

Introduction

Let me begin with a joke someone sent me by email in 2001:

Gottlieb called his Rabbi and said, “I know tonight is Kol Nidre [the service that marks the beginning of Yom Kippur], but tonight the Yankees start the playoffs. Rabbi, I’m a life-long Yankee fan. I’ve got to watch the Yankee game on TV.”

The Rabbi responds, “Gottlieb, that’s what VCRs are for.” Gottlieb is surprised. “You mean I can tape Kol Nidre?”¹

This joke assumes that the medium of videotape is in tension with religious life, an assumption often made about other new media of the past century in relation to religion. At the same time, though, the joke voices a desire to resolve this tension, rethinking the possibilities of religious practice (why not watch a “replay” of Kol Nidre on one’s home VCR?) and challenging the protocols of religious authority (though one might well imagine the rabbi’s response, Gottlieb’s innovative suggestion is left unaddressed). As an artifact of turn-of-the-millennium American Jewish culture, the joke testifies to the community’s ongoing attention to inter-relating Americanness (baseball) and Jewishness (Kol Nidre), in which desires understood as competing might be resolved through mediation, in more than one sense of the term. Moreover, the joke evinces the dynamics of American Jews’ engagements with new media—from the telephone to broadcast television to videotape to email—which variously unite this community with and distinguish it from other Americans and other Jews. This is a fast-paced dynamic; in the summer of 2007, the *New York Times* reported that the Jewish Television Network, a “nonprofit television production and distribution company,” was planning to offer streaming video on the Internet of religious services during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, suggesting yet another resolution to Gottlieb’s dilemma, one unavailable when this joke was sent to me.²

Slight though it is, this joke exemplifies the topic of *Jews, God, and Videotape*—American Jews’ encounters with new media during the past century and the implications of these encounters for religious life—and demonstrates its rich potential for scholarly inquiry. Over the course of the twentieth century, a succession of new media became fixtures of daily life for millions of Americans, as well as for many others living in technologically advanced societies, starting with the arrival of sound recordings and silent movies during the first decade of the century and continuing to the advent of the Internet, digital media, and their various devices (email, web browsers, DVD players, digital cameras) in the 1990s. These innovations have appeared so frequently and regularly that not a single generation has passed without engaging at least one new communications technology and often dealing with more than one concurrently. Such encounters are hardly new; in a volume on the phenomenon of new media, Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree start with the advent of zograscopes (viewing devices that impart a sense of depth to a flat image) in mid-eighteenth-century England, and of course it is possible to look back further in time, especially to the beginnings of print culture in the fifteenth century. Gitelman and Pingree call attention in their study to the social significance of a medium’s “newness”:

There is a moment, before the material means and the conceptual modes of new media have become fixed, when such media are not yet accepted as natural, when their own meanings are in flux. At such a moment, we might say that new media briefly acknowledge and question the mythic character and the ritualized conventions of existing media, while they are themselves defined within a perceptual and semiotic economy that they then help to transform.³

Although the moment of a medium’s newness constitutes a distinctive and strategic opportunity for reflecting on the meanings invested in various modes of communication, established as well as new, these encounters are not all of a kind. In the United States, even as encounters with new media have provided many Americans with a shared experience—occasionally transcending the nation’s vast geographic dispersal and divisions of class, religion, gender, race, or politics—responses to the opportunities and challenges that these media present have varied greatly. In fact, these encounters have proved to be highly contingent, shaped not only by the

particular new technology in question but also by the particular community engaging this new medium.

