

Ma'asei V'reisheet – Acts of Creation: Innovation, Technology, and Judaism

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On the seventh day, God rested from the mighty work of Creation. God saw that it was good and sat back to admire God's achievement. Later, God strolled through the Garden of Eden, marveling as the world filled with bounty. All along God kept an eye on God's most precious creation, the one made in God's own image – humanity. They took to independence quickly, God noticed, curious to their choices and growth. As humans grew, there was stumbling at the beginning, in the Garden, and then later in the age of Noah. Nevertheless, people kept learning and advancing.

Then, humanity took a big leap forward, as people discovered a new skill – the ability to create and innovate. The builders of the Tower of Babel said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used bricks for stone, and tar for mortar.¹ Thus early technological innovation was born. However, with this skill came the pitfall of human pride. The Torah continues, "they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we make a name for ourselves.'²

The story of the Tower of Babel is the key paradigm of wrongful use of innovation and technology. Rabbi Meir Tamari argues, "The Tower of Babel ... served no useful purpose. The tower was simply a symbol of arrogance, erected 'to make a name for ourselves.' They saw their technology and science solely as the product of human wisdom but never as a divine gift."³ The Tower of Babel parable was not meant to be a lesson against innovation, just a warning about intentionality. When our divinely gifted intellect and ingenuity are used for good, it is considered an honor to our Divine Creator of All. In Rabbi Norman Lamm's opinion, "human creativity is an expression of [humanity]'s God-likeness. Certainly one ought not see in this capacity of [humankind] a challenge to divine creativity; this, indeed, was the error of the builders of the Tower of Babel. When primitive [people] rubbed two stones together and produced a spark, [they were] not displacing God's creation of light and fire; [they were] exercising [their] divinely ordained vocation of creativity for enhancing the material world by use of [their] talents, and were thereby imitating God who said, 'Let there be light.' The invention of the scissors was a creative extension of the human hand, the automobile of the human foot, and the computer of the human brain."⁴

During this year 5779, Temple Beth Am's Learning Theme is Ma'asei V'reisheet – Acts of Creation, which accompanies the first year of our Strategic Plan that urges

¹ Genesis 11:3

² ibid, v. 4

³ Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld and Prof. Avraham Wyler, "Technology and Jewish Life," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Spring 2006, <http://www.jcpa.org/art/jep-gerstenfeld-wylie-s06.htm>

⁴ ibid

creativity, innovation, and experimentation within all aspects of our Temple Beth Am community and religious life.⁵ We will be exploring, in the coming years, how technology can innovate, interplay, and weave into our Jewish experiences. For many, this will be a joyful note, something new to discover. For others, this may be a laughable milestone, thinking “it’s about time already.” For others still, the concept of technology in ritual spaces, as nondescript as that phrase may be, strikes a note of caution. This latter group, rightfully so, is worried we will bring the outside world into our sanctuary. Our challenge as a community will be to find ways for all to comfortably relate, interact with, and engage with today’s modern technology as together we innovate and enhance our Jewish lives.

For those of us, and I include myself in this group, who did not grow up with personal computers and handheld devices, we are digital immigrants, brought into this culture when we had already created lives without it. And there are those of us who are digital natives, born in the digital age, whose experiences with technology are completely intertwined with daily life. To the digital immigrants, technology may appear supplemental. To digital natives, the culture, design, and creative processes associated with technology are simply part of life.

Borrowing from our Torah portion on Yom Kippur, technology is both a blessing and a curse.⁶ I think we can all agree that technological achievements have enhanced our lives. We could bemoan how often we look at our devices, but still marvel at the opportunities they present. How technology was used, expressed, and worshipped was where the people of Babel fell short, and where we as a community fall short, too. Technology is able to connect, inform, educate, streamline, give access, and make a large world smaller. But it can also distract, divide, and as we have learned more recently, misinform, invade, lead to the loss of privacy, and worse yet, become an avenue for malicious actors. Technology, like so much in life, is a means whose net effect depends on the human being who controls it. Seattle tech pioneer Bill Gates spoke about technology in the education sector saying, “Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them, the teacher is important.”⁷

So let us consider innovation, technology, and Judaism. One of the incredible qualities about Judaism is that it is dynamic, never static, and should never be stationary. Our ability to adapt to changes is one of the major reasons that our people survived in exile for millennia. While our individual experiences may have undergone small modulations, which melodies we are used to hearing, which classes we attend, the groups with which we associate, the culture and world around us are changing even faster. Our community must decide; will we keep up? Or will we allow Jewish life to become like Blockbuster and Kodak, relics of yesteryear?

