

***K'dushab* in the Age of Technology: The Challenge**

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America is a blessed land, and for the Jewish people in particular, it has been a blessing. Here, for practically the first time in all the years of the Diaspora, we have been free to practice our religion as we see fit. The modern age has also brought with it many blessings: modern innovations make our lives so much easier, as we are able to avoid so much of the tedium and hard labor that were once essential to provide for the necessities of life.

Thus, it is ironic and sad that precisely at the juncture of so much freedom and so much ease, many Jews have lost sight of a major aspect in our religion: holiness, *k'dushab*. Numerous times, the Torah underscores the importance of striving for holiness, in its discussion of observing the commandments. For example, the third paragraph of the Shema, recited twice daily, instructs us to don *tzitzit*, with the reason given as follows: *l'ma'an tizk'ru va-asitem et kol mitzvotai vi-h'yitem k'doshim*, "so that you will remember to observe all My commandments, and thereby become holy" (Numbers 15:40). Similarly, certain *mitzvot* are introduced with the phrase *v'anshei kodesh tihyun li*, "you shall be holy people for Me" (Exodus 22:30).

As far as Maimonides is concerned, the verse *k'doshim tihyu*, "you shall be holy" (Leviticus 19:2), does not embody a specific *mitzvah* in and of itself; rather, the Torah is telling us that if we are careful to observe the commandments, the end result will be that we will become holy. Whenever the Torah makes general statements such as "be careful to follow My commandments," Rambam does not count

these as one of the 613 *mitzvot*, but rather as a general principle affecting all our actions:

This directive [to be holy] is not a commandment that stands by itself; rather, it applies to any commandment [that the Torah has ordained], and whoever fulfills the commandment is called “holy.” And there is no difference whether it says “be holy” or “observe My *mitzvot*.”¹

Others, however, disagree and do see Leviticus 19:2 as a distinct *mitzvah*, one that should inform our every action and thought. (More on these approaches will be found in the next section of this essay.)

Whatever interpretation we follow—whether there is a separate, distinct *mitzvah* to be holy, or whether there is an overarching requirement to live life in such a way that holiness ensues—it is obvious that our lifestyles in America fall far short of this ideal, to the point that striving for *k’dushah* is no longer on the radar screen even for many observant Jews. Walk the streets of any city in America during the summer, and it becomes immediately obvious that the current style of dress, clearly at odds with traditional notions of modesty, is not conducive to holiness. Moreover, the presence of large numbers of women in the workplace has eroded social barriers in daily life, and the increased opportunities for interaction between the sexes in both professional and personal arenas make it difficult to adhere to what used to be common standards of proper behavior, let alone holiness. Sadly, it is an old truism that Jewish mores follow societal mores, and so it is that the values and styles of secular American society are reflected more and more in the modes of behavior prevalent among American Jews.

Perhaps most important for the present inquiry, the ubiquity of “social media” networking and other new technologies have all but obliterated traditional ways of social interaction and societal discipline. There are so many new ways to stray from the ideal of holiness that the very concept may appear, to many, as a relic of the past, an anachronism no longer appropriate for the modern world.

The turmoil this reality introduces into the life of observant Jews was part of the motivation for a huge rally organized by ultra-Orthodox Jewish leaders in New York in 2012, called the “*asifa*,” which urged Jews to avoid or limit use of the Internet and other new technologies.² It is a sad comment on our alienation from authentic Jewish values that many people—including many observant Jews—ridiculed the gathering as an attempt to hold back the tides of progress, rather than seeing it as sounding an alarm concerning the danger to our spiritual welfare posed by contemporary lifestyles.

This essay will examine this situation. We shall first seek a definition of holiness, and then examine the pervasiveness of technology in our everyday lives, considering both its deleterious and its beneficial effects. Finally, we shall suggest ways to overcome impediments to achieving *k'dushab* in our own lives, and we shall consider to what extent that goal is compatible with a technologically advanced lifestyle.

K'dushab/Holiness

What is *k'dushab*? As we have already noted, the classic biblical commentators interpret the biblical mandate to “be holy” in a variety of ways, affording us different insights into this elusive desideratum. Maimonides, as noted, does not count it as a separate *mitzvah*, but rather as an overarching goal that should animate all our thoughts and endeavors. There are numerous instances where the Torah specifically notes that performing a certain *mitzvah* (such as wearing *tzitzit*) will lead to an end result of being holy.

Unlike Maimonides, however, there are those who do consider the verse *k'doshim tihyu*, “be holy” (Leviticus 19:2), as a distinct and specific *mitzvah*, and so they seek to define what one should do to be holy, or what holiness entails. Rashi interprets holiness as being removed from forbidden actions or thoughts, such that one should be ever mindful to take precautions not to be attracted to forbidden

pleasures or to sin, “for every place that you find a barrier against *ervah* [loosely translated as “immorality,” especially referring to sexual immorality], there you find *k’dushah*, holiness.”³ In other words, Rashi sees holiness resulting from conscious separation from *ervah* and whatever else is proscribed by the Torah. Holiness can ensue only when people are removed from negative thoughts, environments, or actions.