This contingency is readily evident in American religious communities' encounters with new media, given the self-consciousness that religions generally bring to the form and means as well as content of communications. Consider, for example, the advent of telephone service in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, at the turn of the twentieth century, which sparked a debate among Amish and Old Order Mennonites over the use of this new technology, embraced by some as rendering "a divine service" while denounced by others as "the devil's wires."⁴ According to communications scholar Diane Umble, telephone usage provoked larger concerns in these religious communities, complicating their interactions with the society beyond their closely guarded social and cultural confines and even challenging their understanding of faith in God. Examples of popular or folk religious practices involving new media are especially revealing, as they can contest widely held assumptions about the compatibility of technology with religiosity, especially at its most traditional, and with folkways, generally thought of as artisanal. Thus, anthropologist Jo Ann Koltyk has noted, "researchers of Hmong culture in America have focused on traditional folk narratives such as folktales, songs, needle work 'story cloth,' and personal narratives," while neglecting the immigrant community's use of self-made videos to transmit memories of Old World customs and rituals. Folklorist Linda Dégh has studied how a Pentecostal community in Indiana, which largely eschews mainstream media (including Hollywood films and most television programming), uses audio recordings of testimonies made during group worship and regards this documentation not as inimical to but rather as enhancing the dissemination and understanding of ecstatic religious narratives. And another folklorist, Daniel Wojcik, has observed how Roman Catholic pilgrims to an apparition site in Queens, New York, used Polaroid photographs to "document miraculous phenomena, produce signs of the supernatural, and create sacred images," thereby extending the spiritual impact of a pilgrimage site and, moreover, redeeming technology and the "fallen" modern society that has embraced it.⁵

As these examples demonstrate, responding to new media does not simply enable innovations in religious engagement. The response itself constitutes a significant cultural proving ground, even when a new medium is rejected, prompting members of a religious community to consider larger

issues that are central to its understanding of religious propriety, literacy, and authority, of its place in history or in the sociopolitical present, or even of its relation to the numinous. Studying American Jews offers a wealth of opportunities to consider the interrelation of new media and religious life, for these encounters have engendered responses that have proved defining for American Jewish culture. Engaging new media has at times situated Jews as an exceptional or paradigmatic religious community in America in unprecedented ways and has distinguished Judaism in the United States from the way it is practiced elsewhere. American Jews' responses to new media have variously challenged the role of clergy or transformed the nature of ritual; facilitated innovations in religious practice and scholarship, as well as efforts to maintain traditional observance and teachings; created venues for outreach, both to enhance relationships with non-Jewish neighbors and to promote greater religiosity among Jews; prompted religious legal debates regarding the proper use of certain media; even redefined the notion of what might constitute a Jewish religious community or spiritual experience.

The extent and variety of these examples demonstrates that, far from being inimical to spirituality, new communications media can instigate innovations in religious practice, including when their use is characterized as extending or maintaining traditions, rather than diverging from precedent. Engaging these new media also stimulates members of religious communities to examine the larger relationship of religious practice and thought to media practices, both established and novel, even when use of a new technology is disallowed. Given the array of new media technologies, the internal diversity of American Jews, and the dynamics of their lives over the past century, it is hardly surprising that the results of these encounters are far from consistent. Some American Jews reject outright new media practices avidly adopted by others, and Jews' attitudes toward a particular medium can change over time, responding to technological or social developments or to the dynamics of religious thought and conduct. There is value in this diversity of responses in itself, for it demonstrates that new technologies do not limit or predetermine the possibilities for their place in religious life. At that same time, the ongoing imperative of considering new media and their implications for religious life has become a common experience for Jews, as it has for other American religious communities, and this demand has itself become an important new means of advancing and affirming notions of religious life. Thus, American Jews' encounters with new media have become a means

of continually redefining their notions of religious literacy, propriety, authority, communality, and spirituality.