⁵ Read more about the Temple Beth Am Strategic Planning Process, including the First-Year Priorities at <https://www.templebetham.org/community/engagement>

⁶ Deuteronomy 11:26

⁷ While I cannot locate the original source of this quote, it has been repeated by numerous articles and publications.

As we look at ways to constantly grow and innovate, we must explore technology throughout our Jewish lives, especially here at Temple Beth Am. I am no expert in technology but I know many in this congregation are. As we grow and innovate, we look to you to be our leaders and teachers, for wisdom, guidance, and support. In this year when our congregation explores our own Ma'asei V'reisheet – acts of creation and creativity, we will experiment with incorporating technology into our prayers, initially through the installation of screens in our sanctuary to project words, images, and more, called "Visual T'filah"⁸ Our next stage will be adding the capability to stream our services and life cycle events and interact with prayer online. The benefits of such technology are many, including offering a means for those home due to illness, community members traveling, or family living far away to join us in prayer. Screens can enhance the worship for those sitting too far from the bimah, or simply to raise our heads up so we can sing forward, lifting our voices with power, without feeling we need to look down at the prayer book. We can resume the ancient Jewish practice of incorporating art, a feast for the eyes, into our worship. This is only a taste of the possibilities already used in over a hundred Reform congregations across the nation utilizing Visual T'filah. The opportunities are endless, and if you have expertise in this subject, our clergy and Religious Practices Committee welcome your participation in our exploration of technology in worship. Yet, this is only one example of how we can incorporate modern technology into our Jewish lives, but we will use this as the next step for our community.

I understand that when some of you hear these words, you may be worried or uncomfortable at the prospect of incorporating technology into worship. So I ask, what makes us apprehensive about technology in the sanctuary space? Is it the more traditional parts of our Jewish selves, that struggle with traditional interpretations of Shabbat rules, prohibiting the use of lights and electronics? Is it potentially the crossing between the sacred and the profane – the rest of our week filled with computers and digital exposure, needing Shabbat to escape from it? Is it the newness of the approach, as books and sheet music have been quite satisfactory for generations? Or, is it too reminiscent of other religions' worship, where we pride ourselves on our uniqueness and not being like the Joneses next door? Many of us eschew from technology, attributing it to the latest fad at best or anathema to Jewish traditional practices at worse. But the truth is innovation and technological advancement are not oppositional to Jewish practice and beliefs. If anything, they are complementary.

Our changing experience with prayer itself is the epitome of incorporating new cultures and technologies throughout Jewish history. Rabbi Dan Medwin, Digital Media Manager of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the expert on all things Visual T'filah, explains, "the siddur [or prayer book] should be viewed as 'a living organism,' sensitive to the religious needs of each generation."⁹ The Union for Reform Judaism reminds us, "From the time of [the prophet] Ezra, who rewrote the Bible in a new script, Jews have always adapted to our environment and taken advantage of the latest

⁸ https://www.ccarpress.org/shopping_product_list.asp?catID=3756

⁹ Rabbi Daniel Medwin, "Visual T'filah: Historical Antecedents and Guide to Best Practices," Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

technologies. To encode our conversations and sacred texts, we moved with ease from stone tablets to parchment [scrolls] to paper [books to the printing press], and we move now to the electronic word." Jewish prayer has always included visual elements, from illuminated manuscripts to stained glass to synagogue architecture to today's computer design and projection. We are not keeping up with the times; we are continuing to reform the ever-changing landscape of Jewish life. Rabbi Medwin adds, "it should be noted that modern technology is already regularly used in worship in such forms as microphones, electric lighting, and even climate control systems."¹⁰ He adds, Jewish prayer engages "the most appropriate use of technology available at the time and provides a number of benefits, [possibilities, and advantages] to users."^{11¹²}