In his own biblical commentary, Naḥmanides cites the views of Rashi but disagrees with his understanding. For Naḥmanides, it is not enough to simply refrain from proscribed behaviors, such as eating forbidden foods or consorting with forbidden partners. He notes that were this the extent of the commandment, then “one with strong appetites for pleasure could constantly indulge one’s desires while eating only kosher foods and having sexual relations only with permitted partners, with the result that such a person would be a *naval bi-r’shut ha-torah*”—that is, such an individual could be guilty of degenerate behavior even while technically adhering to the limitations set by the Torah. One could eat kosher meat to excess, gorge on delicacies, drink wine to the point of inebriation—and still be considered to be following the dictates of the Torah! Certainly, exclaims Naḥmanides, simply avoiding forbidden behaviors (such as consuming forbidden wines or meats, or refraining from adultery) cannot by itself qualify one’s lifestyle as one of holiness. Instead, he offers an alternate understanding of what we must do to seek *k’dushah*: we are to be *prushim min ha-motarot*, refraining from excessive indulgence—even in those things permitted by the Torah. He writes: *kaddeish atzm’kha b’mutar lakh*, “sanctify yourself with that which is permitted to you.” Sanctity can only occur when one consciously limits one’s indulgence in physical pleasure, including permissible pleasures. For Naḥmanides, sanctity is a step above ordinary behavior, and it cannot occur when a person is steeped in self-gratification. Holiness is to be found in the realm of the spiritual; excessive involvement in material existence will drag one away from that higher realm. We will return to this idea later in this study, as we contemplate the effects of technology on our ability to focus on the Divine.

In the modern era, Rabbi Shimon Yehudah Shkop (1860–1939) offers a positive rather than a negative approach to the search for holiness in our lives. In the introduction to his *Sha'arei Yosher*, he notes that we are urged “to follow the paths of the Almighty” (citing Deuteronomy 28:9, *v'halakhta bi-d'rakhav*). According to classic rabbinic discussion of this verse, one should “imitate” the Creator: just as God clothed the naked (Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden), visited the sick (Abraham after his circumcision), and buried the dead (Moshe Rabbeinu), so too are we bidden to follow in God's footsteps. And therein lies holiness. Rav Shkop continues:

The *mitzvah* of *k'doshim tihyu* is a fundamental desideratum of the Torah...that all our services [of God] and our efforts should always be dedicated to the welfare of the whole, that we never use any deed, movement, pleasure, or rejoicing unless there is in it some good for others...and therefore, when one straightens one's paths and strives always that all the parts of one's life be consecrated to the *k'lal* [the community], then whatever one does—even for oneself or for the health of one's mind or one's body—is also turning all [these efforts] to the *mitzvah* of being holy, inasmuch as through one's efforts one is benefitting [not only oneself but] also the many.

Our brief overview indicates just how much diversity there is in the rabbinic delineation of *k'dushah* and how elusive a precise definition of that concept is. For Maimonides, someone who follows all the dictates of the Torah will naturally become an ethical, God-fearing, and God-loving person—that is, a holy individual. Rashi finds that *k'dushah* ensues when one distances oneself from sin and *ervah*. Nahmanides finds holiness in an individual's rejection of a surfeit of physical pleasures, thus minimizing one's focus on bodily needs and the secular world, and instead directing one's thoughts to spiritual pursuits. And the author of *Sha'arei Yosher* sees holiness as emerging from one's conscious efforts to pattern one's behavior after God's example: following the example of the Holy One will perforce lead to becoming holy.

What all of these opinions have in common is the conviction that holiness is not reserved only for an elite few, but is rather an obligation incumbent upon (and attainable by) every Jewish individual.⁴ For Maimonides, it is an outgrowth of careful adherence to the Torah's commands; for Nahmanides, it is attained through self-discipline and avoidance of excess; for *Sha'arei Yosher*, it is the product of directing one's efforts to the benefit of others rather than toward oneself. Furthermore, all of these understandings clearly bespeak the conviction that in order to achieve holiness, that desire must be the focus and the impetus of all one's actions and thoughts. Holiness is not an incidental benefit of observing the commandments; it must be a conscious goal. These different opinions do not negate one another; it might be more useful to see them as complementary perspectives, emphasizing diverse aspects of the same concept—a constant striving that draws us ever closer to the Divine.

Achieving holiness has never been easy, but seems to be even more elusive in the modern age. We turn our attention now to factors that may either impede or advance our religious dedication in the present day.

Modern Technology

How do technological advances threaten or challenge our commitment to Torah ideals, and specifically the ideal of *k'dushah*?

First of all, we need to define “technology” as we will be discussing it in this essay. “Technology” may be considered as a wide range of inventions and improvements that humans have created over the millennia, which have changed the way people live and work, often making life easier. By that definition, the invention of the bow and arrow is an example of “technology,” enabling early people to hunt more effectively; the invention of guns and rifles did the same, on a more advanced level. The invention of the printing press and the typewriter were certainly tremendous boons to spreading ideas and furthering education. And nowadays, instant communication between people all

over the world has advanced to an unprecedented level, due to the presence of social media and the Internet, and devices such as smart phones, iPads, and iPods. But obviously, technological innovations have never been an unmixed blessing. Bows and arrows—and guns and rifles—can kill not only animals or predators, but human beings as well. Atomic energy can provide cheap fuel—or destroy the world. And so we must carefully consider not only the benefits, but also the potential downfalls, that computer-related technology may bring to our lives.

