

Orthodoxy and The Internet

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last Yom Yerushalayim there was a huge Charedi [gathering of some 50,000 "black hats" at Citi Field](#), the home of the New York Mets baseball team. An organization called [Ichud HaKehillos LeTohar HaMachane](#) (Union of Communities for the Purity of the Camp) raised \$1.5 million for the massive rally to protest the "evils of the internet and the damages caused by advanced electronic devices". No other branch of Judaism can organize such massive public attendance at what was a religious event. No women were invited. That is the Charedi way. Initially Chabad Chasidim were excluded too, because they are known to use the internet extensively and have many successful and informative websites.

There was a brave but futile attempt in advance to claim the event was not so much to call for a ban on using the internet altogether, as to campaign for sensible use with filters and safeguards. In fact the event turned into a long parade of rabbis who—in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English—harangued the crowd on the dangers of the internet (comparing it to the worst evils in history) and the need to ban it. If ever there was a case of preaching to the choir, this was it. Even if the choir concerned did not really believe in the message. After all, Charedi internet sites and smart phones buzzed recordings of the event around the world. Here was proof that censorship never works. Instead of trying to educate the faithful, the zealous rabbis were calling for the impossible. It is too late, my dears!

Much of the Charedi world uses the internet widely, despite their rabbis. It is another example of how many of their leaders bury their heads in the sand while the faithful dance rings of disregard around them, even as they proclaim their leadership infallible. When hypocrisy becomes so rampant, you know moral authority has been compromised.

For years now some rabbis have accused the internet of causing cancer and various natural disasters. But there are indeed some serious arguments. The internet (and of course smart phones) gives easy access to pornography, prostitution, sexually promiscuous dating services, sexual predators, online adulterous relationships, as well as opportunities for financial irregularity, misrepresentation, and fraud. People become addicted to watching trivial movies and television programs (both previously banned separately). They waste time gaming, gambling, and overspending online. It all reflects the drive for instantaneous gratification. It is reminiscent of the corruption of the Roman Empire, which as it collapsed, spawned a new era in religious asceticism. Sounds familiar!

Enormous time is wasted daily, instead of spending it in study or social service. Human interaction and effective written communication have declined in the face of brief, semiliterate tweets. Millions of children under the age of 10 have Facebook pages and upload information about themselves that could prove dangerous as well as embarrassing, and the number of suicides in

response to internet bullying is frightening.

The dangers have been well explored and written about by psychiatrists, educationalists, and criminologists. The actual problems they discuss and the list of evils described have been around ever since humanity stepped out of the cave. Some people have always looked for excuses to be indolent just as others have worked hard. The only difference, you might argue, is that now access much more widespread. One hardly needs to leave one's room to face the dangers of the outside world.

But the fact is as clear as daylight that those who demand a ban are just pissing into the wind. You cannot ban the internet any more than you can ban sex or ban the wheel on the grounds that it could get you to a brothel quicker than going on foot.

The other side of the coin is that the internet brings wealth, jobs, investment, career opportunities, dating services, marriages, and social networking that connects families, friends, alumni, and charity. The amount of study and text that the internet provides for traditional study is almost beyond imagination, and access to sources far more available than to any previous generation.

I agree with the critics of the abuses of the internet and its dangers, but I have never thought you could turn back progress. One has to learn and teach how to use it sensibly. And parents need to exercise control over usage. They also need to ensure their children learn how to access all the wonderful teaching aids it provides whether secular or religious.

I am especially delighted with what the internet has threatened authority, including rabbinic. It can spread ideas, often anonymously, through blogs and emails. It gives everyone who wants it a voice, to cry for help. These now include Charedi voices too that can lampoon ineffectiveness, highlight incompetence, and point out where leadership is failing (as in dealing with sexual predators or recalcitrant husbands). Shining a light drives away the darkness.

Much of the Charedi world preserves its intellectual stranglehold on the faithful by censoring innovative rabbinic opinions. Books printed over the past five hundred years that have expressed contrarian or lenient views have had pages and sections removed from new editions. Uncomfortable personal details that give the lie to stereotypes and hagiography have disappeared from official view. The internet now allows the originals of all such books to be published and readily available to anyone with a computer and a basic Talmudic education. We can now all see what was permitted in previous generations and where current rabbis have pushed the boundaries far further than ever before.

It is the same as, Lehavdil, political revolutions against oppressive regimes. Give people the means of communicating and you enable them to protest. Spread knowledge and you spread power. When you give people more freedom of thought, you get more honesty. And when religious authority is challenged, you open the religious world to greater spirituality and

ironically it thrives. Good for the internet.