

MAKING THE INTERNET KOSHER

ORTHODOX (HAREDI) JEWS AND THEIR APPROACH TO THE WORLD WIDE WEB

by

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This article surveys the approach of Orthodox Judaism – especially the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Judaism – to the Internet. In the introduction we compare the approach of the Abrahamic religions to the Internet. Then we focus on the Haredi community (especially in the contemporary State of Israel) and their specific approach to the Internet. This article argues that the use of the Internet, although officially banned by many Haredi Rabbis, is in fact tolerated on a pragmatic basis. We also survey which kind of “protection against secular threads” the Haredim¹ use (filtering software, Holy Shabbat protection). In the last part of this article the role of the Internet in Israeli religious politics, and by its uses by fundamentalist and radical Jewish groups, is surveyed.

KEYWORDS

Abrahamic religions and the Internet, Amish, Halakha, Haredim, the Internet, Judaism, Neturei Karta, Rabbi, Religious fundamentalism, Religious law, Religious Zionism, Salafism, Shabbat, Sharia

1. INTRODUCTION

The Abrahamic religions oscillate between two basic attitudes to the phenomenon of Internet – concern and pragmatism. Their concern is related to the unlimited liberalism of the Internet, which could undermine each religion’s authorities and values. Religious authorities as well as many adherents oftentimes fear the “moral poison” which media and technological advantages allow; they fear especially the negative influence of media on young people and children.

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¹ Hebrew sing.: *Haredi*, plur.: *Haredim*.

On the other hand, religious figures may adopt a pragmatic approach to the Internet because this media is indispensable for the modern way of life and, more importantly, offers the possibility to propagate particular religions by the means of the World Wide Web.

Only a few of today's religious groups maintain complete separation from modern technology. We can find some of them even in the very heart of a technological superpower, the USA. Some Amish and Hutterite² (Christian) communities living in that country (but not faraway from technological centers, such as the Amish in Pennsylvania) even still forbid, or at least strictly limit, the use of electricity. But only small and closed communities could afford to live such a traditional lifestyle. In a broader picture, main established religious authorities are not so conservative. Even though there have generally been great disputes among them concerning the use of new technologies (not only computers and Internet but much earlier also electricity, cars, radio, television, telephones, cellular phones etc.), most of them finally accepted the usefulness and indispensability of modern technology, including the Internet.

In secularized Western societies there is usually no such opposition against modern technology on the part of Christian religious authorities, although exceptions exist.³ In traditional Muslim or Jewish religious environments, the approach to technology was often more conservative. But nowadays some Salafi and Wahhabi preachers who want to live in the "same manner like the companions of the Prophet Muhammad"⁴ and who, formally at least, strictly forbid depictions of living creatures, can be seen

² In the USA some Amish communities still forbid electricity, and they prefer to use gas-lamps, gas-stoves and diesel engines for some of their farm operation. They do not use cars, rather small horse carriages. Hutterites also attempt to remove themselves from the outside world, and up until recently, their colonies still had only one common phone (TV's, radios and other electronic devices are forbidden). Some Hutterite homes now have computers and radios; a minority of communities have some filtered Internet access. Some of their colonies have recently struggled with the proliferation of computers and have clamped down such that computers are no longer allowed in households and their use is limited to only business and farming operations including animal, feed, and crop management. See *Denlinger, M. A.: Real people – Amish and Mennonites in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania*, Herald Press, Scottsdale – Waterloo, 1993.

³ See *Ornella, A. D.: The Promethean Myth – An Argument For Methodological Atheism*, Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology, Volume 3, no. 1 (in press).

⁴ Salafism is a stream of contemporary Sunni Islam which emerged in 19th Century Egypt. Salafism wants to purify Islam of "non-Islamic" influences. Wahhabism is sometimes interpreted as being a synonym of Salafism but this is not accurate. Wahhabism follows the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who lived on the territory of contemporary Saudi Arabia, and it has many similarities with Salafism but also some differing features specific to the desert-Bedouin tribal territories of the Arabian peninsula. Both Salafists and Wahhabists believe that contemporary Muslims are leading non-authentic and decadent lives. That is main reason they want to return to their religious roots of the generations of the Prophet (in Arabic, Salafi, which means literally "early generations" – in other words: "generations of the Prophet").