It is necessary to recognize a basic truth: technology in and of itself is neither good nor bad; rather, how we use it and what we do with it determines whether it is ultimately an asset or a detriment to our lives. Indeed, the rabbis understood the Torah to be alluding to an argument between Lemech and his wives on just this point.⁵ It seems that Lemech (the seventh generation after Adam) was a very talented man, who taught his oldest son the art of animal husbandry and his second son the art of music. The third son was taught by Lemech how to sharpen weapons and fashion all kinds of instruments for waging war. His wives wanted to abandon him because of this, claiming that he had introduced killing and murder to the world. Lemech replied, “*I have slain a man...*” (Genesis 4:23, emphasis added)—thus adumbrating the modern slogan, “Guns don’t kill, people kill.” Lemech argued with his wives that he was not guilty of any wrongdoing for having taught his third son what he did: the instruments he had fashioned could be used for hunting and helping people survive, and if some chose to use them to kill, that was not his responsibility.⁶

Technological innovation has been part of human development since the dawn of civilization—and so has the controversy surrounding it. When we examine technological advances throughout the centuries, we must conclude that there are both positive and negative aspects to most of them. It is true, for example, that the printing press and the photocopy machine have made the written word available cheaply and easily to millions of people, and we can certainly consider that a positive outcome. Yet, these “advances” have also had an adverse

effect on people's ability to memorize or remember poetry or written documents, since the need for memorization no longer exists in the same way that it used to. The printing press, or the Internet, or any kind of telecommunication, are all powerful instruments that can spread all sorts of knowledge (such as Torah, or medical and scientific advances) quickly to all parts of the world. But at the same time that the Internet can make rare libraries and arcane books available to scholars, it also makes it possible to disseminate heretical, immoral, or evil ideas to millions of people, far more rapidly than has ever before been possible in human history.

What should be the "proper Jewish" appraisal of technology? In particular, since we have seen that holiness represents a core Jewish value, we will need to evaluate how use of the Internet (and television, smart phones, and various social media) may impact our ability to strive toward attaining *k'dushah* in a meaningful way.

It is easy to recognize the great benefits that television, the Internet, and other forms of modern technology have had on the sense of unity of the Jewish people. Being able to see events taking place in Jerusalem, on-screen in our homes halfway around the world, virtually as they happen (no pun intended), binds us to fellow Jews living in Israel far more powerfully than was previously possible. The sense of immediacy and closeness has had the effect of galvanizing and connecting all parts of the Jewish people. Decades ago, the Chabad Movement was one of the first segments of the Orthodox community to capitalize on the possibilities of the modern era, transmitting the Rebbe's speeches to a worldwide audience in real time. Nowadays, Jews all over the world have become accustomed to hearing and viewing outstanding rabbinic leaders addressing virtually the entire Jewish people. Families on different continents can be in conversation via Skype, maintaining closeness far more easily than in previous generations. These wondrous developments have given a new meaning to the age-old prophecy that all the Jews "will become bound together" (*agudah ahat*),⁷ as for example, hundreds of thousands celebrate the completion of a *daf yomi* cycle together.

But there is no question that these modern technologies at the

same time represent a formidable challenge and threat to wholesome Jewish living, and particularly to a holy lifestyle. Television brings the daily news into our homes, but it also brings to us graphic depictions of violence and immorality—and those images are not readily erased from our minds. Even against our conscious desires, our minds become suffused with images, ideas, and language that are antithetical to Jewish values.

The Internet is a marvelous tool for accessing all manner of information that would have been highly difficult to retrieve or access in the past, but it also offers access to areas of thought or action that should never enter a Jewish mind. We are not even taking into account the reality that pornography and *l'shon ha-ra* are readily available in cyberspace; these are, and have always been, outright forbidden for any Jew. But the ubiquity and anonymity afforded to these age-old forbidden behaviors by the new technologies, together with their easy accessibility, do magnify the problem. Everyone is familiar nowadays with the reality that sexual predators lurk in anonymous chat rooms, and that one can easily become inveigled in all manner of dangerous and sinful behavior—yet every day, incautious youngsters (and adults too) find themselves lured into this realm. On the Internet, one can find thousands of *shiurim* on Torah and *musar*, but also thousands of speeches and websites about heretical concepts. And often, the consumer may not be able to discern the authenticity or validity of the ideas disseminated. The Internet also opens the door to blogs or postings on Facebook and the like, which are often little more than rants of *l'shon ha-ra* and denigration of others, made so easy by the anonymity of cyberspace. Lives and reputations have been destroyed by the total invasion of privacy that is possible when someone posts pernicious comments or videos online, which are then forward to and viewed by millions—with complete disregard of whether or not they are true.

