

Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

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Shabbat and Technology: Modern Challenges

Rabbi Ari D. Kahn

The Torah begins with the ultimate paradigm shift: Creation of our physical universe, and then rest. In a concise, even cryptic few verses, our existence, our world, and our place in that world, come into being. Time, space, and matter come into existence; the cosmos takes shape. Life springs forth, and man, the first sentient, self-aware being, is introduced. From the moment of Bereishit, Genesis, everything else is, quite literally, history. Mankind is endowed with both physical and spiritual capabilities, and is given the freedom to put those capabilities to use—for better or worse: To work and protect the Garden, to rule over all of nature and harness its great power, while remaining mindful of our tremendous responsibilities and capabilities....

“Smart phones,” which are actually small computers with access to the worldwide reservoir of knowledge, make the path to limitless information direct and virtually uninhibited. In addition, countless “apps” have been developed to organize and optimize our access to a web of facts, opinions, and ideas. While some of these apps serve as mere diversions, many others perform and monitor tasks that can make us more informed, in-touch, productive, and efficient than ever before.

Recently, a “Shabbat app” was reportedly developed, which promises to solve the “problem” of the cruel isolation experienced by Sabbath-observant Jews for 25 hours every week.

On a theoretical level, Sabbath observance in the modern world should be exponentially easier than ever before in history. Technology makes it possible to live in comfort, even luxury, without the need to perform any of the work prohibited on Shabbat. Unfortunately, man has become enslaved to the very technology designed to liberate him. Our technological creations have risen up and are poised to overcome us, like Frankenstein’s monster or a golem of our own design. We are addicted to the constant flow of communication that we have created. We have become incapable of functioning without our virtual community, without our constant access to the information we ourselves produce. We do not allow ourselves one day each week to reconnect with our inner selves, our

souls, our God. We find it more and more difficult to pray with the distraction of tweets, beeps, and blips. We are rapidly losing our ability to sit around the table, to make eye-contact with loved ones or guests, to engage in and foster actual, not virtual, communication, to nurture love and respect. We are at risk of forgetting the most basic and human of all arts: the art of communication and attentive listening.

Rather than searching for ways to sidestep Shabbat’s prohibitions, we should follow in the footsteps of Isaiah, and seek out new ways to enhance and deepen our Shabbat experience. The proper use of the Shabbat app, if and when it is made available, is exclusively for people working in emergency or security positions: Physicians, army, and police personnel, or others who are required to sidestep (but choose not to disregard) the 39 prohibited categories of labor on Shabbat. For the rest of us, instead of strengthening the stranglehold technology has on our lives, instead of allowing technology to take over our Shabbat as it has the other six days of the week, instead of increasing our servitude to 24/7, we should be marketing the benefits of a gadget-free Shabbat to all members of modern society. Rather than an app that would give technology a foothold on Shabbat, I would welcome an app that shuts down our devices during meals, prayers, and during the precious time we spend with our loved ones, even on week-days. This app would be a beneficial tool indeed.

Adapted from Rabbi Ari D. Kahn, A Taste of Eden

Wrong Reasons Why the Torah Was Given

Samuel David Luzzatto, trans. Daniel A. Klein

The wise understand that the intent of the Torah is not to teach of the natural sciences, but that the Torah was given only to direct humankind on the path of righteousness and justice, and to establish belief in the Unity and Providence of God in their hearts, for not to the scholars alone was the Torah given, but to the entire people. Just as the concepts of Providence and reward and punishment are not explained (and properly not explained) in the Torah in a philosophical manner, but are treated in human terms (“And the Lord was angry with them,” “And His heart grieved,” and many other such expressions), so the story of the Creation is not told (and properly not

told) in the Torah in a philosophical manner—for as the Rabbis said, to impress upon flesh and blood the power of the Creation is impossible.

Therefore it is not proper for the Torah scholar to force the Scriptures from their literal meaning to make them conform with the natural sciences, nor is it proper for the critic to deny the Divine origin of the Torah if he finds things in its stories that do not conform with scientific research. Both scholar and critic ought instead to examine the inner nature of the human mind, and the different learning approaches nature takes when it speaks to each mind: to a child in its way, to a youth in another way, to an aged person in another, to the strong in a special way, to the weak in a special way, to the rich in one way, to the poor in another. So with all groups of human beings nature speaks to their minds in a way particularly befitting them, and nature never reveals to any of them the naked truth without some veil or garb. And so the blessed Giver of the Torah (for the God Who created nature and the God Who gave us the Torah is one God), when He speaks to human beings, must speak according to their level and not according to His.

Now God wanted to proclaim to humankind the unity of the world and the unity of the human race, for error in these two matters caused many evils in ancient times. Without knowledge of the world's unity, it followed that people believed in private gods with limitations and imperfections, and that people would do evil deeds in order to gain their favor (see my comment in Yitro (Exod. 20:3) on "You shall not have other gods"). Without knowledge of the unity of the human race, it followed that one people would hate and despise another, and that physical force, not justice and righteousness, would rule among them. These two cardinal principles—the unity of the world and the unity of the human race—are the overall purpose in the story of the Creation. Other parts of the Book contain other purposes, which will be explained.

Adapted from Shadal on Genesis: Samuel David Luzzatto's Interpretation of the Book of Bereshit, trans. Daniel Klein

The Original Marshmallow Test

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Imagine you are presented with a puffy and fluffy, delicious, sweet-smelling marshmallow. You are told that you have a choice. You can either eat this marshmallow now, or, if you can muster the self-restraint and hold off eating it for a while, you will eventually get a second marshmallow to enjoy along

with the first. What would you do? Eat one now, or constrain yourself to double your fortune?

Social psychologist Walter Mischel initially conducted this famed Marshmallow Study back in the 1960s with preschool aged children. He then tracked them for years afterwards. The children who demonstrated self-control by waiting until the researcher returned to the room had higher standardized achievement tests, lower body mass index (BMI), decreased substance abuse, and lower rates of divorce later in life, as compared to those who took the first marshmallow right away. Those who exhibit self-control are generally more successful, healthier, and have better relationships than those who choose instant gratification.

In an updated version of Dr. Mischel's study, published in the journal *Psychological Science*, researchers explored other variables besides sheer self-control that may contribute to a child's success in the equivalent of the marshmallow test. They were particularly interested in finding out to what extent a child's ability to delay gratification was dependent on "reputation management," meaning to what extent the child was concerned about what other people would think of them. Researchers divided children into three groups: (A) children who were told that the teacher would find out what choice was made, (B) children who were told that their peers would find out, and (C) children who weren't told anything about who would find out. When children believed the teacher would find out, they exercised greater self-control than the other two groups, and children who believed their peers would find out exhibited greater self-control than those who believed their choice would not be disclosed.

The story of Adam and Chava is not just a failure in self-control; it is also a failure in reputation management. They fell short in their ability to be concerned with what God commanded. They ignored the fact that He would find out the results of the experiment. If we are looking for self-control strategies that could help us along our own journey to overcome our struggles with delaying gratification, we would be wise to keep in mind reputation management. Be it food, drink, procrastination, or other temptations, if we truly care what God thinks of us and believe that He knows the results of the test, perhaps we would do a better job at not eating whatever our metaphoric marshmallow may be.

Adapted from Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman, Psyched for Torah