



חבורת מהות היהדות

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From the Chabura **New Topic!**
By: Adam Friedmann

Motivations for Technology: On Markets, Bridges, and Bathhouses

We continue this week in our discussions about technology.

What motivates the creation and deployment of new technologies? One of the most eloquent Jewish sources to discuss this in recent memory is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*. In the essay, R' Soloveitchik sketches two typologies of human characteristics based roughly on the two creation accounts in chapters 1 and 2 of *Bereshit*. Adam the first, who is interested in science and technology, is "overwhelmed by one quest, namely, to harness and dominate the elemental natural forces and to put them at his disposal" (page 13). Adam the first is driven to overcome disease, hunger, and natural disaster in order to attain a life of dignity and majesty at the top of the natural order. This describes a system of motivation for technological innovation. It enables humanity in its pursuit of a dignified life, or, in more contemporary terms, 'encourages human flourishing'.

R' Soloveitchik may be describing an ideal, or perhaps the best of the enlightenment-driven scientific world he saw around him in the early 20th century. However, using technology to pursue human dignity or flourishing is not a given, nor is it universal. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Genealogy of Morals*, III:23) argued that the fact that scientists are driven to give themselves over to the pursuit of truth is the result of foundational ethics that are primary to the scientific quest itself. As those ethics shift, so too do the goals of science (something we have witnessed in recent years). The same is true of technology. Just as not every human society's primary ethical goal is human dignity, so too their motivations for creating technology can vary sharply.

Chazal were keenly aware of this issue. In the Mishnaic period, the Roman empire extended into the Land of Israel. With it, came some of Rome's technologies. The Gemara (*Shabbat* 33b) relates a discussion among the Tannaim about these:

Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosei and Rabbi Shimon were sitting, and Yehuda, son of

of converts, sat beside them. Rabbi Yehuda opened and said: How pleasant are the actions of this nation, the Romans, as they established marketplaces, established bridges, and established bathhouses. Rabbi Yosei was silent. Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai responded and said: Everything that they established, they established only for their own purposes. They established marketplaces, to place prostitutes in them; bathhouses, to pamper themselves; and bridges, to collect taxes from all who pass over them.

What is this debate about? Maharal (*Chidushei Aggadot*, ad loc.) notes a parallel Talmudic passage (*Avodah Zarah* 2b). There, the Gemara narrates G-d's final judgement of the great empires of history. In that case, the Romans claim that their marketplaces and bathhouses were established for the benefit of the Jewish people. G-d reprimands them using Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's logic, that they did everything for themselves. The Maharal asks, if G-d, as it were, agrees with Rabbi Shimon, how can Rabbi Yehuda argue? He answers that Rabbi Yehuda must have agreed, but censored his real opinion for fear of Roman punishment.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (*Ein Aya*, ad loc.) explains that the debate wasn't about Rome's ultimate motivations, but rather about practical outcomes. The Romans' ethical vision for society was different from the Jewish one. However, argues Rabbi Yehuda, certain technological innovations play a part in both visions. Whatever the Romans' motivation for creating them, marketplaces encourage commerce, bridges enable rapid travel, and bathhouses improve personal hygiene and health. These benefits, provided by Roman innovation, fit within the Jewish vision for a society improved by technology and are therefore commendable.

Rabbi Shimon argues that this is misguided. The fundamental motivation of a technology will always drive its application and undermine any other accidental benefit. In creating marketplaces, the Romans were primarily interested not in commerce but in lechery and hedonism. The prostitutes installed in the marketplaces did more damage to society than the accidental benefits accrued by increased commerce. The same is true of bathhouses and bridges. The demented ethical motivations of the Romans make all of their technological innovations fundamentally dangerous.

It's doubtful that Rabbi Shimon's critique can be directed equally at all societies throughout history. But it remains as sharp today as it was in his own times. In the coming weeks we will, G-d willing, examine how profit, the overwhelming motivator in Silicon Valley, has warped the deployment of otherwise positive technologies like social media. Whether the positive social benefits of a product like Facebook outweigh its addictive and culture-destroying characteristics is a serious and open question.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 9:2 — Awe and Awareness

This week's mishnah outlines a framework for recognizing God's presence in both the grandeur of nature and the particulars of human experience. We are taught blessings for powerful natural phenomena, such as lightning, thunder, and earthquakes—events that inspire awe in all of humanity—and for personal events, such as hearing good or bad news. Through these blessings, the mishnah underscores God's presence in both the macro and the micro—the enduring forces and ephemeral features of life.