There is yet another aspect of modern technology that impacts negatively on lives, especially our Jewish lifestyle, and that is its seductive nature. People often waste away hours daily, idly surfing the Internet. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter, as well

as electronic communications such as texting and emailing, seem to have an addictive effect on many, especially on young people, for whom social standing is overwhelmingly important.⁸ More than one person has been killed due to texting while driving, as the addictive lure of instant communication monopolizes our attention and makes it impossible to focus elsewhere—sometimes with tragic results.

Also inconsonant with Torah values are the demands that modern technology make on the individual to stay constantly in touch, always connected, and up-to-date with the newest and latest gadget or app. The ancient rabbis note that part of Pharaoh's nefarious plan to enslave the Jewish people was to keep them so busy, so involved in physical survival, that they would not have the time to ponder their situation or even complain about it. Pharaoh charged the taskmasters: *tikhbad ha-avodah al ha-anashim v'ya-asu vah, v'al yishu b'divrei sheker*, "Let heavier work be set upon them, so that they may do it and not [spend their time] contemplating nonsense" (Exodus 5:9). This is strikingly parallel to what is happening to myriads of people nowadays, caught up in the technology revolution. By sucking in the mind of users—by keeping people almost frantic to stay in touch, with their finger on the pulse of all that is happening with their acquaintances and in the world, fearful of falling behind the latest and newest innovation—modern technology totally distracts us from our loftier goals, making it difficult to focus on what God wants of us and instead filling every available minute with efforts to keep up with the technology.⁹ And the more one is involved in the secular, material world, the further removed one is from a life of contemplating the glory of God, the wisdom of the Torah, and the awesome responsibility we each have to perfect our souls.

Confronting Modern Innovations

Since the dawn of the modern age, the Jewish community has been divided into two basic camps: those who have wanted to isolate themselves from the reaches and effects of the modern world, and those who have wanted to partake of the innovations and

opportunities offered to us by the modern world. There are strong arguments to be made for both positions.

Especially in the Hasidic world, one finds entire towns established on the premise that the intrusion of the modern world into the Jewish community is a threat to our dedication to Torah ideals. Consequently, enclaves are created where no TV, computers, or even secular newspapers are countenanced, thereby affording the residents a haven from the corruption, violence, and immorality that is so rampant in the surrounding society. There is much to be said for protecting young minds—and mature ones as well—from the corrosive effects of secular society, thus fostering an environment in which it is possible to live serenely according to the dictates of Torah values and ideals. A problem could arise, however, when individuals from such a protected community come into contact with modern society, which is inevitable in the course of making a living, or travelling, or seeking medical treatment. Unaccustomed to modern innovations, such people could become completely overwhelmed by them, and might totally surrender to the lure of the “outside” world.

The other side of the coin consists of Jewish groups that seek to participate in all aspects of the modern world while still remaining completely loyal to the requirements of Jewish living. They seek out not only Jewish education but also secular knowledge, and they actively engage with modernity and technology, believing that these are compatible with Torah values and can enhance them. In their view, the correct approach for the committed Jew is to participate in the world, meet its challenges, and thereby rise to greater heights of belief and dedication.¹⁰ The downside of this approach is readily apparent not only in the high rate of intermarriage, which has only increased after a few generations of this lifestyle, but even in the weakening of observance of *mitzvot* and diminution of Torah values among those who profess to be strictly Orthodox in the present. In a recent article, for example, Jonathan Rosenbloom laments the frightening number of young people who study in Orthodox yeshivas and Bais Yaakov schools, and who admit to texting one another on

Shabbat. Nor is this a fleeting phenomenon: it even has a name, “half Shabbos.”¹¹ Yet, as many contend, it is also modern technology that makes possible access to information that is beneficial, including Torah lectures, closeness with the land and people of Israel, medical knowledge, and the like.

Therefore, we need to have a discussion about how to approach the modern world with its mixed blessings. Should we try to negate it by holding back the tides of time? Or should we “take the fruit and discard the peel”? And is that even possible? This is not a new conflict, between those who want to block any influence from the non-Jewish world and those who want to engage the modern world and use its innovations to enhance a Torah lifestyle. In truth, this tension is part of a larger debate, seeking to clarify the role of the Torah in our lives and what God expects from each of us.

The Torah contains a *mitzvah* concerning the nazirite, a person who voluntarily takes a vow to live a life of exemplary holiness, eschewing drinking any wine, even avoiding grapes, and not becoming ritually impure through contact with a dead body.¹² At the end of his period of abstinence, the nazirite must offer an atonement sacrifice. The Talmud records a debate about why the nazirite must seek atonement:¹³

Rabbi Elazar the Kappar...says [he must atone for the fact that] he distressed himself by [abstaining] from wine. And a priori, if this person is considered a sinner when only abstaining from wine, how much more so the person who abstains from any and all pleasures [should be considered a sinner]! But Rabbi Eliezer says, [on the contrary, the nazirite] is considered holy [and must bring an atonement for the fact that he is now abandoning his higher calling and returning to life as an ordinary Jew].¹⁴ And if this is so, and someone who abstains from only one thing [i.e., wine] is considered holy, how much the more so should a person who abstains from other pleasures [be considered holy]!