By focusing on media practices, *Jews, God, and Videotape* enriches the historiography of this community during the period when the United States emerged as a major center of Jewish life and when Jews attained unprecedented prominence in American public culture. For people familiar with the history of twentieth-century American Jewry narrated in terms of immigration patterns, communal institutions, political activities, or other frequently studied elements of its experience, examining American Jews' encounters with new media offers new insights into this history. Intergenerational dynamics, for example, typically discussed in terms of work, education, or religious observance, can also be studied in relation to new media. Thus, a 1924 feature in the English section of America's most widely read Yiddish newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward* (itself an intergenerational mediation), on whether Jewish families should buy a phonograph or a radio, observed that inclinations were split between immigrants (who preferred the phonograph, which enabled them to "listen to their heart's content to Jewish tunes") and their children (whose "faculties are young and pulsating" and therefore inclined toward the radio, enabling them to "get in touch with any broadcasting station and open the floodgates of noise and merriment").⁶ Or consider a study of American Jewish youth that was undertaken at the turn of the millennium by Reboot, a nonprofit organization that strives to help younger American Jews "'reboot' the traditions we've inherited and make them vital and resonant in our own lives"⁷—thereby analogizing Jewish consciousness with computer technology. Reboot identified its study's subject in terms of another new medium—dubbing American Jewish youth members of the "iPod generation"—and characterized the new technology as epitomizing this cohort's cultural moment, wherein "the desire and ability of the individual to mix and match . . . translates into the power to choose the way he or she defines personal identity in America."⁸ These examples concern all manner of engagements with new media, secular as well as religious. By focusing on those encounters related to Jewish religious life, this book expands the scholarly discussion of Jews and media in America, which has mostly dealt with Hollywood film, stand-up comedy, and other secular entertainment genres and has primarily addressed issues of Jewish image and identity.⁹

To the relatively new field of media and religion, *Jews, God, and Videotape* offers the first book-length study of American Judaism within this

rubric. Beyond examining a religious community infrequently discussed in this field, this book also essays a distinctly expansive approach to religion, media, and their interrelation. In this study, American Jews—including various major religious denominations (Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist), hasidim, unaffiliated, and secularist, among others—are a subject of interest in their own right and in relation to the nation's Christian majority. Several chapters examine interfaith efforts, both official, such as ecumenical broadcasting on national networks in the mid-twentieth century, and popular, as in the various media practices responding to the “December dilemma” (that is, the challenges posed by the seasonal coincidence of Christmas and Hanukkah). Besides studying various forms of Jewish agency in relation to new media (as producers, writers, advertisers, performers, critics, consumers), this book also considers Jews as objects of Christians' moral and theological reflection, notably in media works of Holocaust remembrance. Some chapters focus on phenomena that are distinct to Jewish experience (for example, hasidism or the cantorate), and others engage media practices for which there are parallel phenomena in other religious communities, especially the photodocumentation of life-cycle rituals.

Moreover, this book approaches the nexus of media and religion differently by dint of the uneasy fit between the category of “religion” and Jewishness, which can also be conceived as a comprehensive way of life, as an ethnic (or national or racial) identity, or as a consciousness or sensibility. (Considering this array of paradigms in 1949, anthropologist Melville Herskovits asserted that perhaps “no word . . . means more things to more people than does the word ‘Jew.’”)¹⁰ As Michael Satlow observes in his recent analysis of the challenging task of defining Jewishness as a religion, “to the extent that Jews have understood themselves as practitioners of ‘Judaism’ [that is, of a religion], they have primarily adopted a model of a religious tradition that emerged from the Enlightenment's adaptation of a Christian notion.”¹¹ Similarly, Lynn Schofield Clark argues that research into media and religion is epistemologically informed by the protocols of what she terms “Protestantization”—that is, “values emergent with the Reformation,” including “the rise of intellectual inquiry as an endeavor separated from religious aims and the cultural norm of religious tolerance and relativism.” These values, she writes, are a product of Protestantism as “first and foremost a movement that signaled a new independence from the institutions of religion.”¹² *Jews, God, and Videotape* interrogates the rubrics of “religion” and “media” through close examination of Jews' uses

of new media in which the notion of religiosity is itself under scrutiny, as is its relation to mediation. Given the challenges that the word *religion* poses, it is not surprising that use of the term (as well as the terms *belief*, *faith*, and *spirituality*) varies considerably in this book's examples. Moreover, these examples often engage the subject of religion and media less as "putatively distinct realms," in which a medium serves as an instrument of religion, but rather, as sociologist Jeremy Stolow has suggested, as a more complexly integrated phenomenon, "religion *as media*":