See *Čejka, M.: Encyklopedie blízkovýchodního terorismu* (Encyclopedia of the Middle Eastern Terrorism), Barrister & Principal, Brno 2007 (The Czech Republic)

speaking and preaching in television and driving their cars. In Afghanistan, Pakistan and in many other states (including European states where we can find radicalized Muslim communities) the fundamentalist radicals use the most sophisticated technologies and employ the Internet to spread their ideas all around the World.⁵ In the Jerusalem neighborhood of Meah Shearim, in Brooklyn, New-York, or in the London districts of Stamford Hill and Golders Green one can see Orthodox Jews dressed according to 19th Century fashion from Lithuania and Galicia but carrying the latest cell-phones and doing their business with the use of laptop computers. So we can see that even the orthodox groups within great religions really have learned that they cannot entirely avoid the accelerating technological development.

This article will make a brief survey of how the religious Jews, especially the (ultra) orthodox Haredim, deal with the challenges presented by the Internet.

2. WHO ARE THE HAREDIM?

From religious and political points of view, the Jewish religious society is very structured and by no means homogenous. Different Jewish groups and movements vary greatly in respect of their observation of Halakha⁶, their attitude towards Zionism, and their perception of the State of Israel. Therefore some basic information about these issues is required for even a rudimentary understanding of our issue. I have developed the following typology,⁷ which should help us to understand the religious divisions within the Jewish Community:

I. Secular Jews⁸ (not observing Halakha)

II. Traditionalist Jews (observing some aspects of Halakha)

III. Religious Jews (observing most aspects of Halakha, at least in principle)

A. Non-Orthodox streams (mostly in USA – Conservative, Liberal interpretation of Halakha)

B. Orthodox (strictest Halakhic Tradition)

C. Modern Orthodox (Daati – Religious-Zionist, Jewish Settlers)

⁵ For example, numerous pages sympathizing with Al-Qa'eda are regularly being blocked by anti-terrorist intelligence services. Even the „amateur“ Islamist radicals can make their own „radical videos“ which they can very easily put on YouTube. Sometimes it is quickly deleted but it is very easy to place it on YouTube again or on other pages.

⁶ *Halakha* or „Jewish Law“ is a collective body of Jewish religious law. Halakha (in Hebrew: „To Walk“) encompasses biblical law (the 613 *mitzvot*) and later Talmudic and rabbinic law together with Jewish customs and traditions. Islamic law, Sharia (in Arabic, „Path to the source“), was inspired by Halakha, among other sources.

⁷ Čejka, M.: *Judaismus a politika v Izraeli* (Judaism and Politics in Israel), Barrister and Principal, Brno 2009 (The Czech Republic)

⁸ „Secularism“ does not always mean „atheism“. For example, in Israel 53% of Secular Jews do believe in God (source: The Central Israeli Bureau of Statistics - <http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader>). But e. g. in the Czech context, if we speak about secularism, in most of the cases it is very close to „atheism“.

D. Ultra Orthodox (Haredi – Non-Zionist but in reality pragmatic on the issues of Zionism and Modernity)

1. Hassidic Haredim
2. Non-Hassidic (Lithuanian, Mitnagdi) Haredim

E. “Ultra-Ultra” Orthodox (Haredi – Anti-Zionist)

1. Hassidic Haredim (e.g. Satmar Hassidim)
2. Non-Hassidic Haredim (e.g. Neturei Karta)

The following table shows the development of religious self-identification among Israeli Jews (percentage of the total Israeli Jewish population):

	1979	1986	1989	1992
Religious Jews	17 %	15 %	17 %	20 %
Traditionalist Jews	41 %	38 %	33 %	29 %
Secular Jews	42 %	47 %	51 %	51,00%

Source: Dowty, A.: *The Jewish State – A Century Later*,
University of California Press, Berkeley 1998.

