

# HOW DOES TECHNOLOGY CHANGE US?

**A GUIDED CONVERSATION**



# WELCOME

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

1. **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed-upon meetings. I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
2. **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.
3. **Double Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here. If I see another group member in a different context, I will not bring up anything they said here unless they do first.
4. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences in order to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
5. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
6. **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.
7. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening.
8. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
9. **Ownership:** 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.

# ASK & 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.

# LEARN

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.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

### **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?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

# PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

The Jewish people's desire for – and struggle with – technology dates back to the book of Genesis, with the story of the Tower of Babel:

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 **many** 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 did the people hope to achieve through technology in this story?
- Was their motivation good? Bad? Neutral? Does it matter?
- How does God respond? Why?
- The result is that the people end up bringing about the very thing they fear – being "scattered all over the world." Can you think of any instances of technology backfiring this way in modern times?
- In what ways has modern technology allowed us to "speak the same language"? In what ways has it left us more scattered?

*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.

-- Exodus 31:3-5

- 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?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.



# DO

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.**

*Portions of this guide were originally developed by Rabbi Nicole Auerbach for Central Synagogue.*



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