

# Challenges of the Information Age

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## The Value of Debate

After I had given my Reith lectures in 1990 a friend said to me: "I see that your university education has had an effect." "How?" I asked. "Because you quote thinkers who disagree with you as often as you quote those who share your views." I replied: "That is not something I learned at university. I learned that from the Talmud." I went on to explain how.

The Talmud tells us that in late Second Temple times, two academies, those of Hillel and Shammai, disagreed on many aspects of Jewish law. So profound were their differences that for a time it seemed as if there might be "two Torahs" (*Sanhedrin* 88b). Eventually the law was generally decided in accordance with the views of the school of Hillel.

The Talmud asks why. What was it about the disciples of Hillel that made their views authoritative? After all, the disciples of Shammai were no less gifted and erudite. The Talmud (*Eruvin* 13b) gives the following answer: because the disciples of Hillel were "kindly and humble, and because they studied their own rulings and those of the school of Shammai, and even taught the teachings of the school of Shammai before their own." They studied the views of those with whom they disagreed. That was a lesson in intellectual open-mindedness long before any university existed.

Why is this important? First because truth is multifaceted. The Talmud tells us that there are “seventy faces to Torah”—that is, seventy possible interpretations of any passage. Maharsha (R. Samuel Edels 1555-1631) goes further. He says there are 600,000 faces of Torah, a metaphorical number corresponding to the 600,000 people who first received it. Maharsha means that each of us can, in theory, discover something in the Divine word that no one else has seen.

More seriously, exposure only to the views of those who agree with you produces group-think, and that is how great minds can make great mistakes. Arthur Schlesinger, an adviser to John F. Kennedy, wrote about how one of the most intellectually gifted group of strategists in American history made one of the greatest mistakes, the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961. He said, they were all friends. They were all of a like mind. None of them wanted to disturb the harmony of the team by voicing their reservations about the policy. The result was disaster.

None of this means that every view is true, that truth is relative, or that multiple interpretations of Judaism each have their own validity. To the contrary: the school of Hillel was dedicated to the truth. They thought their opponents were wrong. They studied the views of the school of Shammai in case there was something their opponents had seen that they had missed. It was precisely their passion for truth that protected them from group-think.

There is an immense danger, in an age of Internet, email and the fragmentation of communication, that people are becoming exposed only to views that agree with their own. Societies may become divided into non-communicating factions, never seriously engaging with the views of their opponents. That is bad for truth, for wisdom, and for peace.

## Information Overload

Are we suffering from information overload? Two recently published scientific studies suggest that we are. Researchers at the University of California, San Diego, argue that the continuous flow of data from email, the Internet, mobile phones, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the rest is becoming overwhelming, and people are suffering as a result.

Scientists at the University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute have discovered, monitoring responses by brain scans, that complex emotions such as admiration and compassion take much longer for the brain to register than other, less emotional tasks.

Both studies suggest that continuous bombardment of news and information is making us emotionally exhausted. Our brains are conditioned to register empathy, sympathy and altruism, but these emotions are processed by the prefrontal cortex, a relatively slow-moving part of the brain that is bypassed when we are under stress.

To have a healthy emotional response to situations, we need time to absorb, digest and reflect.

The sheer pace of modern life is not allowing us this time. The danger is that, simply to cope, we will become emotionally detached. The digital age is moving too fast for us to be able to respond humanly with the appropriate feelings. According to Felix Economakis, a specialist in stress, "When everything is screaming at us, we start withdrawing, so that normally nice people become unempathetic."

He continued: "Either you control your technology or it will control you." His advice is: "You should make certain days, and times such as family meals, sacred. You have to plan these things for now. The patients I see think that first they will get all their work communications out of the way, then they will start living. But they never get to start living."

What a telling restatement in contemporary terms of the case for Shabbat. Perhaps no institution in all of history has had such continuing relevance in age after age, era after era. In ancient times, Shabbat was a release from slavery. Then it

became a weekly respite from the pressures of work. When Jews were poor, once a week they sat around the dinner table in their best clothes as if they were royalty. When Jews were rich, once a week they were reminded that there are things you cannot buy.

Today Shabbat is an antidote to stress. In the 1960s, economists and futurologists used to predict that automation would reduce the working week to 20 hours. The biggest problem we would face, they said, would be what to do with all the time available for leisure. How wrong they were.

Today, on average, people work longer hours than they did then. And few things are more intrusive than mobile phones, Blackberries and laptops, and the idea to which they have given rise that we are totally available at all times. This is the new form of slavery, well paid and carrying high prestige, but slavery none the less.

Once again Shabbat—the email-free-zone—comes to the rescue, reminding us that there are other things in life: family, friends, community, the chance to thank God for our blessings, and to listen to our most holy book of wisdom, the Torah.

Either we control our technology or it will control us, in which case we may discover, years later, that we were too busy making a living ever to have time truly to live. Shabbat shalom!