We will explore the inclusion of Visual T'filah together as a community – experimenting and seeing what we can create together. We will include art, music, interactive elements, personal photos and designs, video, social media; we are only limited by the extent of our imaginations. This is not technology for the sake of technology – the Tower of Babel warned us about that. This is adding a powerful, prayerful, more meaningful experience. Rabbi Medwin teaches, "Perhaps the most important benefit of Visual T'filah is the opportunity to engage with ancient prayers in new ways... Visual T'filah is a way to enhance prayer and help worshipers in finding new or deeper meaning in prayers... and engage a generation who have grown up with technology as a natural element of their lives."¹³

Taking this even further, taught by Rabbi Bradley Artson,¹⁴ the Zohar, the central text for Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, teaches that every well-meaning, intentional, beautiful "innovated word of wisdom ascends and settles on the head of [the Holy One]. From there it flies and soars through 70,000 worlds, ascending [and]... fashions a heaven."¹⁵ The possibilities are incredible! When we innovate and create, our ideas are held as sacred by the Holy One, adorned in majesty, and actually creating new heavens. This is so remarkably different from the Tower of Babel. In the Zohar, we are encouraged, rewarded, and blessed for innovating, for discovering the new within traditional sources, for pushing ourselves beyond that which-is-normally-there. We become partners of Creation with God. We use the tools of intellect, curiosity, creativity, and technology to keep unfolding Creation time and time again, creating new heavens with each breakthrough.

Therefore, as a community let us be innovative, bold, and daring. Let us deliberately push the boundaries, maybe even be agitational. But let us be aware, warned by the people

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ The words preceding the quotation and those in brackets were adapted from the original paragraph from which this quote was taken.

¹² Rabbi Medwin Rabbinic Thesis

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ Rabbi Bradley Artson, "God Loves Novelty: The Zohar Recommends Innovation," Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, February 4, 2015, <http://www.zieglertorah.org/2015/02/04/god-loves-novelty-the-zohar-recommends-innovation-rabbi-brad-artson/>

¹⁵ Zohar, Prologue, page 4b

of Babel – we do not use our tools for our own gain. We use them with intent and purpose so that we might create new heavens. Let us begin with Visual T'filah and worship, but let that only be the first experiment. Let us explore modern technology at many levels – spiritual, personal, communal; we will create new heavens, new connections, new ways to create meaning in our Jewish lives and community. As taught by the Seattle tech giant Steve Ballmer, “The number one benefit of information technology is that it empowers people to do what they want to do. It lets people be creative. It lets people be productive. It lets people learn things they didn’t think they could learn before, and so in a sense it is all about potential.”¹⁶

And there really is a lot of potential here. So instead of dipping our toe into the unknown, let’s jump in. After all, so many here in this room are employed by, engage with, or embrace modern technology in many parts of our lives. Our Jewish lives shouldn’t be any different, especially in a city as rich with technological innovation and integration as Seattle. Let us learn from these modern day experts, our Jewish elders, and our youth – the digital natives who understand the infinite possibilities of technology so intuitively. And we will journey forward together in this New Year.

Will things go wrong? Of course they will. Will we make mistakes? You bet! But that is no excuse to throw up our hands and not learn from the experience and try again. This is the Jewish way after all, growing with each new era, being malleable in each new age. We have mastered the art of blending the new with the traditional – after all, we still use a scroll each and every Shabbat. There is an inevitable nature of our changing times. Judaism and technology, this isn’t the future – it is the past and it is the present.

¹⁶ Steve Ballmer, AACIS Unlimited Potential Grant Announcement, February 17, 2005, <https://news.microsoft.com/speeches/steve-ballmer-aacis-unlimited-potential-grant-announcement/>