3. BANNED BUT USED

In this article we will focus especially on the Orthodox Jewish communities which are the most interesting in terms of the theme of this article. Non-Orthodox communities are more or less open to technological developments. But approach taken by Orthodox, especially Haredi, communities to the Internet is noteworthy in the context of religion and technology, since although it forbids the Internet verbally, it allows for its pragmatic acceptance in daily life.

In the year 2000 a group of prominent Haredi rabbis (some of them poskim⁹) from the most important communities in Israel issued an important statement concerning the Internet:

“The Internet is a danger 1,000 times greater than television, which was banned 30 years ago, and is liable to bring ruin and destruction upon all Jews.”¹⁰

⁹ *Poskim* (in singular, *posek*) are the highest authorities on *Halakha*. They decide on Halakhaic cases where previous authorities are inconclusive, thus they bring Halakhaic decisions to the final stage. The number of contemporary poskim is limited. The most famous contemporary Israeli poskim are Yosef Shalom Eliashiv (Ashkenazi Haredi community), Mordechai Eliahu (Religious Zionist Community) and Ovadia Yosef (Sephardic religious community, the supreme rabbi of the Israeli Shas party).

¹⁰ Portnoy, E.: *Haredim and the Internet*, Modiya, 2004

Rabbi Leyb Keleman added: "The Internet has penetrated our community, but with the same strength [with which the Haredi rabbis avoided television], we shall uproot it....Our gedolim [the greatest Haredi spiritual authorities] have advised us to remove internet from our homes, and so we will do."¹¹

So in fact when we read these statements it sounds very much like a complete ban of the Internet. But in reality many of the Haredim are great pragmatists in many fields, and they use computers and the Internet to conduct their business and to communicate with their friends and relatives.

In November of 2003, the official English language journal of Agudat Israel,¹² *The Jewish Observer*, dedicated an issue to the dangers of the internet. The article contains excerpts from the Novominsker Rebbe's Yaakov Perlow's address given at the Torah Umesorah¹³ convention on the problems of the Internet, in which he alleged that "[t]he Internet, with a flick of a button, invades a Jewish home, a Jewish soul, and makes moral disaster." But the Rebbe added: "[I]f your business cannot get along without it, you must create the strictest controls around its use. Do not give it free rein! Remember that you are dealing with a force that contains spiritual and moral poison."¹⁴

So hand in hand with the ban of the Internet we find a rabbinical dispensation permitting use of the Internet for business purposes. In Judaism, and similarly in Islam, there is not only a single (or a limited number) of religious authorities who can decide what is Halakhic and what is not. Judaism is a religion of discussion and of different opinions. So we have a situation similar to that in the case of Islamic fatwas; that is - we can find contradictory authoritative decisions of respected Rabbis and religious authorities.

4. FILTERING AND BLOGGING

Some other Rabbinical Halakhic decisions emphasize that the Internet should not, under any circumstances, be available in the home.¹⁵ But in actuality, many Haredim have Internet at home, so that it is very difficult to monitor their conduct. Hence it is very probable that many Haredi Jews have Internet access without stricter limitations.

In order to achieve "Kosher purity" of the Internet, some Haredi Jews use many varieties of filtering software. It is possible to use some "general"

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Agudat Israel* is an international Jewish Haredi movement and a traditional Israeli Haredi Ashkenazi political party.

¹³ *Torah Umesorah* is the *National Society for Hebrew Day Schools*, An American Haredi organization that fosters and promotes Torah-based Jewish religious education in North America.

¹⁴ Portnoy, E.: *Haredim and the Internet*, Modiya, 2004

¹⁵ Ibid.

filtering software, but even specifically “Jewish” filtering software which eliminates almost all “inappropriate” webpage content is available on some specialized web pages.¹⁶

As one can easily discover through a variety of search engines, the Haredim do not use the Internet solely for the most necessary tasks, but also for many other purposes. So in fact one can find on the Internet numerous more or less “Kosher” pages such as specialized Haredi discussion forums, Haredi blogs (so called J-Blogs and J-Blogosphere);¹⁷ some Haredim even use Facebook.¹⁸ Some Jews also use specialized Jewish dating web pages such as JDate or JSingle¹⁹, but in the Haredi environment more traditional ways, usually matchmaking (in Hebrew: Shidduch), are preferred.

