever an Internet connection is available.)

Students can access the course any time of day or night, spending as much or as little time as they desire in front of the screen. This encourages a cyberspace experience that rarely happens in the classroom: students can slowly, at their own pace, reflect on the words of sacred text, teacher, or fellow students, taking their time to compose a reasoned, thoughtful response or query that they then post on the bulletin board. In most classrooms I know, the pace of teacher-student interaction doesn't leave much time for personal meaning-making, processing, or interpersonal, intellectual struggle.

Nostalgia and personal experience may incorrectly influence us to assume that a form of learning that worked for us is the only true path to the living God. The newest technological tools of access to teachers and Jewish learning may remake the world of Jewish learning as did the easier access to printed books in the Middle Ages. Why shouldn't a busy lawyer in Seattle, a surgeon in Birmingham, or a synagogue schoolteacher in Des Moines not have equal access to the highest level and caliber of Jewish scholarship and learning? For the geographically and schedule-challenged in our midst, the new technologies may indeed be a blessing. Come see for yourself at various Jewish sites around the cyberspace world.

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