1. WELCOME

Before we begin, let’s review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

- **Accountability**: I’ll show up for eight meetings over the next eight months. Or I’ll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone’s time. Which means that meetings will start and end on time, no matter how good the schmoozing.

- **Presence**: When we’re together, I’ll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.

- **Double Confidentiality**: I’ll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. That means that even when I see group member in another context, like at Central or in the neighborhood, I won’t bring up what has been shared in our group unless you open the conversation.

- **Vulnerability**: I’ll stretch myself to be as open and honest as I can with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks, too.

- **Respect**: I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.

- **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight**: I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to “solve their problem.” No advice unless it’s asked.

- **Listening**: I understand that some of us are talkers and some of us are quieter, so I’ll be aware to not dominate discussions or always leave the weight of it to others.
• **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.

• **Ownership:** This is our group. This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

### 2. ASK AND SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Take a moment and think of the word “technology.” What’s the first thing that comes to mind? Use the space below to make some notes or draw a picture.

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### 3. LEARN

It goes without saying that technology has shaped the world most of us live in. For many of us, our smartphones seem like another part of our bodies. What happens on Facebook can feel as real as what happens in room with us. Our economy has been dramatically altered by technology, as products become cheaper and fewer people are required to make them, and as we can do business with people half a world away.

But technology doesn’t just mean laptops and cell phones. The word technology comes from the Greek *tekhne*, meaning art or skill, and *logia*, meaning system. In its original meaning, technology is a systematic approach to doing something. By the mid-19th century, in the wake of the industrial revolution, the word had acquired the meaning of “science of the mechanical and industrial arts.” Technology could mean the steam engine or the telephone, or it could mean cloud computing and the latest iPhone. But when we think of technology as the things which help us manipulate and experience the world, we can think of more basic transformative technologies: fire, writing, the wheel. Technology has been around as long as civilization.
Technology can be associated with positive things: advances in medicine help us live longer, healthier lives; digital technologies help us learn and stay connected; agricultural technologies help us produce more food on less land with less effort. But technology isn’t always, maybe even ever, simply good: just think of nuclear weapons. And even ‘good’ technologies can wind up changing us, and not always for the positive: some of us may check our inboxes 100 times a day. “Men have become tools of their tools,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in his 1854 *Walden*. For as long as technology has been around, it has provoked both admiration and concern.

Today we’ll talk about how technology changes us, for better and for worse. This is an excerpt from an interview that pastor and author Shane Hipps gave to *Christianity Today* about his book, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*. Please read it together.

**You argue that a significant technology shift occurred in 1890 that affects us today. What do you mean?**

The telegraph more than anything broke the historic connection between transportation and communication. Prior to the telegraph, the fastest [that] information could travel was about 60 miles an hour, maybe the speed of a locomotive. Suddenly, with the telegraph, communication is instantaneous. It also divorces context from information. There is this great line by Samuel Morris, who said people in Texas will now know when there is a murder in Boston. So information that used to be local becomes universal. Where we used to have the problem of information scarcity, we now have the problem of information glut.

**So the Internet is an extension of the telegraph in that it only accelerates the availability of universal information?**

And it creates a permanent puberty of the mind. We get locked in so much information, and the inability to sort that information meaningfully limits our capacity to understand. The last stage of knowledge is wisdom. But we are miles from wisdom because the Internet encourages the opposite of what creates wisdom—stillness, time, and inefficient things like suffering. On the Internet, there is no such thing as waiting; there is no such thing as stillness. There is a constant churning.

Every technology has embedded spiritual consequences. The mechanical clock was created by Benedictine monks in the 13th century. It was designed to create more regular prayer intervals to enhance our devotion to God. The mechanical clock also gave birth to the Industrial Revolution and capitalism, because it created measurable, uniform time units to break up your day into. So a technology originally designed to enhance devotion to God also enhanced our devotion to mammon.
And our efficiency.

That’s right. This culture is on an extraordinary pace toward needing things to be more efficient. But that is a value that is ultimately antithetical to the gospel. I’ve never heard of efficient wisdom, efficient love, efficient suffering, or efficient compassion. So what does it mean that we inhabit a world that is so dominated by this ideology of efficiency? That’s my interest in asking, what does it actually mean? How is it shaping you without your knowledge or permission right now?

Is there a positive side to technology and spiritual values?

