Is the Sefer History?

The future of the Sefer, the Jewish book, is currently uncertain, but not for the reasons you might think. Jews have been traditionally called the “People of the Book.” We maintained a culture of literacy even before public education became a societal goal. My non-Jewish business colleagues are often surprised when I tell them that my children learn to read Hebrew before English. Reading, particularly religious texts, is in our blood and our culture. In contrast to the Catholic Church’s pursuit of heresy among early translators of the Bible into English, Jews have generally treasured translations into the common language. We are commanded to read the weekly Torah portion with a translation, and we have an ancient tradition, albeit largely abandoned today, of reading the Bible in synagogue each week accompanied by a translation of each verse.1 Everyone, not just rabbis, must be well versed in the Torah.

The Talmud (Gittin 60b) says that, originally, only the Bible was allowed to be written. We must retain the oral nature of our other traditions. However, due to the danger of forgetting these sacred ideas, the Sages eventually permitted us to write them down. This led to the publication of the Mishnah and Gemara, Midrashim, and all subsequent Torah books. While there is a dispute today whether someone who publishes an unnecessary book violates this prohibition, everyone agrees with the vital importance, the national necessity, of publishing original Torah insights.2 So important is the publication of Torah books that we are told to set aside this prohibition rather than risk losing these ideas.

But Jewish book sales are down. On its own, this is unsurprising during a devastating economic downturn. When unemployment approaches 10 percent, it is hard to take a complaint about sagging book sales seriously. Financial difficulties do not restrain people from buying the must-have new book, the publication that excites their imaginations and draws them to bookstores, but such exceptions only prove the rule. Most books today languish on store shelves as cautious consumers spread their limited discretionary income ever more thinly. However, I think that something larger than penny-pinching is occurring. Even when the economy improves, there is a larger trend that may remain and jeopardize the future of the Sefer.

A Tale of Revolutions

A brief history of publishing revolutions can help us see what lies in the future. For centuries, publishing was largely a matter of hand copying manuscripts. During the Second Temple era, scribes gathered in the Temple in Jerusalem and copied books from a primary manuscript. These copies...
were then distributed and sold.\(^3\) This tedious process continued in varying forms, among Greeks, Christians, Muslims and Jews, until the fifteenth century when Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press changed the world. Books could be produced en masse and sold at more reasonable prices. Those who could read had access to a much larger library of knowledge.

This technological revolution was the third in a series that changed humanity. Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in an impassioned argument for educating the third world, describes the dramatic effects of these three innovations.\(^4\) Writing, initially with pictograms, created civilization. It enabled the permanent transfer of information from one person to another. However, reading and writing were limited to the few who mastered the complex written language, who studied as many as twenty years to acquire these skills. The development of alphabets, which encapsulate entire languages in only twenty to thirty characters, opened information to wider classes of people. The alphabet broke down barriers of society. It created the possibility that anyone could acquire the knowledge that allowed for exercising societal power.

The printing press brought literacy to the masses. Within fifty years of its invention, readers had access to more than fifteen million copies of over 35,000 titles across Europe. This spreading of knowledge eventually led to political and religious revolutions. The newfound wisdom empowered the public and gave people the ability to disagree with and overturn the ruling classes. Five centuries later, publishing has experienced another revolution.

**The Internet As a Game-Changer**

Writing created information. The alphabet spread it. Printing democratized it. The Internet is drowning it. With the Internet, people now have access in their palms to more information than ancient Egyptians could find in the entire Library of Alexandria.

Vast stores of knowledge are available online. Google Books is a massive project to digitize libraries. If I come across a phrase that sounds like it was stated by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, I search for the phrase on Google Books and, faster than I could flip through a card catalogue, I find through this web site the exact book and page in which the phrase appears.

HebrewBooks.org started as a web site to perpetuate the many obscure sefarim published in America. After philanthropic grants allowed substantial expansion, the site now provides an extensive library of downloadable books in searchable PDF format, free of charge. Responsa and codes, Talmud and commentaries, encyclopedias and journals are all available immediately on one’s laptop. Daat.co.il is another incredible online library, full of complete books of Jewish thought, law and Biblical commentary. And there is much more available all over the web, and even on new devices.