Thus we see that the two approaches about partaking of all that the world has to offer is not a new debate, nor is it one for which there is a clear-cut “right” answer. Since the reality is that most people will find it almost impossible to cut themselves off from contact with modern secular society, it is important to consider the advice of rabbinic leaders who have sought to address this challenge.

Human beings are not perfect; we all make mistakes. As King Solomon, the wisest of all men, noted: “There is no one who is perfectly righteous and never sins” (Kohelet 7:20). What is important is what a person does after erring.

In a famous letter to one of his disciples, Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner (1906–1980) quotes the verse, “For a righteous person falls seven times, and rises” (Psalm 88:6). He rejects a common interpretation that the verse teaches that, despite making repeated errors, a righteous person has the resilience to pick oneself up, repent, and continue to grow. Rather, he emphasizes that “wise people know well that the intent [of the verse] is to teach that what *precipitates* a person’s becoming a *tzaddik*, is that first one had to fall down seven times...”¹⁵ Rav Hutner is taking a definite position here, reiterating his belief that the true fulfillment of human potential results from confronting the multiple challenges faced by each person. And while it is true that no person will be able to overcome all hardships, one will nevertheless emerge a greater and better person for trying—and maybe failing—and then trying again.

Others point to the sad reality that not everyone (and maybe not even most people) will be able to cope positively with their mistakes, learn from them, and go on to become stronger and better. After all, Jewish law mandates that when a nazirite approaches a vineyard, we are supposed to warn him: “Go away, go away!” Clearly, Jewish thinking recognizes that it is more prudent and practical to *avoid* sin, rather than to be exposed to it and hope for the best. And while it may indeed be an admission of a general weakness of character in our generation, there is no question that if people do not allow

the Internet into their homes, there will be many fewer people viewing inappropriate material or twittering away their free time over nonsense.¹⁷

In his *Nefesh Ha-hayyim*¹⁸ Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin (1749–1821) refers to a disagreement between Saadiah Gaon and Abraham ibn Ezra about who is greater, humans or angels.¹⁹ Rav Hayyim Volozhin writes that in truth they are both right: “Undoubtedly, angels are superior to humans, in both their very essence and the greatness of their holiness and their wondrous intellectual grasp; however, in one aspect humans have a great superiority over the angels, and that is their ability to overcome adversity and strive to improve themselves, which no angel is able to do. That is why angels are described as ‘standing’ [i.e., they cannot move to a higher plane].”

His conclusion harks back to a famous talmudic text describing the encounter between the angels and Moses, when the latter went up to heaven to receive the Torah:

The angels confronted Moses, demanding to know what a human being was doing in their midst, and he responded that he had come to receive the Torah. Thereupon the angels, aghast, turned to God and asked, “Can it be that this treasure, which You have kept hidden for 974 generations... You intend to give to a flesh and blood [person]!?” The Almighty then said to Moses, “You answer them.”...Moses asked, “God, what is written in Your Torah?”...“I am the Eternal...who took you out of the land of Egypt.” Then he challenged the angels: “And did *you* go down to Egypt, and were you enslaved by Pharaoh? And what about ‘Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it’—do you angels do any work, that you need to sanctify Shabbat [by desisting from work]? And what about ‘Honor your father and your mother’—you angels don’t have fathers or mothers!” Straightaway, each of the angels became a loving friend to Moses and gave him a gift...²⁰

This celestial encounter seems to adumbrate the debate between ibn Ezra and Saadiah, alluded to by Rav Hayyim Volozhin: the angels, so to speak, claim superiority in the realm of knowledge and in their ability to contemplate the Divine.²¹ On those grounds, they consider themselves to have a stronger claim to the Torah, for humans are subject to shortcomings and physical and mental frailties, and are therefore not to be trusted with God's special treasure. But Moses' claim trumped theirs: it is humans who need Torah, not the angels. Humans can grow; their understanding can develop; their spirit can soar. Yes, humans can also stumble and fall—but they can rise up again, becoming even better and stronger. And on that basis, even the angels agreed that it is more appropriate for humans to possess and learn from the Torah than it is for the angels to adore it.

In the context of our present inquiry, this passage from *Nefesh Ha-ḥayyim* is most instructive. One way of living life as a Jew is to try and insulate ourselves in our communities, cut ourselves off from the rest of the world, and focus only on our religious obligations.²² On the other hand, God created us to live in this world: to meet its challenges and to get involved in its problems. Let us remember that after God created humanity, with our quixotic ability to stumble or to grow, God put us into this world to be a part of it—and it was at that point that God concluded that “it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