Bearing in mind that English is the Lingua Franca of the Internet, that for Haredi Jews the Hebrew language is sacred (and most suitable for religious purposes only) and also that a significant portion of World Jewry lives in the USA, we can understand why Jewish religious pages are also very often written in English. But of course we can also find such pages in Hebrew, Yiddish and other languages which are spoken in countries where religious Jews reside.

5. OBSERVE THE HOLY SHABBAT ONLINE!

As observance of the Shabbat is extremely important, especially for Haredi Jews, one crucial issue concerning Judaism on the Internet is the determination of when Shabbat begins and ends. The Shabbat is the holiest day of the week (beginning on Friday evening and finishing on Saturday evening),²⁰ numerous limitations are placed upon Jews during that day. Of course, the use of computers and the Internet is absolutely forbidden during Shabbat. Some Haredi pages are even closed during Shabbat and it is interesting how the page authors calculate when Shabbat begins and ends. In some cases that determination is not made according to the local time of the home-server, but rather according to the local time of the place from which the visitor accesses the page. For example if you access the pages of the Israeli Haredi

¹⁶ In this context, “inappropriate” means any and all content which can endanger Haredim (especially the young) due to its “secular” content – especially pornography, homosexuality, drugs (but also missionary activities of other religions) etc. See, for example, the following pages with filtering software: <http://www.ayinroah.com>; <http://www.yeshivanet.com>; <http://www.thejnet.com>.

¹⁷ See, for example, the following pages: http://blogcarnival.com/bc/cprof_43.html; <http://english.webster.co.il>; <http://bh.hevre.co.il/forum/listforums.asp>; http://www.israelforum.com/blog_home.php; http://hydepark.hevre.co.il/forum.asp?forum_id=9672.

¹⁸ We can find, for example, the Facebook page of the current Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Mr. Yona Metzger.

¹⁹ See <http://www.jdate.com>, <http://www.jsingles.com>.

²⁰ Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Shabbath, to observe Shabbat throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant (Exodus 31:16).

political party, Shas, from the Czech Republic during time of Shabbat (in the Czech Republic, that is) you will see the following notice:

The Web Shabbos Service: Dear Surfers! This site observes Shabbat and Jewish holidays, and in these days surfers can not enter. Now the site is closed because: Today is Shabbat [or Jewish holiday]. The Shabbat in the Czech Republic will end in X hours and Y minutes. We'll be glad to serve you at other weekdays.²¹

The Internet also contains innumerable pages about the Jews, Judaism, Haredim, Kaballah, and Israel. Some of them are created by the Haredim themselves; the majority are created by secular Jews or by non-Jews. Of course the quality of these pages varies considerably.

6. THE INTERNET AND THE ISRAELI JEWISH POLITICS

Understandably, the Internet is very often used to disseminate political information and propaganda. If we focus specifically on Israel, Jewish religious parties are no exception in this respect. Almost all political parties in Israel have a webpage, usually written in the modern Hebrew (Ivrit) language, but some include also English and Russian versions (if they concentrate also on immigrants from the former USSR).

Israeli religious parties present themselves on the Internet in various and substantially different manner. For example, the Ashkenazi Haredi parties, United Torah Judaism (including Agudat Israel party) and Degel HaTorah, do not have Internet pages at all, thus they observe the official rabbinical ban on the Internet. These parties have a very stable constituency, and one can say that they are interested only in the votes of the Israeli Haredim, usually of Ashkenazi origin, not in secular or not so strictly religious voters. The Ashkenazi Haredi voters usually strictly follow the recommendations of their rabbis, and in fact these parties do not need the Internet to spread their ideology.

The Sephardi-Haredi religious political party, Shas, presents a different case. Shas is usually more powerful in Israeli politics because of its bigger strength and popularity. The power of Shas stems from the fact that this political party does not concentrate only on deeply religious Haredi voters of Sephardic origin but also on less-religious (traditionalist) Sephardi Jews. So in fact, the Shas party is not a 100% Haredi party like the Ashkenazi ones. Thus this approach significantly increases Shas's influence on potential voters. So it is understandable that Shas uses webpages²² to inform voters about its activities (e.g. about the party's sophisticated social system)

²¹ Check the Shas political party website (<http://www.shasnet.org.il>) during Shabbat time.