"Religion" can only be manifested though some process of mediation. . . . It is only through . . . media that it is at all possible to proclaim one's faith, mark one's affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. . . . By the same token, every medium necessarily participates in the realm of the transcendent, if nothing else than by its inability to be fully subject to the instrumental intentions of its users.¹³

Therefore, one task of this study is to consider how, in engaging new media and the special self-consciousness of mediation that doing so entails, Jews are also engaged in mediating the idea of religion itself. They do so both in relation to Christians, by challenging a generalized notion of religiosity that looks beyond denominationalism and creed, and in relation to Jews themselves, by problematizing the Christian paradigm of religion while, at the same time, working within it.

What can be identified, however imperfectly, as traditional rabbinic Judaism has its own distinct paradigms, and these also inform this book's approach. The Talmudist Joseph Soloveitchik has argued that the religiosity of rabbinic Judaism, what he terms the worldview of "halakhic man," is "as far removed from the [Christian notion of] *homo religiosus* as east is from west," in large part because the hands of halakhic man are "soiled by the gritty realia of practical Halakhah [rabbinic law]." The centrality of rabbinic Judaism's many commandments, elaborated through custom and learned, to a considerable extent, through mimesis, privileges behavior over thought and the practices of daily life over theological doctrines, mystical strivings, or eschatological projections. Soloveitchik characterizes this phenomenon not as limiting but as expanding opportunities: "Halakhic man prefers the real world to a transcendent existence because here, in this world, man is given the opportunity to create, act, accomplish, while there, in the world to come, he is powerless to change anything at

all. . . . The universal *homo religiosus* proclaims: The lower yearns for the higher. But halakhic man, with his unique mode of understanding, declares: The higher longs and pines for the lower.”¹⁴

This principle is frequently extended to explaining more generally how “the good Jewish life is achieved.” In his popular “anthropology of the Jews,” Melvin Konner writes that this is accomplished “not by philosophy, . . . but by deeds large and small,” and he references the oft-cited biblical proof-text for this sensibility, “We will do and we will understand” (Exodus 24:7).¹⁵ The privileging of deed over thought that is central to rabbinic Judaism also informs the Jewishness of many Jews who do not observe rabbinic law, including those who variously characterize themselves as nonreligious, secular, cultural, “non-Jewish,” “imaginary,” or “post-halakhic” Jews.¹⁶ In delineating the distinctive character of the “non-Jewish Jew,” Isaac Deutscher explains that most of his exemplars have a “great philosophical idea in common—the idea that knowledge to be real must be active. . . . It was Spinoza who said that ‘to be is to do and to know is to do.’ It was only one step from this to Marx’s saying that ‘hitherto the philosophers have interpreted the world; henceforth the task is to change it.’”¹⁷

Indeed, although the history of Jewish modernism is usually recounted in terms of Jewish philosophy that, starting with Spinoza, challenges traditional rabbinic thought, this history could be traced just as effectively (if not perhaps more so) according to modernists’ quests for new Jewish practices, which mediate between those who perform them as Jews and the ideas that conceptualize these behaviors as defining Jewishness. New media have often figured in these practices. For example, attendees of Jewish film festivals, of which there are now several dozen held annually in North America, sometimes describe the experience as the equivalent of going to synagogue.¹⁸ Although these new practices are occasionally conceptualized as replacements for religious observance, others are characterized as enhancing religiosity—such as Jewish *Star Trek* fans’ elaboration of speculative *halakhah* as it would pertain to life in outer space as portrayed in the science-fiction series.¹⁹ Conversely, these new practices can be deemed religion’s subversion, as in the case of a 1996 poll of students in a Manhattan Jewish day school, who, when asked to identify their favorite Jewish heroes, named performers Jerry Seinfeld, Adam Sandler, and Howard Stern ahead of God (who came in fourth).²⁰ Uniting all these undertakings is a desire to forge new ways of behaving as Jews, always

conceived—if often tacitly and sometimes defiantly—in relation to established practices understood as religious.