There is a fascinating episode recorded in the Talmud: for more than two years, the students of Hillel (Beit Hillel) and the students of Shammai (Beit Shammai) were engaged in a fundamental debate about whether it was better for humanity to have been created or not. Beit Hillel argued that a life of physical existence and endeavor and the opportunity to fulfill God's wishes affords the soul the opportunity to grow, to rise, and to attain great spiritual heights. Beit Shammai, on the other hand, was not so sanguine, and pointed to the countless opportunities for humanity to fall, to stumble, and to sin grievously against God. After years of debate, they finally put the issue to a vote and concluded, “It would have been better for

humanity not to have been created” (*mutav lo la-adam she-lo nivra*), seeing how the majority of people cannot overcome the challenges and temptations of physical existence. Despite this conclusion, since the reality is that humanity indeed has been created, the question is effectively moot. Therefore, the sages advised: “Let one examine one’s deeds” carefully and avoid sin.²³

Perhaps the Jewish community would indeed be better off if all the delicious temptations of the modern world had not been made available to them. But that train has long since left the station. For many, the reality is that we have had no choice but to confront the modern world, rather than escaping from it. Nevertheless, this reality does not mean “throwing in the towel” on maintaining or achieving our status as God’s holy people. Modifications in our Jewish educational system might fortify young people and help them prepare for the onslaught of technology and modernity they will encounter in the world, and remind them of the imperative to live a life of holiness. The problems need to be addressed, rather than avoided or denied.

All is not bleak. Through our struggles with both the temptations and opportunities afforded by life in the modern world, we can hope to emerge even stronger in our commitment to our Jewish values. But that is only a hope, not a guarantee. As we have noted, our sages considered that “it would have been better for humanity not to have been created.” Consequently, we must be cognizant of the depressing reality that many people are not successful in meeting the challenges presented by this world to their spiritual journey.

For many, the pleasures and distractions of the world—presented with all their lure via the Internet or the like—are more than they can overcome. It is quite relevant in this context to note that the temptation (*yetzer ha-ra*) to worship idols was unbelievably strong in ancient times. Despite the numerous warnings in the Torah, and despite centuries of exhortations from the prophets to reject totally any form of idol worship, the Jewish people were not successful in withstanding this temptation. Idolatry was the underlying reason for

the loss of the Northern Kingdom and, according to the Talmud, idolatry was at least partially responsible for the destruction of the First Temple.²⁴ When the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile and built the Second Temple, the sages saw that once again the temptation of idolatry was seducing many people. At that time, the Talmud relates, they prayed mightily that God would allow them to excise this *yetzer ha-ra* (temptation) permanently, because too many people just did not have the strength to overcome it. And then they received a sign from heaven that their request had been granted. At a certain point, if a *yetzer ha-ra* is just too much for most people to handle, it may be time to eradicate that temptation, to prevent the havoc it will inevitably wreak.²⁵

The burgeoning technology of the modern world and its ubiquitous intrusion into our thoughts and habits represent a problem that is ignored by most people, including many Jews committed to a Torah lifestyle. We need to recognize that our increasing participation in the general lifestyle of the secular world introduces obstacles to our ability to maintain appropriate spiritual direction, and may even threaten religious observance. The obstacles presented by the modern world are often beyond the ability of many (if not most) people to overcome. It is not sufficient to bemoan the inroads made by television, the Internet, social media, and instant communications (such as emailing and texting) in whittling away our consciousness of our Jewish mission; it is also necessary to take action against this pervasive erosion of our values and lifestyle.

No matter how diligently Torah values are taught in Jewish schools, children are inherently most powerfully influenced and shaped by the values they absorb from their families and from their homes. Thus, it is the responsibility of Jewish parents to carefully monitor, control, or even remove untoward influences from their children's environment. This would include not only installing filters on computers but also disabling certain functions of their cell phones, iPods, and iPads—or even interdicting them entirely—and making sure to place the computer in the middle of the living room to discourage family members from clandestinely viewing inappropriate material. Many adults cannot overcome the urge to

“take a peek” (or worse) at forbidden images on the web. One attempt to deal with these challenges is presented by Web Chaver software, a “buddy system” that shares information about all sites accessed by a user with a designated individual, who accepts the responsibility to monitor the Internet use of his or her friend.

These are attempts to limit the damage that could ensue from improper use of modern technology. But they might not be enough. Although it will go against the grain for some people who are accustomed to living in a thoroughly modern and open environment, it may be necessary to draw back from the customary total involvement in order to preserve one’s Jewish commitments. Thus, there is much to be said for those who disdain having all sorts of modern technology in their homes and who shun television, the Internet, and various technological gadgets and devices altogether. Since many people find themselves unable to effectively limit their use of technology or social media, it may be most prudent to interdict them totally.

The problem when it comes to setting guidelines and taking precautions is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge in advance any particular individual’s susceptibility to the temptations of technology. Consequently, wise parents will restrict their children and only cautiously and gradually permit them access to this environment, which can be so dangerous. Some parents may find it prudent to restrict access absolutely, while others may decide that their children or teenagers are able to withstand the temptations and use the technology in a responsible manner.

What we have said about the vulnerability of youngsters applies as well to adults. Many individuals feel that they can successfully maintain the delicate balance between using technology for the good of the world and the individual, on the one hand, and the pitfalls of becoming slavishly devoted to the demands of social media and the Internet to keep us constantly in touch and in the know, on the other hand. However, even well-intentioned adults are not always successful in gauging how far they may be sliding down a slippery slope.

