How media have molded modern Jewish religion

Jews, God, and Videotape
*Religion and Media in America*
By Jeffrey Shandler

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Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Videotaping bar and bat mitzvahs, many observant Jews maintain, violates Talmudic prohibitions against work on the Sabbath, distracts the worshiper from worship, and transforms tranquil and dignified ceremonies into spectacles.

And yet, as Jeffrey Shandler reminds us, more and more parents - and teenagers - insist on documenting their families' coming-of-age rituals.

In *Jews, God, and Videotape*, Shandler, a professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University, provides a fresh and fascinating account of the impact of technology on the religious life of American Jews during the last one hundred years.

The "new media," he argues, have helped shape a popular Jewish religion, more concerned with consumerism, celebrity, and community than with theology or rabbinical authority. Reorganizing emotion and experience, this "religion in the making" is struggling to identify strategies through which "the People of the Book" can accommodate and/or confront how Jews can (or should) fit in and stand out.

In a richly detailed chapter on *The Eternal Light*, a long-running radio broadcast, created in the 1940s by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Shandler shows how the medium can affect the message.

Aimed primarily at a non-Jewish audience, the overarching goal of the show, which reached about five million Americans by the end of the decade, was to combat anti-Semitism by demonstrating (through historical dramas and literary adaptations) that Jewish "particularism" was incidental to its "fundamental universalism" and that Jews were anything but anti-American radicals or communist sympathizers.

Populated by actors whose voices were ethnically "unmarked," *The Eternal Light*, Shandler speculates, allowed Jews, sight unseen, to invite themselves into the homes of their non-Jewish neighbors, confident that they were subjects of "respectful attention."

More often than not, Shandler implies, modern media have marked - but have not made - changes in Jewish attitudes and behavior. The themes of *The Eternal Light*, for example, reflected the "powerful integrationist...
impact" of the post-World War II suburban migration of American Jewish culture. When, in the 1960s, concern about anti-Semitism gave way to fears of the "erosion" of a distinctly Jewish culture, the ecumenical, assimilationist *Eternal Light* dimmed.

Frequently, according to Shandler, modern media provide an arena for contests over appropriate conduct. E-cards, he points out, reflect a range of responses to the "December dilemma" of Jews. Some postulate parity between Christmas and Hanukkah, pairing Santa Claus with Tevye. Others, however, are more hostile to "interfaith" sentiments.

In 1989, Shandler writes, the American Jewish Committee, in conjunction with the National Conference of Christians and Jews, denounced greeting cards that combined the religious and cultural symbols of the two holidays as "an affront to the integrity of distinct faiths."

With respect to religion, Shandler writes, provocatively and persuasively, the notion of "separate but equal" lives on.

Recently, Shandler reveals, ultra-orthodox Jews have overcome an aversion to technology as a corrupting distraction - and begun to use television, video, and the Internet to spread their messianic vision. Under the leadership of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who almost never left his neighborhood in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, the Lubavitcher hasidim have raised millions of dollars through telethons, even as they make sure that the arms, legs, and breasts of the female celebrities who appear on the small screen are covered.

DVDs and Chabad.org allow Schneerson to communicate with his disciples long after his death.

Technology, Shandler concludes, hasn't changed everything. It can - and does - facilitate traditional communal rites, including synagogue worship, as well as more secular practices.

For many, it may be less helpful in forging new links than in renewing, in the virtual world, a sense of belonging to links already established in the "real" one.

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