

**Did Moshe Rabbenu Know Everything?:  
Printing and the Unfolding of Human Knowledge**

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Sotah 48b

It was needed for that which was taught in a Baraisa: WE DO NOT INSCRIBE THESE STONES<sup>140</sup> WITH INK. BECAUSE IT IS STATED regarding the stones of the ephod: „פחותי חתם“ - ENGRAVED LIKE A SIGNET RING.<sup>139</sup> - However, WE MAY NOT ETCH UPON THEM WITH A CUTTING TOOL. BECAUSE IT IS STATED regarding the stones of the choshen: „במלואתם“ - IN THEIR ENTIRETY.<sup>140</sup> - RATHER, ONE WRITES the names of the Tribes UPON (THE STONES) WITH INK, AND SHOWS THE SEAMIR TO THEM FROM THE OUTSIDE.<sup>141</sup> - AND (THE STONES) SPLIT into the forms of the letters BY THEMSELVES.<sup>142</sup> - It is ANALOGOUS TO THIS DATE THAT SPLITS IN THE SUMMERTIME AND IS MISSING NOTHING of its mass, AND IS MISSING NOTHING of its mass.<sup>143</sup>

כחבן דברי ר' יהודה אמר לו ר' נחמיה וכו' אפשר לומר בן דהלא כבר נאמר כל אלה אבנים יקוח  
וג' מעורחת כמורה אם בן מה חל לא נשמע כבוח בהבנתו שיהיה מרחק מברין ומבנים מבנים  
אמר רבי נחמן רבי יהודה באבני מקדש הדבר ר' נחמיה באבני ביתו ור' נחמיה שמד למי ארא  
סבני ליה לברתניא [?] אבנים הללו אין כחבן אהן ברוי משם שנאמר פרוחו ורוחוואן מסרין עלדם  
כחבן משם שנאמר במלואתם אלא כותב עלדם ברוי ומראה להן שמד מברין וכן נבקעה מאלהן  
בתאניה וו שנבקעת בימות החמה ואתה חסדה כלום ונבקעה וו שנבקעת בימות הגשמים ואתה חסדה  
כלום חל' שמד זה ברייתו כשעודה ומששת ים בראשית נברא אהן כל דברי קשה יכול לעמד בפניו  
במה משמין אהו כורכין אהו כמפתח של צמר ומצוהן אהו באישי של אבר מליאת סבי שעהן אמר  
רבי אמי 'משדב מקדש ראשון במלה שרא פגרא חטוכיה לכנה תניא נבי רבי משדב מקדש ראשון  
'במלה שרא פגרא חטוכיה לכנה דרב ברי ר' אמי ין קדש תבא משדב ורוחיה כעיתיל רבילא ;  
ועתה צפים : מאי טעם צפים אמר רב סלה שצפה על גבי נפת רוחיה לעיסה שגילוחה כדכש ושמן

(ול' ערך מבי ר'  
קיסתא כהן משה ר')

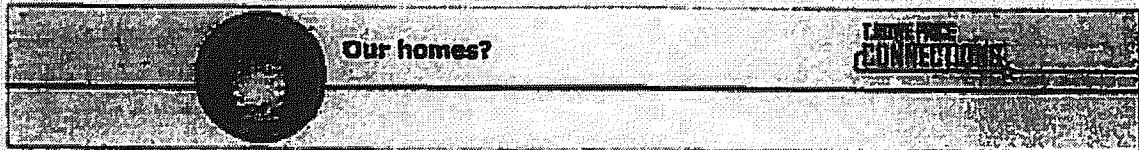




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# What Ancient Texts Can Teach Us About Technological Change

By Alan Jacobs

*A study session with some Orthodox rabbis results in a few surprising insights about technology — and how to be a better thinker in general*



Eugene Ivanov/Shutterstock

Recently I had an opportunity, thanks to Rabbi Mark Gottlieb and the smart and generous people at the Tikvah Fund, to speak with a group of Orthodox rabbis about religious reading. In the process I, surprisingly enough, learned something quite interesting about how to think about technology.