An additional factor to be taken into account is that this is not only an individual struggle, but one that has communal aspects as well. We must always be cognizant of the needs of the entire Jewish community and not only of our own personal perspectives. Thus, it is desirable to set community standards to protect those most vulnerable. Some people may be more susceptible to the attractions of modern technology, with its myriad opportunities to stray from the guidelines of Judaism; others may be fairly impervious. Whatever one's particular position on the issue, responsible people in the Jewish community need to engage in conversation within the community about how to increase our dedication to becoming a holy nation.

The Torah's commandments enjoin us to perform certain acts and expect that these actions will transform us into a holy nation, God's people. And it is this goal that should set the guidelines for whether, or to what extent, we allow ourselves to become part of the new technological world. In this essay, we have focused on the dangers that this new world represents for our ancient and enduring commitment to a Torah lifestyle. But technology is only the latest permutation of the threat to Jewish values that arises anew in each generation, and it is not the only one.

Becoming part of secular society has really only been an option for Jews for a few hundred years, and this participation carries with it a continuing threat to the mandate of the Jewish people to seek holiness. *K'dushah*, holiness, is not one of the values of the world around us. To the extent that a Jew engages in a modern lifestyle, the threat becomes stronger; and so, the efforts to overcome the negative drag need to become stronger, too. As Nahmanides pointed out, holiness ensues when one consciously decides to forego an action or an option that is intrinsically permissible, but that may be just too materialistic or physically gratifying—that partakes just a little too much in *olam ha-zeh*.

Writing to a correspondent who had endured a difficult moral test and yet emerged successfully, Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (1892–1953) commends him and makes the following observation:

You should know that there is blessing (*b'rakbah*) and there is grace (*haninah*). A blessing is bestowed from [God's] lovingkindness and mercy, but grace comes also from the aspect of justice, which means that it is obligatory from the force of justice...Because when one suffers for the sake of heaven, withstanding a temptation [or trial], and accepts one's suffering with love, because one considers oneself fortunate to have been able to make this sacrifice for the Creator—with this, by the quality of divine justice, one is entitled [for God to] bestow grace and grant many good things, in this world and in the next.²⁶

Conclusion

It is not the purpose of the present study to chart a definitive path that sincerely committed Jews should follow with regard to rejecting or employing modern technologies, but rather to point out the pitfalls and benefits of both alternatives. It is readily evident, moreover, that whatever one's decisions with respect to technology, it is more and more important in the modern age to remember always that we are bidden to be a holy people.

Reviewing the variety of understandings for the concept of *k'dushah* adduced by our rabbis, it may be valid to surmise that there are differing degrees or modes of holiness. While each of us must strive for holiness, just as each of us must strive to learn Torah, we will surely not all accomplish our goals in the same way or to the same degree.

Holiness is not a one-size-fits-all attribute; that was a basic mistake made by Korah when he challenged Moses and Aaron, arguing that “the entire congregation [of the Jewish people] are all holy (*kullam k'doshim*)...and therefore why do you set yourselves above God's people?” The ensuing debacle, wherein Korah and his cohorts were swallowed alive by the earth, definitively proved the superiority of

Moses.²⁷ A similar failure to comprehend that there are differing levels of *k'dushab*, closeness to God, was what provoked Miriam to speak against Moses, when she protested that he had separated himself from his wife due to the demands of his prophetic responsibilities: “Was it only with Moses that the Eternal spoke—didn’t God speak with us as well?” (Numbers 12:2). She assumed that since she (and many others) had also experienced the transcendent phenomenon of prophecy, and none of them had been instructed to separate from their spouses, it was pretentious for Moses to assume a different mode of behavior. But God clarified that there are, in fact, different modes of prophecy, each denoting a distinct level of holiness. It was only with Moses that God spoke *peh el peh*, “mouth to mouth” (Numbers 12:8); communication with others was on a more “mundane” level.

Although the directive to be holy applies to the entire Jewish people, that does not mean that all people can, or do, achieve the same level of holiness. What is clear is that all of us are bidden to rise as high as we can, and no one is entitled to opt out with the claim that such a goal is not appropriate for him or her. Nor need all people follow the same path for achieving holiness. Some may find their path to holiness impeded by their constant interaction with social media, while others can access technology in moderation, deriving maximum benefit without impediment to their focus on the sublime. Not all people are the same, and one size does not fit all when it comes to lifestyles either. What is essential, however, is that we embark upon a serious discussion about how to infuse our homes, our families, our workplaces, and the entire Jewish community with a greater sense of *k'dushab*. A prerequisite to engaging in such a conversation is the acceptance of the goal of becoming a holy nation.

NOTES

¹ *Sefer Ha-mitzvot, k'lal 4* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1990), p. 17.

² Ironically, the overflow crowd was able to gather “virtually” and view the rally by means of modern technology. For a report of the *asifa* in the mainstream Jewish press, see Ari L. Goldman’s article in the *The New York Jewish Week* of May 22, 2012, also available on the newspaper’s website at http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new_york/will_asifa_net_results.