Absolutely. One of the great correctives of the electronic age was a return to community, and to an appreciation for intuition, experience, and mysticism—all of which expand and round out a gospel that was at one time too abstract, logical, and linear. So there is new holism now emerging as a consequence of the digital age. Efficiency and awareness of the clock have allowed the world to generate more resources than we’ve ever been able to generate in the history of the world. If distributed right, you can actually bless a lot of people. That’s a gift.

So you’re not anti-technology.

No, because it is impossible. It’s like resisting the wind and the tides. Everything around me is a technology. It’s silly to resist. But you can try to understand it. Christians are quick to critique it or adapt it or reject it without understanding it. My interest is to have deep discernment, to understand the actual power of these things, and then decide whether or not a technology is useful. I didn’t own a cell phone until five months ago because of the way I feared it would shape my soul. I have to be disciplined about how this thing shapes me.

Interpretive Questions:
- In what ways does Hipps claim that technologies like the telegraph and the mechanical clock have impacted society?
- How does he think that the Internet has changed our culture in problematic ways? In helpful ways?
- How does he understand the intersection between technology and his religious values?

Reflective Questions:
- When has technology made you feel that your life was better?
- When has technology made you feel your life was worse?
- Have you ever unplugged from certain kinds of technology in an intentional way (on Shabbat, for example, or on vacation)? What was the experience like?
- What would you change about your relationship about technology, if anything?
4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are several texts—Biblical and modern—to consider. You need not discuss all of the texts; feel free to choose those that speak to you. These texts are merely tools for reflecting on your own stories and experiences. Please use them in a way that organically continues or deepens the conversation you have been having so far.

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.” Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.”

Adonai came down to look at the city and tower that humans had built, and Adonai said, “If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another’s speech.” Thus Adonai scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there Adonai confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there Adonai scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

-- Genesis 11:1-9

• What is the technology in this story and how do people make use of it?
• What do they hope to achieve?
• How does God respond? Why?
• Is technology here portrayed as good, bad or neutral? What’s at stake?
[The] pride [of the people in the Tower of Babel story] lay in their newfound technological ability to construct buildings of unprecedented grandeur. They did not realize that the greatest power is language—a message signaled in the opening verses of the Torah with the grand simplicity of the repeated formula, “And God said...and there was.” What is holy for the Torah is not power, but the use to which we put it, and this is intrinsically linked to language—the medium in which we frame our ideals, construct imaginative possibilities, and call others to join us in realizing them. The word is prior to the work. With great poetic justice, it was not a technological problem that caused the builders to abandon the project, but rather the loss of the ability to communicate.

--Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

**Questions:**

- How does Sacks understand the problem with the Tower of Babel?
- How does he understand how Torah and technology intersect?
- How does Sacks’ contention intersect with Shane Hipps’ take on technology?
- How does technology help you communicate? How does it hamper your ability to communicate?

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Bezalel was the chief artisan of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and tasked with building the Ark of the Covenant.

Adonai spoke to Moses: See, I have singled out by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft; to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve word—to work in every kind of craft.

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**Questions:**

- How is technology portrayed in this passage?
- How is the use of technology different here than in the Tower of Babel story?
- In what ways do you feel that your use of various technologies involves the “divine spirit”?
- How can our relationship with technology have that spirit?
When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.

--- Deuteronomy 20:19-20

- Why are we forbidden to “wield the ax” against trees in an enemy city?
- How does this passage regard technology? Is it similar to, or different from, the other selections we’ve read?
- What’s the appropriate role of technology in warfare? What, does the Torah suggest, are its ethical limits?

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence from external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature—is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man’s progress than the Sabbath?

--Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Sabbath

- How does Heschel describe technology? How is it similar to, or different from, Hipps’ and Sacks’ take?
- How does he understand the relationship between technology and Shabbat?
- How does Heschel describe turning off technology as connected to “hope for man’s progress”?
- In what ways does technology help you progress? In what ways does turning off technology help you progress?
- How does Shabbat figure into this for you?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.
5. DO

Whether it’s the Greek myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, or the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, it seems that technology has posed a paradox to human beings for a very long time. Our innovations and discoveries have the potential to cause great harm and to do tremendous good, depending on what we do with it. It can, and does, change the world and change our lives—so perhaps the question is, what choices should we make to shape what those changes look like?

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions.

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.

Central Synagogue works tirelessly toward a world in which Judaism is central to the lives of Jews everywhere and is a profound and positive force for humanity. We are relentless in our pursuit of that goal — constantly evolving and always seeking new ways to be “more excellent.” We reach far beyond the walls of our synagogue to learn, worship, serve, and continually redefine what it means to be Jewish today.

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