²² <http://www.shasnet.org.il>

and about recommendations from its political and spiritual authorities (especially the rabbi, Ovadia Yosef, who is depicted at the top of Shas's webpage).

The modern Orthodox (Religious-Zionist) political parties have a very liberal attitude to the Internet. Most of them have their own web pages (some of which are even in English). So one can find on the Internet information about Mafdal (National Religious Party), the National Union and Ahi parties and also about the more liberal Meimad party.²³

So we could see that some modern, Orthodox Jewish parties use the Internet in a manner similar to most of the political parties in the Western world, and they use their webpages to help them in addressing the electorate. On the other hand, we can see that traditional Orthodox parties very strictly observe the ban on the Internet. It should be noted that these parties can succeed in the elections without the use of the Internet and information technologies in general, since they rely more on the "traditional" methods for electoral-advertisement (especially rabbinical recommendations).

7. RADICALISM ONLINE

The last issue which we will deal with is the phenomenon of Jewish religious radicalism. According to my typology, there are there are two main streams of Jewish religious radicalism:

I. Religious-Zionist Radicalism

II. Anti-Zionist religious fundamentalism

Both of these streams are deeply religious in terms of their Jewishness, but in certain respects they entirely contradict each other. The first group is very pro-Israel; sometimes it even criticizes the contemporary Israeli establishment for not being "Jewish-Israeli" enough. Many Religious-Zionist radicals are Jewish religious settlers and they harshly criticize the concessions which Israeli governments make to the Palestinians, such as the evacuation of settlements (in Sinai, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank settlement outposts), the treatment of Jewish radicals etc. Some of their pages were banned by the Israeli officials but one can still find many pages supporting Jewish Radicalism (and the banned Kach and Kahane Chai! parties),²⁴ as some of the radical websites are not placed on Israeli servers but on the US-servers where they could enjoy wider freedom of speech than in Israel.

²³ See <http://www.mafdal.org.il>, <http://english.meimad.org.il>, <http://www.moledet.org.il/english>, <http://www.beytenu.org.il>

²⁴ See <http://www.newkach.org>, <http://www.hebron.com>

Many such pages are connected with the radical US Jewish organization the Jewish Defense League.²⁵

One can also find many particular pages supporting deeds of Jewish radicals such as rabbi Meir Kahane, mass-murderer Baruch Goldstein or Yigal Amir, the assassin of Prime Minister Rabin.²⁶ The campaign to free John Pollard, an Israeli who spied on the USA for Israel, is also popular in Israel and enjoys the support not only of radicals but of some moderate Israelis.²⁷

The second group of Jewish religious radicals are fundamentalist anti-Zionists. Nowadays they are usually connected with the international Jewish anti-Zionist organization, Neturei Karta. This group represents only a tiny fraction of the World Haredi Jewry (a few thousand Haredi Jews in Israel, Great Britain and USA) but it is very visible because of its extreme anti-Israeli positions.²⁸ Neturei Karta is very active on the Internet with various freshly-updated web pages.²⁹ The media appears wherever this organization is active, as the public is very interested in Haredi Jews in black kaftans and hats demonstrating side-by-side with Palestinians against Israel or visiting TV-discussions on the Hezbollah TV channel Al-Manar or meeting the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Both streams of Jewish religious fundamentalism – religious anti-Zionism and extreme religious Zionism – are very controversial. For example the members of Neturei Karta, however extreme their opinions are, are just non-violent fundamentalist activists. But recent history has shown that especially the religious Zionist radicalism can be very dangerous not only for its opponents but also for many Jews: Many Palestinians were killed or seriously wounded by fundamentalist religious Zionist settlers from Kach and Kahane Chai! parties (e.g. the above-mentioned mass murderer Baruch Goldstein), Israeli prime minister Rabin was killed by a religious Zionist assassin and many other Israeli pro-peace politicians were endangered by radicals from the same group.

