Disruptive Technology in Jewish Life and Practice

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Little is certain about the future of Jewish life and practice except that it will assuredly look very different than it does today. A Shabbat evening prayer service in the twenty-first century would be unrecognizable to one bringing a sacrificial animal to the Temple in Jerusalem during one of the pilgrimage festivals. Similarly, although not quite as dramatically, the experience of contemporary Jews during the COVID-19 pandemic, who attend services and events solely online, is radically different from their reality just a year ago. While some aspects of Jewish life and practice may return to pre-pandemic characteristics, we are witnessing a shift in real-time to what the future of Jewish life may look like.

This is not the first time Jewish life and practice have undergone a remarkable transition. While many are familiar with the large-scale shifts in Jewish practice—biblical to Temple and Temple to Rabbinic—it may be uncommon for non-scholars to recognize that disruptive technologies have come to define Jewish life today. There have been a number of significantly disruptive technologies that radically transformed and redefined Jewish practice and life.

The concept of “disruptive technology” was coined by Harvard professor Clayton Christensen and expanded in 1997 in his book *The Innovator’s Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*. Christensen examines the qualities of new technologies and why they pose existential challenges to large, established businesses, as well as how these entities can strive to innovate.

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themselves. While Christensen focuses on the business community, many of these principles are readily applicable to Jewish communal life and practice.

Three disruptive technologies in particular are worth exploring to give context to how disruptive technologies have shaped Jewish life and practice, and how Jewish organizations can manage the current rate of technological disruption moving forward. They are: the printing press, automobiles, and smartphones.

While there has been a steady process of upgrading technologies utilized for containing our sacred texts—stone tablets to parchment scrolls to hand-written manuscripts—one of the most profound and practice-altering new technologies was the printing press. The printing press allowed for the cost-effective mass production of books, which resulted in each member of the community able to afford their own copy (or for the community to afford a copy for each member). Previously, most service-goers either memorized the prayers, or simply said “Amen” following the recitation of the sh’liach tzibor (prayer leader). Never before had amcha (average people) had such direct access to the wealth of Jewish learning and liturgy. The printing press not only transformed Jewish life and practice, but the whole of society: “The printed book triggered cascading waves of disruption that lasted centuries and impacted every aspect of society, fundamentally changing our view of the world and our place within it.”¹

The mass-production of the automobile is another disruptive innovation that not only transformed society, but also Jewish life and practice. This disruptive technology practically transformed the US society and economy, leading the way to the suburbs, shopping malls, and radical shifts in transportation, commerce, and more. It cannot be overstated how the invention of the automobile lead to the current form of American synagogues. In fact, much like many other aspects of American life, it quickly became necessary to own a car in order to participate in Jewish life. One’s own sense of community, after moving to the suburbs, shifted from the neighborhood shul to a larger geographical area. For some rural communities, the closest synagogue was an hour’s drive away, even further expanding the physical distance over which one could be a part of a community. This shift may have also drawn more distinctions between Jews comfortable driving on Shabbat and those who view the combustion engine as a Sabbath violation.
Finally, the smartphone has most recently transformed many aspects of contemporary life and Jewish practice. Similar to the automobile, for one to access and participate in Jewish life today (during the COVID-19 pandemic) one needs to have a smartphone or computer with Internet access. And whereas the printed book democratized access to information, the smartphone has put the wealth of human and Jewish knowledge in our pockets, while simultaneously giving content consumers the tools necessary to become content creators. The smartphone also negates the limitations of physical geography for participation in Jewish community. A Jew living anywhere in the country, or even the world, can join any live-streamed or Zoom service taking place anywhere else.

As the pandemic winds down, many folks are eager to rejoin physical in-person gatherings for prayer and communal events, although many will also choose to—or out of necessity—continue participating remotely. Paradoxically, in a religious community where some members typically only gather together physically twice a year (on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur), online participation may increase weekly engagement. In fact, anecdotally, this is already happening in many communities. Additionally, there is a long history of only gathering together physically a few times a year. One such example is the ancient pilgrimage festivals, when Israelites living all around ancient Israel would journey to Jerusalem and gather for the festivals of Sukkot, Shavuot, and Pesach. Perhaps, the most successful models of Jewish communal life involve regular small group in-person gatherings (within one’s hyper-local community) and large communal gatherings a few times a year.

Unfortunately, and also paradoxically, according to Christensen, successful organizations are not well equipped to manage the new realities brought by recent technological advancements and exacerbated by the global pandemic. Well-managed Jewish organizations are typically successful because they: (1) listen to the members of their community, (2) invest heavily in meeting the stated desires of their members, and (3) target the mainstream or largest population. Established and successful organizations are, rightfully so, focused on meeting the needs of the majority of their members. How many worship service innovations have been dismissed out of concern for displeasing the regulars? Unfortunately, this approach can lead to rejecting innovations and solutions, the
benefits of which aren’t readily apparent. Steve Jobs, the creator of the iPhone, stated: “I think Henry Ford once said, ‘If I’d ask customers what they wanted, they would’ve told me a faster horse.’ People don’t know what they want until you show it to them.”

Often, disruptive technologies arise from, and are utilized by, companies and individuals on the margins, while being disregarded by established entities. Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft when the iPhone was announced, said: “There’s no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share. No chance.”