Certainly the latest innovation in book publishing is the electronic reader—the Kindle, iPad, Nook and more. E-book sales have skyrocketed as consumers quickly opt to carry inexpensive e-books in one device. What does this mean for the Sefer? On the one hand, we will still need the basic texts in book format for use on Shabbat. However, we have more options on the other six days. Aaron Herman and David Merel of jTouch are adapting Torah texts for iPad use, enabling a new type of interaction where sources are literally at the reader’s fingertips. By touching a verse or phrase, one can navigate through texts and instantly access commentaries, vocalization and related passages. While this is intended for school use so that students can keep all their textbooks on one device, it seems likely that within a few years consumers will have access to a vast interconnected Torah library on a single portable device. Perhaps we will use Shabbat to study basic texts and the rest of the week to explore commentaries and reference material on jTouch libraries. Yet, as we gain access to so much information through such powerful tools, we face a new danger.

We are bombarded with too much information. News comes to us all day from multiple sources. Opinions, both essays and comments, abound. Parashah insights flood our inboxes. Daily digests, hourly updates, constant data flows, libraries at our fingertips—the human mind is not equipped to handle this much information at once. We lack, if not the capacity, then the training to adequately process it all.

And it isn’t just a matter of digesting everything; we need to decide how much credibility to assign the information. Readers of all ages encounter massive amounts of information, with no guide to determine its accuracy or relevance. Just because something is on the Internet does not mean it is true. We live in a library where the bookshelves have collapsed on us, and we are struggling to make our way through the rubble of constant information. But volume is not the real issue.

**Give It to Me Quickly**

The problem facing the Sefer is not why to pay for enlightenment when you can get it for free. It is that we have so much information online, we lack the time for books. Once we finish catching up on our e-mails, blogs, tweets and Facebook updates, we have no time for books. The saving grace for Orthodox Jews is Shabbat, when we shut off all our communication devices. Finally, in between prayer, family, friends and food, we have time for...
OU Torah: Something for Everyone

OU Torah, the OU’s exciting new online Torah content section, offers something for everyone. Geared for Jews across the spectrum, from the beginner to the seasoned learner, OU Torah offers a dazzling array of shiurim and classes, including:

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books. But can we totally turn off the effect those devices have on us?

The bombardment of information is not only time-consuming, it has also changed the way we process knowledge. We have stopped reading carefully and only pay attention to the newest and most exciting pieces. We often fail to read to the end of e-mails and articles. We skim, so we can cover more ground. The information triage our brains perform six days a week cannot be easily turned off on the seventh. The world, Orthodox Jews included, has collectively lost its attention span. Any given person can, and in my opinion should, avoid this pitfall or retrain himself to frequently read long books and articles. But we would be naïve to believe that any such movement will take place on a wide scale. Instead, we find the Sefer endangered by a decreasing ability to focus. Unless the Sefer can adjust.

A New Kind of Sefer

The solution to the Internet is to embrace it on our terms. If people process information differently, then books need to be written in a different way. We must produce books that accommodate the new way of reading. The “vort” genre, in which books consist of short Torah insights, is perfect for our unfocused generation. Articles can be shortened and footnotes can serve as hyperlinks, offering readers interested in a specific point more information and suggestions for further reading. Concluding summaries can highlight the main points for impatient readers. Long books can be broken down into bite-size sections that people can read in spurts.

This article is an example of how section headers can turn a long article into short segments, each readable on its own but connected with teasers. Journalists have long known how to gain readers’ attention by using provocative headlines and placing the most important information at an article’s beginning because most readers will not reach the end. Today, we must all be journalists. The essential Torah content cannot be changed, but the form in which it is presented must.

The Sefer isn’t dead. It merely needs to adjust to changing realities.

Notes
2. See Responsa Chatam Sofer, Orach Chaim 208; Responsa BeTzel HaChachmah 4:84.