²⁵ <http://www.jdl.org>

²⁶ See <http://www.kahanetzadok.com>, <http://www.yigalamir.co.il>

²⁷ See <http://www.jonathanpollard.org>

²⁸ Neturei Karta fundamentalism comes from theological opposition to the contemporary Zionist State of Israel because, according to Neturei Karta rabbis, the Jews are forbidden to have their own state until the coming of the Messiah. Neturei Karta has been vigorously Anti-Zionist since 1938 when it split away from the more pragmatic Agudat Israel movement. At present the Neturei Karta still refuses to make any compromise with Zionism, rejects the legitimacy of the State of Israel and supports everyone who is fighting against Israel (e.g. Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran). Activists of Neturei Karta are very visible because of their Haredi dress, together with hard anti-Zionist slogans and banners in their demonstrations in the USA, Great Britain and Israel.

See Čejka, M.: *Encyklopedie blízkovýchodního terorismu* (Encyclopedia of the Middle Eastern Terrorism), Barrister & Principal, Brno 2007 (The Czech Republic)

²⁹ See <http://www.nkusa.org>, <http://www.jewsnotzionists.org>, <http://www.jewsagainstzionism.com>, <http://www.israelversusjudaism.org>

8. CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article was to provide the reader with a basic introduction to the topical issue of the Israeli religious Jews' attitudes towards the Internet. The wide range of approaches to the Internet is astonishing: from total dismissal of the Internet, through wide pragmatism, to utilizing the Internet. The approach of Jewish religious groups and personalities to the Internet also proves that Judaism is an extremely differentiated religion with many – often contradictory – opinions on some crucial matters.³⁰ But in general, even the most orthodox Jewish groups have shown that they are flexible and realistic and that they know they cannot isolate their adherents from the accelerating technological developments. Rather than doing that, a lot of technology which eventually gains acceptance has been symbolically changed and appropriated into the religious narratives. For example, if the Haredi Jews use the Internet and computers they are made “Kosher” by using them only for appropriate tasks (religious study and learning, studying of rabbinical opinions etc.), and with the help of filtering software they are protected against the most dangerous secular threads (pornography, sexual content, influence of other religions etc.). Some Jewish groups even try to stimulate the observance of the holiness of religious festivals and Shabbat through the internet, by specific measures like turning off their pages in Shabbat time.

It is open to question how the Haredi Jews' relationship to the Internet will develop in the future. In the State of Israel there is a permanent tension between the secular and Haredi populations.³¹ And there are also two very important phenomena relating to this issue. First, the Haredi population is the fastest growing part of the Israeli Jewish population.³² Second, the Haredim have always tried to influence the Israeli state from the theocratic point of view.³³ So there is a possibility that the Haredim will try to influence or limit the use of the Internet (i.e., by making it Kosher) not only for themselves but also for all the Jewish Israelis. Of course, their success in this endeavor would depend on their political influence, which is difficult to predict accurately. But the long-term trend since the 1980's has been that the

³⁰ It also shows that Judaism is – similarly to Islam – far from being monolithic and “conspiratorial”. And it is exactly that insight which could help to repudiate the opinions of contemporary anti-Semites and Islamophobes.

³¹ My further research on this topic can be found in Čejka, M.: *Judaismus a politika v Izraeli* (Judaism and Politics in Israel), Barrister & Principal, Brno 2009 (The Czech Republic)

³² Source: The Central Israeli Bureau of Statistics (<http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader>)

³³ There is a long-term tendency on the part of the Israeli Haredim to impose religious legislation not only on themselves but also on all Jewish Israelis. Since 1948 there have been a number of disputes and conflicts between secular Israelis and the Haredim concerning Shabbat observation, Kosher food, the funding of religious schools, army recruitments etc.

Israeli Haredi parties have increased their influence. In any case, the effort of the Israeli Haredim to “make the Internet more Kosher” (against the liberal concept of the Internet) could in the future become another bitter issue in the complicated conflict between secular and Haredi Israelis.

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