

Technology, Genius, and Dirt

By David Kraemer

In conversations on the promise of the so-called "new technologies" (most notably at the Jewish Public Forum and at CLAL's faculty development), I have come to be known as the "nay-sayer." (That said, what follows is not an "I-told-you-so" concerning the collapse of technology stocks. Read on, dear reader. I promise I have something less obvious to say.) This is not because I am a Luddite. I am willing to use my Palm Pilot, my cell phone and the Web as much as the next person. Rather, my "nay" comments on what I consider to be the limitations of the new technologies, the most significant of which is the limitation of human imagination and genius. To state my claim simply, the new technologies are only as promising as the promise of the people whose creativity comes to expression through them. And a Beethoven or a Shakespeare or a Darwin (or a Schoenfeld or a Roth or an Einstein) does not come along too often.

Permit me to describe my common experience on the Web. I click on, open the default homepage, and quickly peruse the headlines. News, shopping, diversions, same old same old. In-depth news I get better from the newspaper, updated news more pleasurably from the TV. And whatever the format, the writing and substance are the same. Nothing new or more interesting here.

Shopping? I've always hated shopping, so you would think that Web shopping would be my salvation. But it still comes down to a basic question: what is it that I want to buy? Clothes? I've got to try them on (slacks rarely fit the first time), so it's less of a bother to try on multiple pieces in the store than to order, wait and return time and time again. Music? Books? If I have a particular pick, sure. But picks are limited. How much is available in the genre and of the quality that satisfies my tastes? Not much. So whether I must purchase it or can download it for free, the real question is whether I want it at all. No salvation here.

Diversions? After a few minutes, I just get bored. The pages all look more or less the same, the format allows for truncated text or weary eyes. The advertisements are odious and overwhelming. I'd much rather window-shop along Madison Avenue or watch the crowd pass by on Fifth.

By the early 20th century, the printed word relied on old technologies. Yet Joyce invented something challenging and new through the sheer force of his brilliant imagination. The technologies of producing music were already traditional, yet Mahler tested the ear of the listener with musical juxtapositions that were unprecedented and therefore thrilling. As my daughter taught me (and others) in her recent d'var Torah for Parashat Bereshit ("In the beginning"), even God's creativity, for the most part, depended not on something new but on forming and creating new combinations with substance that, by the second day of creation, was already old. God's "creativity" is exemplified by taking dirt, created early in creation, and forming it

into a human, a work of art that is unparalleled. We would do well to be instructed by God's example.

An on-line catalogue is still a catalogue. One hundred cable channels that show poor drama, tired reruns, and extended advertisements are just more of the same. What it must come down to, in the end, is the person whose imagination and intelligence stand behind the new media. And I see no evidence that there is any notable development in that realm.