Similar predictions accompanied the advent of the motor vehicle, such as a statement in *Carriage Monthly* in 1904: “Humankind has traveled for centuries in conveyances pulled by beasts, why would any reasonable person assume the future holds anything different?” How many predictions about the lack of efficacy of online community, or other emerging expressions of Jewish practice, may turn out similarly?

Disruptive technologies are frequently brought to market by smaller companies for a number of reasons. There is no existing market or population whose needs must be met or existing revenue that must be maintained. Smaller organizations need their innovations to be successful in order to maintain their existence and can celebrate the small victories. These organizations also have the flexibility and courage to test, fail, reiterate, and fail again. The initial pace of development for innovative technologies is non-linear and iterative, often too inefficient and anathema to large established organizations and their needs.

Although, hope is not lost for these organizations. Christensen suggests a key step to help foster and generate innovative technologies and solutions: set up a smaller, independent organization. This organization should be free from the values and constraints that are key to the successes of the larger organization and that are antithetical to success with disruptive technologies. While it may be unrealistic for an existing Jewish organization to create an entirely new, separate organization that has the freedom to explore radical new solutions, there are analogs in the Jewish communal world that may be operative. One such possibility is to utilize an existing group or smaller segment of the community.

Various synagogues and Jewish communal institutions have given their young adult groups (members in their twenties and
thirties) the flexibility needed to succeed with creative ideas that would not be acceptable in mainstream services or synagogue events. Similarly, youth groups, and even religious schools, have experimented with varying degrees of success during the pandemic period. The solutions involve innovative utilization of online technologies and creative use of in-person gatherings (in pandemic-safe ways).

Another approach might be to imagine the collective of Reform Jewish organizations and synagogues as one large organization, with many of the smaller component organizations having the flexibility and need to innovate successfully. One such example is the URJ Six Points Sci-Tech Academy, which maintains its start-up mindset and is uniquely suited to explore the benefits and challenges of communal gatherings online.

Over the summer of 2020, when the camp was unable to hold sessions in person, due to the pandemic, it continued a nascent experiment in which campers gathered together online in a game called Minecraft. There, in the virtual landscape with unlimited creative potential, campers, parents, and faculty joined in regular Shabbat morning services. In what, at first, seemed to be a novel way to engage the camp community, became a meaningful way for members of the community to gather and share a prayer experience.

Some of the benefits become clear upon examination. Zoom is a two-dimensional space, in which only faces are seen, whereas Minecraft provides a three-dimensional gathering place, which in some ways feels more “real” even though participants only see each other’s avatars. As is often the case with disruptive technologies, additional benefits revealed themselves, which were not immediately apparent. For example, campers built their own tents during Mah Tovu, a prayer in which Israel’s tents are praised, followed by being transported to a mountaintop to watch the sunrise while singing Yotzer Or. The participants were able to engage with and enact the themes of the prayers, while reciting or singing them.

While most established Jewish communities do not have the in-house capacity to set up a Minecraft server, nor the membership interested in joining at this point, it may indicate one of many possible venues in which Jews gather in community and pray online in the future. Zoom, in retrospect, may be a temporary Band-Aid
allowing us to transition into a new era of online Jewish life and practice. Virtual reality, another technology just recently hitting the consumer market in an affordable way, could also help shape the future of online gatherings.

As an example, presently members of a family can each participate in a prayer experience more closely aligned with their preferences or with their desired community. Whether using Zoom today, or virtual reality tomorrow, one parent can join a yoga and meditation service, while the other gathers to daven at a virtual Kotel. One child can join their friends from camp in a musical service, while the other can participate in an experimental experiential virtual prayer gathering online. Then, following each family member’s individual prayer experience, they can all join together for an in-person Shabbat dinner. While only a rough vision of the future a few years ago, this can actually occur today.

More than a decade ago at the CCAR, we began looking to the future and tried anticipating needs and forecasting technological trends, which allowed us to be prepared when the pandemic struck. While initially conceived of for in-person projection, the digital liturgy of Visual T’filah™ was readily available for live-streaming and remote services. As is common with disruptive technologies, the breadth of benefits isn’t always immediately apparent. Additionally, the creative flexibility and ability to fail during the development process was paramount to developing a digital solution that would meet the needs of many communities today.

While the CCAR continues to plan for the future, it remains unclear how the Jewish community will continue to adapt and grow to the new realities of contemporary life. What is clear, however, is that creativity, experimentation, and failure are essential aspects of ensuring the success of the Jewish community in the future. Jewish organizations need a variety of approaches to respond to and thrive on disruptive technologies, which seem to be emerging at an unprecedented rate. Perhaps we are witnessing another large-scale shift in Jewish practice. Rabbinic Judaism 2.0? Digital Judaism? However it may be characterized by future historians, with intention and creativity we can help shape and guide the direction of this growth and transformation.
Notes


2. Partial list of items replaced by smartphone: telephone, web browser, calendar, calculator, ride hailing/taxi, letters/emails, alarm clock, flashlight, watch, timer, music player, library, games, art, photography, to-do list, credit card, ATM (check deposits), tape measure, map, GPS, notebook, tool for (video) meetings, newspaper/magazine, book (reader), and more each day.


