

Cyber Judaism

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replace the magic of what happens in our sanctuary. Just because a football game is televised, it doesn't stop the fans from going to the stadium. And consider the new uses: When a parent of a young child replays the Friday children's sermon as a bedtime story, we are all richer for the continuation of the message.

Rabbi Phyllis Sommer: Internet connections enhance, rather than replace, real-life communications. It's easier for many people to communicate with me because they "see me" online at Facebook; it eliminates some of the discomfort that might exist in infrequent personal interactions. At the same time, hearing the shofar blow must be experienced in a room full of people. The YouTube rendition never replaces the collective gasp as *Tekiah Gedolah* ends.

Emily Grotta: Stronger and faster relationships are forged by corresponding through cyberspace. I've seen this at URJ Biennial conventions, where people who've only connected through email or blog posts greet each other like long-lost friends.

Rabbi Dan Cohen: Electronic communication sometimes allows for connectivity in places and at times that would otherwise be impossible. For instance, one of our bar mitzvah students lives with a chronic illness that limits mobility. In addition to my paying visits to him at home for tutoring, we also work via video chat. It doesn't replace the face-to-face interaction, but enhances it in ways beyond description.

Rabbi Scott Sperling: This past Chanukah, as our family and friends gathered to celebrate the first night, my adult children were together in Israel, half a world away. At the appointed hour we opened up our laptops and, using a free communications program called Skype, we chatted via video and audio. Over the course of nearly twenty minutes, my wife's laptop was passed from hand to hand as everyone greeted each other and caught up on the latest

news from D.C., Madrid (where my daughter lives), and Tel Aviv. Moses, 4, chatted with his former babysitters as if they themselves—and not a computer—were sitting on the couch next to him. We all had a wonderful visit and promised to be in touch soon.

None of us, though, would argue that this virtual visit was equal to being in the same room and ending the evening with a real hug and kiss.

As long as we're cognizant of its significant limitations, technology can reframe our relationships. We can remain vitally connected to people who are physically unable, for a host of reasons, to be in the same space with us.

Does a person need to be present to be part of community? If Shabbat is being brought to us via YouTube or streaming, how does that affect our individual Jewish choices?

Scott Hertz: This is tough. The next generations of Reform Jews are growing up in an "on demand" world. They watch TV when they want, and they can even watch it without a TV.

Rabbi Phyllis Sommer: Streaming services will never replace being present together. It's not the same to "conference in" as it is to be "live."

Moreover, bringing Judaism to Jews will never be "too easy." Judaism begs to be brought to each of us in whatever way we're willing to meet it.

Rabbi Scott Sperling: We have learned from our history that being part of a community is a movable and fungible description. Did any of the rabbis who wrote to Maimonides asking for his legal opinions from a continent away feel themselves *not* to be a part of the same Jewish community? Community is, I believe, not necessarily an address, but fundamentally a matter of the head and heart.

Rabbi Dan Cohen: A number of years ago I was officiating at a wedding. One grandparent wasn't able to be present due to health issues. The bride was

heartbroken. At the beginning of the service I pulled out my cell phone, called the grandparent, and placed the cell phone, on speaker, on the podium in front of me. While being present via telephone is a distant second from being physically together, having the grandparent present via this device was, in and of itself, a cause for celebration. A cloud that had hung over this joyous event was, at least to a degree, lifted, thanks to technology.

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz: We started streaming our services online after 9/11, when air travel was impeded, and many people have thanked us for allowing them to be "present" when other factors or events made "in person" worship impossible. Here's just one letter we've received:

I am currently in [a college] program which gives students an opportunity to intern in Washington DC....I really love services and I was devastated I couldn't [get home and] attend this year, but it was kinda like I was there with the webcast (I even got to see my parents open the ark!). Despite its glitches and blurry picture, I felt like Temple Judea really was my home and they were accommodating me even though I couldn't be there. I know there are only about 20 people watching on the webcast, but if it meant as much to them as it did to me, then it is well worth it.

Rabbi Scott Sperling: If anything, for me the new technologies heighten our individual Jewish choices. We can't say, *I can't get to the synagogue for the ritual committee meeting*—the meeting is being held by conference call. We can't say, *I couldn't hear the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur because I was in a hotel room in Beijing*—the webcast of the service was available in either real time or on YouTube. We can't say, *I don't have time for Torah study*—the Union's "Ten Minutes of Torah" teaching (www.urj.org/torah/ten) is delivered to our computer desktop every day. With the help of webcam or cell phone technology, we can also light Shabbat candles with our family members throughout the world. □