³ Rashi to Leviticus 19:2.

⁴ It must be pointed out, however, that there is a broad spectrum of holiness. Not every individual will attain the same degree of *k’dushah*, yet everyone must strive to reach the highest possible level for him or herself.

⁵ Genesis 4:23; see comments of Nahmanides there.

⁶ Rashi to Genesis 4:23.

⁷ The Hebrew phrase is found at 2 Samuel 2:25.

⁸ This is without even considering the invidious effect that pernicious posts and cyberbullying can have on individuals. There is more than one instance on record of teenagers committing suicide because of hurtful or hateful postings about them online.

⁹ Part of the fascination with technology may arise, for some people, from lack of involvement in ideas or thoughts that they find meaningful. Nature abhors a vacuum, and that may in part explain why young people get so caught up in playing with their technological toys. If their minds and hearts were filled with Torah, or *hesed*, or community involvement, they might find that they have considerably less interest in technological distractions.

¹⁰ There are some people who maintain that since most of us do not have (or will not choose) the option of isolating ourselves and our children from the outside world, it is important to increase our Torah knowledge and study, so that we are fortified against letting the secular world overwhelm our values. People well-grounded in Torah wisdom are less susceptible to being overly impressed by modern science and technology. So for example, when students learn that our rabbis two thousand years ago knew that hemophilia is a disease that presents in males but is genetically transmitted by females—a fact that modern science did not appreciate until about a century ago—it can only strengthen their faith that the Torah is divinely inspired. Such faith will then be better able to withstand the lure of the outside world. Another example would be discovering that many of Freud’s brilliant insights into the human psyche and the symbolism of dreams are also found in the Talmud, written more than a thousand years earlier. Modern medicine has concluded that a fetus’s gender is determined by the sixth week of gestation—which the ancient rabbis knew almost two thousand years ago. If people want to take on the intellectual challenges of the modern world, some will say that we should adjust their education to help them withstand its

attraction, as seeing the wisdom of the ancient rabbis can only bolster one's *emunah* (faith).

¹¹ Jonathan Rosenblum, "Half Shabbos Is No Shabbos," *Jewish Action* (Spring 5722), p. 12.

¹² Numbers 6:1–20.

¹³ B. Taanit 11a.

¹⁴ This is also the view of Nahmanides in his commentary to Numbers 6:1-20.

¹⁵ *Pahad Yitzhak* §128. The same idea is expressed also in *Pri Tzaddik*, *parshat Va-yeilekh 1*; *Tzidkat Ha-tzaddik* §234.

¹⁶ B. Bava Metzia 92a and Shabbat 13a.

¹⁷ It has been suggested that Jewish schools should refuse to enroll any student whose parents have the Internet in the house without a filter, and only provided that the parents need it for work.

¹⁸ *Sha'ar* 1:6.

¹⁹ Cited in the commentary of ibn Ezra to Genesis 1:1.

²⁰ B. Shabbat 88b.

²¹ See the introduction of of Rabbi Shlomo Avraham Razachta to his collection of responsa, *Bikkurei Sh'lomo* (ed. Pietrikow, 1894), p. 12.

²² The *S'fat Emet*, commenting on Numbers 14, analyzes the motivation of the spies in the wilderness along these same lines. He explains that they deliberately painted a frightening picture of what awaited the Jews in the promised land because they feared that the confrontation with the mundane requirements of having to earn a living and being involved with the myriad needs of fashioning a society would pull the Jews down from the pinnacle of holiness that exemplified their existence in the wilderness. There, they saw daily that their sustenance came directly from God and that they were totally dependent on divine bounty. This closeness to God, this high level of holiness, would be lost when they entered the land. Therefore, suggests the *S'fat Emet*, the spies deliberately chose an alternative that would keep the Jews in the wilderness.

²³ B. Eiruvim 13b. See also Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *y'fashfeish*: "One should review one's deeds, clarify what one did wrong, and repent." The Talmud notes that some versions of the rabbinic debate have a slightly different conclusion: *y'mashmeish b'ma-asav*, "let one examine the quality of each of one's actions"; see Rashi, *ibid*.

²⁴ B. Yoma 71a.

²⁵ We should point out in this context that when the sages prayed that the temptation for idolatry be eradicated because it was too powerful a lure for the majority, the outcome was not entirely positive—because the removal of the great pitfall, idolatry, had to be balanced by the removal of its great opposite attraction, prophecy. With the end of idolatry, the Jewish people also experienced the end of prophecy. Removing the impediment meant also removing the opportunity to attain high spiritual summits. Furthermore, the Talmud notes that the sages initially also sought to abolish other forms of temptation, but that

abolition had a negative effect on the world's dynamic growth and productivity. No one wanted to strive for achievement anymore. Recognizing that they had gone too far, the sages later changed course in order to permit humanity to function according to the divine plan.

²⁶ *Mikbtav Mei-Eliyahu* (Jerusalem, 1997), vol. 5, p. 532.

²⁷ Numbers, chapter 16; quoted verse is 16:3.