



What's New? And What's New About What's New?

By Shari Cohen

Hype, trendiness, breathless exuberance all characterize the omnipresent pronouncements about changes brought about by technology - mostly information technology. But what is really new? And what is new about what is new?

Certainly we are only at the very beginning of whatever changes are inherent in the Web and related technologies. How do we wade between the hold-on-to-your-seats school of radical change and the cautious we've-seen-it-all-before school to begin to understand what is likely to be significant? In particular, what is new regarding how people construct their identities, relate to others and to institutions and ideas larger than themselves - questions essential for the Jewish future?

I have written in this column before about the problem of naming new phenomena too quickly. Instead what is necessary is to map the landscape of what is emerging, allowing for the possibility of really seeing the new. This was the spirit behind CLAL's recent Jewish Public Forum seminar: "The Virtual, the Real and the Not-Yet-Imagined: Meaning, Identity and Community in a Networked World." Part of the seminar was based on short on-site visits to workplaces, public spaces, on-line communities, stores and religious institutions to try to make more concrete many of the common pronouncements about the nature of change and the implications of such changes for how we think about ourselves, our work, our families, society at large and deep questions of meaning.

One such visit was to Beliefnet.com, a new religion Web site. Beliefnet is interesting since it simultaneously illustrates the relative lack of innovation in how the Web has generally been used, and the extraordinarily significant possibilities inherent in the technology. It is a microcosm for asking a question about how the Web might have the potential to change religious identity.

The most frequent use of the Web is to do things we did before, but to do them better and faster. Access to information is rapid and efficient- the Web is thus a library or database, a great bookstore, a place to browse lots of magazines very quickly. E-mail and on-line conversations allow for immediate communication with friends and strangers in different geographical locations - whether about which Canon lens to buy or about dealing with an obscure disease.

Beliefnet contains portals to a range of religions - the conventional (from Buddhism to Islam) as well as the more marginal (like the Wicca, Zoroastrianism and Scientology) -- and these are all under one roof. You can find sacred texts on line, links to all key publications and organizations. There are cross-religious categories too on issues such as morality, life-cycle events, spirituality. So information is easy to find. And information is exchanged via discussion areas on issues such as interfaith marriage or particular ritual practices.

But while the greater efficiency of the Web is new, often Web sites are not much more than fancy newsletters. It is necessary to look further to understand what is new about what is new - how the Web might be changing identity fundamentally. The technology makes real and tangible what for a long time was theoretical and abstract. Some of the most significant changes being brought about by the Web are in two areas: the radical decentralization of access to information, and thus power, and the use of the Web as a place to play with new and complex conceptions of identity. We can see glimmers of both of these possibilities at Beliefnet.

Control

A long-term historical process of democratization, in which increased access to information has played a fundamental role, takes one more, perhaps qualitative step by virtue of new technologies.

The access to information and to other people made possible by the Web shifts control away from figures of authority and institutions that previously derived their power from the control of information. Consider, for example, how the Web might affect the authority of rabbis. If it becomes possible to access texts and ritual advice via the Web, and via discussion groups not limited to particular communities, the rabbi's role as ritual authority is diminished. We see an interesting dilemma in this regard at Beliefnet if we examine who really controls the information there.

Surely sites like Beliefnet function to democratize religion vis-a-vis traditional religious institutions and authorities in the way I just mentioned. But new layers of control and authority exist in their place. While rabbis and traditional religious figures might be among the commentators writing on the site, the real producers of meaning -- the real authorities -- are the creators of the Web site itself, who select the content that is put up and the categories around which the site is organized and the "community managers" who run the on-line discussion groups. On the other hand, those same individuals have created a for-profit site thereby ceding control to advertisers and the marketplace more generally. Whether the commercial sullies the spiritual is another question and the topic for another article. But what is interesting to look for, and what would require more research, are the ways in which the creators of the site and by extension the commercial backers are ultimately still influenced by the users of the site. How much has the

content and format changed in response to how the site has been used? Have the users taken over? A recent entry in an on-line chat gives some hint: A guy named Ed seconds another person's comment about the fact that Beliefnet should set up an Interfaith Forum

...where all of us - Christians, Pagans, Bahais, Moslems, Jews, Atheists/Agnostics, Buddhists, etc. can get together and really spend time mulling over our differences and similarities. ...Want to come over with me and sign the petition? From what we've seen, unfortunately, b-net hasn't been extremely responsive to suggestions on updating the site. Maybe if we get a critical mass of people together, we can do it. Just post to the "multifaith Forum" thread over in "Add a Religion"... See you there?

Certainly the potential is there in such a situation and that potential is what suggests that sites like Beliefnet could change the ways in which we behave religiously and think about religion. Even the most conventional sites can spawn new forms of religious life and practice - even against the site's "owners" by virtue of the democratizing nature of the technology.

Playing with Identity

Steve Waldman, Beliefnet's founder, suggests that there are two reasons that the level of conversation in Beliefnet's chats is as high as it is: first, the site has been designed to link sophisticated and substantive content in the form of columns and articles by well-known commentators to its community conversations (thereby creating a setting more like a book group than like your average dinner party). But his second and related hypothesis is more interesting: many secular but highly educated people simply have nowhere else to talk about issues of faith and religion in an honest way. The Web thus becomes a place for anonymous exploration of aspects of identity that are too sensitive or charged to discuss with friends. People who would never set foot in a religious institution - as it offends their secular sense of themselves - might go online to explore these issues from their offices or bedrooms. On line, it might be possible to think about the religious and secular parts of ourselves in new ways. The potential is there for true experimentation, the more radical forms of which were discussed in *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle's fascinating study of MUDs, on-line chats in which people actually take on identities other than their own, or other than their primary identities, giving them the opportunity to experience life through very different eyes. This is different from role playing in other settings since the anonymity of the computer screen permits interactions that would be impossible in person.

According to Turkle, "Computer screens are the new location for our fantasies, both erotic and intellectual. We are using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics, and identity."

It is not difficult to see how a site like Beliefnet could become a place of experimentation with increasingly significant implications for how we think about our spiritual selves in relation to other aspects of ourselves, or for how we come to understand or even adopt aspects of traditions other than our own. This might not be what the creators of the site intended. The site might not be set up to tap into this facet of the technology's potential. Still the potential is there.

While much of the use of the Web is "old wine in new bottles," anyone using the Web in this way must recognize that the bottles might be changing the wine forever.