Bartenura highlights a distinction between global and local natural phenomena. When witnessing powerful, universal events like thunderstorms, one recites *she'kocho u'gevurato malei olam*—"He whose strength and power fill the world"—because they reveal divine might on a global scale. However, for mountains, rivers, and deserts, which are significant only to those in their vicinity, the blessing *oseh ma'aseh bereishit*—"He who makes the work of creation"—is recited. The mishnah reminds us that awe is not a singular experience. Witnessing God's overwhelming power and contemplating the beauty of creation require different modes of attention.

A related debate concerns the identity of *Yam HaGadol*, the "Great Sea." According to Bartenura, it refers to the Ocean (*Yam Okeanos*), which, due to its sheer size and significance, warrants its own distinct blessing. In this view, the mishnah follows the pattern of previous blessings: just as certain natural wonders require special acknowledgment, so too does the Ocean, which surpasses all other seas. Tiferet Yisrael, however, identifies *Yam HaGadol* as the Mediterranean, emphasizing its connection to the Land of Israel rather than its global prominence. This debate reflects two perspectives: one in which the blessing is an extension of universal awe, and one in which the more personal significance of Israel's geography is highlighted.

Tiferet Yisrael also observes the mishnah's careful wording regarding blessings on news. While good news is described as *besorot* (tidings), bad news is referred to as *shemuot* (things heard). The implication is that the former should be actively shared, while the latter should only become known through happenstance. This subtle distinction conveys an ethical lesson: while joyous events should be shared, distressing news should be handled with discretion. Though there is tremendous value in recognizing God's justice in suffering, we are required to balance this value against a sensitivity toward others.

Ultimately, this mishnah presents a model for divine awareness that embraces both the vast and the personal. Whether marveling at a thunderstorm or processing personal sorrows, one finds profound significance in all aspects of life. At the same time, the mishnah reminds us that not every experience must be broadcast; reverence for God must be accompanied by ethical responsibility toward others. Through these blessings, one cultivates a worldview that is both expansive and compassionate, equally attuned to both the rhythms of nature and the drama of human life.

Sforno on the Parsha By: Nochum Spiegel

Terms Of Endearment

In the year 1548, R' Ovadiah Sforno sent a gift and dedication to King Henry II of France. Sforno had prepared a Latin translation of his work *Ohr Amim*, in which he discusses Creation, aspects of G-d and His relationship to the world, along with the nature of man's soul and ultimate purpose. Analysis of our parsha will show that this act was not simply a symbolic gesture to a head of state but is rooted in a key principle of Sforno's thought.

When Hashem first speaks to Moshe, he instructs him to tell Pharaoh, "Thus says Hashem, Israel is **My son, My firstborn** (*bechori*)" (*Shemot* 4:22). Now, in the prelude to *Matan Torah*, Moshe is told to tell Bnei Yisrael "If you will surely listen to My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be for Me a **treasured possession** (*segulab*) **from among all the peoples**, for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be for Me a **Kingdom** (*mamlechet*) **of Kohanim** and a holy nation" (19:5-6). What is the significance of these terms of endearment and in what respect is Am Yisrael distinguished from the other nations?

Sforno (*Shemot* 4:22, 19:5-6) explains that the ultimate future goal of humanity is that all people should call upon the Name of Hashem to serve Him together (see *Tzephaniah* 3:9). Still, Yisrael will be honored above all of them. They serve Hashem as a **son**, out of love, not to pursue reward and avoid punishment. They were the first nation (*bechori*) to serve Hashem when all others strayed from Him. Being possessors of the *Tzelem Elokim*, all of humanity is precious (*segulab*) before Hashem—"Beloved is man for he was created in the image" (*Avot* 3:14)—but it is Yisrael who is "a *segulab* from among all the peoples". This is fulfilled by taking on the role of **Mamlechet Kohanim**, servants of Hashem enjoined with the task of teaching and instructing the nations in the true knowledge and service of G-d. Yeshayahu (61:6) describes the nations as calling the Jews "*Kohanei Hashem*". He further prophesied, "And many nations shall say: Let us go up to the mountain of Hashem, to the house of the G-d of Jacob, and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths, for out of Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of Hashem from Yerushalayim" (*Yeshayahu* 2:3). The elevation achieved through receipt of the Torah is manifest as the willingness to accept the responsibility to pass its message beyond those present at Har Sinai.

"Therefore I called this book *Ohr Amim* (Light to The Nations) as its purpose is to present a constant light before mankind and to remove the dirt covering the eyes of the nation of Avraham so that they should raise their voices to open the eyes of humanity to the service of G-d, for we are all His creation" (Sforno, Introduction). In his G-d-appointed role as a member of the *Mamlechet Kohanim*, Sforno seeks to teach man's appointed king and to effect the potential impact he can have on his society.