In keeping with this sensibility that assigns behavior a defining, meaningful primacy in Jewish religious life, *Jews, God, and Videotape* approaches the nexus of religion and media among American Jews by centering attention on the social practices of new media as they engage religiosity, broadly defined. Beyond discussing the form or content of media works, theories of mediation, or communication in the abstract, this approach entails examining how certain media technologies figure in Jewish life comprehensively, including the contexts in which media works are created, distributed, consumed, scrutinized, and collected; the epiphenomena of media works (for example, publicity materials promoting a new film); the protocols of media use, both official and actual; the discussion of media in public forums, usually facilitated by other media (such as reviews of television programs published in newspapers or posted on weblogs).

The notion that the social practices of media can be key to understanding Jewish religious life is not without precedent. Long known as the “People of the Book,” Jews are often defined in relation to a fundamental media work and its attendant social practices, including institutionalized study and ritual public reading, as well as an elaborate set of practices around the creation, adornment, storage, celebration, and interment of the Book in its most traditional (and sacred) form, the Torah scroll. For post-halakhic Jews, the notion that texts, broadly conceived, and textual practices are definitional persists in the form of Jewish book fairs and book clubs, as well as other text-based phenomena, such as guided tours organized around the films (both based on novels) *Exodus* (1961) and *Schindler’s List* (1993).

Organizing this study around the spectrum of social practices involving new media necessitates a consideration of the term *media* in its full variety and complexity. As Raymond Williams observes, this word encompasses a convergence of meanings, including “the conscious technical sense,” distinguishing various communications technologies (print, audio, visual, digital, and so on), as well as “the specialized capitalist sense,” in which a particular institution or service (such as a newspaper publisher, radio station, recording label, or video production company) serves as “a medium for something else.” (Sometimes the term also refers to media works themselves.) In addition, Williams notes “the old general sense of an intervening or intermediate agency or substance,” most often expressed

as a verb, to *mediate*, meaning to make a connection or negotiate between distinct entities or notions.²¹ Just as this book attends to diverse uses of the word *religion*, it considers various uses of the term *media*, as well as how these uses resonate and intersect with one another.

To do so, *Jews, God, and Videotape* takes an expansive approach to new media, examining both new communications technologies of the past century as well as older media that are new to Jews during this period (for example, the Yiddish daily newspaper and the Jewish holiday greeting card). New mediating practices are also examined as they engage more established cultural institutions, such as museum displays and tourist productions. The approach to time and place in this book is similarly expansive. Though this study is centered in twentieth-century America, it looks back before 1900 and forward into the present century, as well as beyond the borders of the United States, when doing so is important to the analysis of particular phenomena.

At the same time, *Jews, God, and Videotape* takes a selective approach to its subject, analyzing a set of case studies in depth, rather than seeking to offer an all-inclusive overview, delineate a master narrative, or posit a comprehensive theory. Each case study—variously organized around a particular issue, medium, community, time period, or occasion—has been selected as being especially revealing of a different aspect of the religion/media nexus in twentieth-century American Jewish life. The approach to each case study responds to the phenomenon at hand, each engendering its own research questions, analytic methods, scope, and organization of writing.

The first chapter examines the impact of sound recordings, broadcasting, film, and other media on the role of cantors in Jewish community life throughout the twentieth century. As these new media aestheticized cantors' devotional musicianship, they have transformed the cantor from a spiritual messenger into a celebrity performer, who has become the center of communal attention as opposed to a conduit to the divine. These media have also situated cantors as protagonists in a variety of narratives in which cantors figure as exemplars of American Jewry, negotiating the demands of communitarian tradition and the lure of modern culture, centered on individual consciousness and creativity.