The other visitor to the group was the wise and learned Michael Fishbane of the University of Chicago, so I was the only Gentile in the room and the only person who couldn't read or speak Hebrew. Each of the sessions shifted rapidly back and forth between Hebrew and English, which meant that I would often have been utterly lost — in sessions I wasn't leading — had it not been for the kindness of those sitting around me, who would whisper translations of key terms or point me to online translations of

the relevant Talmudic passages. Thanks to that assistance, I was able to follow the arguments fairly closely. Those were enlightening sessions indeed.

Near the end of the conference, Rabbi Jacob Schacter of Yeshiva University -- who had taught many of the men in the room and was affectionately called "Rabbe" -- led a session offering some Jewish reflections on the age of the internet. Though the men gathered for this conference were modern Orthodox, not the *Haredim* whom the media usually call "ultra-Orthodox," I immediately thought of the recent ultra-Orthodox rally in New York that focused on the dangers of the Internet. But Rabbi Schacter pursued these issues in a surprising and, to me, enlightening way.

Professor Fishbane and I had prepared some brief handouts to guide the participants in our sessions, but Rabbi Schacter had a rather more ambitious plan. After recommending Clay Shirky's recent books *Here Comes Everybody* and *Cognitive Surplus* -- he was speaking my language then -- he plopped before each of us a three-ring binder filled with photocopies of passages from a wide variety of rabbinical texts, most of them dealing with the proper preparation of a divorce decree, known as a *get*. (Anyone who has seen the movie *A Serious Man* will be familiar with the complexities of the *get*.)

This seemed a strange way to proceed, but I soon saw the sense of it, because traditionally a *get* had to be written by a *sofer* (scribe) according to a very strict protocol -- and with the rise of the printing press in the sixteenth century, debates ensued among rabbis about whether a printed *get* could ever be legitimate. This led in turn to a fascinatingly complex debate, chiefly focused on the Taz, a name that refers both to a book (the *Turei Zahav*) and its author (David HaLevi Segal, a seventeenth-century Polish rabbi). The Taz is itself a commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, written a century earlier in Safed by Rabbi Yosef Karo.

Rabbi Schacter took us on a virtuosic whirlwind tour of these texts, demonstrating that Karo, the Taz, and their successors became consumed by the question of what we might call the *conditions of technological possibility*. Why was there no printing press in the time of the Patriarchs, or of the sages of the Mishnah? Were these not great and wise men -- men who talked with God! -- who could have invented the printing press had they thought it appropriate to do so, or had God so instructed them? And was not their failure to do so an indication that the printing press is to be shunned? Some thought so, but others replied, no, not at all: The fact that these men were great sages who knew God did not mean that they could overleap the state of their own age. Technology develops incrementally in any given culture, and even the wisest men of God have no power to escape those conditions. Technological history and sacred history connect, and sometimes overlap, but are essentially distinct.

To open up this history of debate was Rabbi Schacter's chief purpose. He wasn't telling his fellow rabbis *what* to think about recent technological developments: he was teaching them *how* to think about such matters. The implicit argument of his presentation was simply that if Jewish leaders today are going to cope wisely with contemporary technological challenges and opportunities, they will need to think as seriously and as faithfully as their ancestors did about the printing press.

So the session was not concerned to answer particular questions but to provide *intellectual equipment*, and the distinctive kind of intellectual equipment that can be gained by taking your own tradition very seriously -- but not by believing that the answers our ancestors gave to the questions facing *them* can be directly imported to answer the very different questions facing *us*. Rather, Rabbi Schacter seemed to be saying, by entering into the conversation with those we admire from the past, we can practice the

habits of mind we need in order to be discerning users of technology today. And that, it seems to me, is a lesson all of us could benefit from.

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