Chapter 2 analyzes the involvement of Conservative Judaism in ecumenical broadcasting during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Considered pioneering efforts in public-service radio and television, these broadcasts were especially innovative in their use of drama as a vehicle of Jewish religious culture. In addition to playing a strategic role in

redefining the image of Judaism in American public culture during the years following World War II, these broadcasts became the center of new definitional rituals of listening for a widely dispersed audience of American Jews. The rise and fall of these broadcasts sheds light on the dynamics of religious pluralism in twentieth-century America.

The place of new media—including feature and documentary films, television broadcasts, tourist productions, and museum installations—in the civil religion of Holocaust remembrance in the United States is the subject of chapter 3. During the latter half of the twentieth century, Americans came to embrace the Holocaust as a mainstay of its civil religion, thanks largely to works of media. These media also prove strategic in adapting the protocols of established religious practices—inspirational dramas, rituals, moral instruction, pilgrimages, and monuments—to realize projects of Holocaust remembrance and moral edification for this large and diverse nation, in which few citizens have any direct connection to this profoundly disturbing historical event.

Chapter 4 examines how films and videos documenting life-cycle celebrations have transformed the nature of many American Jews' experience of ritual. Within the expansion of personal photodocumentation over the course of the past century, film and video making have had a remarkable impact on planning, enacting, and recollecting rituals associated with birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. In addition to serving frequently as the organizing principle of staging and remembering rituals, these films and videos have at times become an integral component of the ritual experience itself, which some participants deem incomplete until they have witnessed the ritual's photodocumentation.

Chapter 5 considers the implementation of various media, including advertising, television drama, and greeting cards, to address the challenges that Christmas poses to American Jews. Known since the mid-twentieth century as the "December dilemma," the coincidence of Christmas and Hanukkah not only has transformed how American Jews observe Hanukkah but also has engendered an array of Jewish responses to the near-ubiquitous public celebration of Christmas. These responses address changes within the American Jewish community—most significantly, shifting responses to intermarriage—and in the United States generally, notably the dynamics of identity politics as it relates to religion. The December dilemma has inspired a remarkable array of new Jewish media practices that center on productivity, thereby partaking in—and, at the same time, often subverting—the consumer rites of Christmas in America.

The final chapter explores how Lubavitcher hasidim, based in Brooklyn, New York, have used broadcasting, video, and the Internet, among other media, to advance their distinctive mission during the past half-century. Unique among ultra-Orthodox Jews, these hasidim deploy media extensively in their outreach campaigns, which strive to encourage other Jews to become more observant of traditional religious precepts. Media also play a provocative role in the group's messianism, which has become more complicated since the death, over a decade ago, of the last Lubavitcher rebbe, who left his followers without a successor to his leadership. Consequently, the extensive inventory of media documentation of his public appearances has come to serve many of his followers as a "virtual rebbe," providing them with a source of devotional inspiration and solidarity as an international religious community.

Although each of these chapters can be read as an independent study, there are revealing resonances among them. For example, though the Holocaust is dealt with specifically in chapter 3, it is also discussed, in one manner or another, in all the other chapters. Moreover, several key analytic issues recur: how the notion of Jews as an audience, defined by their engagement with new media, engenders new understandings of this community; the importance of celebrity as a new cultural force in religious life; how new consumer practices inform discussions of religiosity; the emergence of new modes of storytelling in conjunction with new media; how new media challenge traditional notions of religious authority and literacy; the impact of new media on the relationship of theology to religious behavior; and the advent of new modes of self-scrutiny through innovations in self-reflexive media practices.

From among these resonances, the value of studying the interrelation of religious life and new media emerges: far from being incompatible or destructive, new media can enable a wealth of possibilities for enhancing religiosity. Nor are these media simply means that serve some distinct end for religious communities; rather, these media are imbricated in that end. And the ongoing demand to consider the implications of a cascade of new media demonstrates the centrality of mediation in religious life, not only by virtue of the extent and variety of media practices but also as a catalyst for stimulating religious thought and practice.