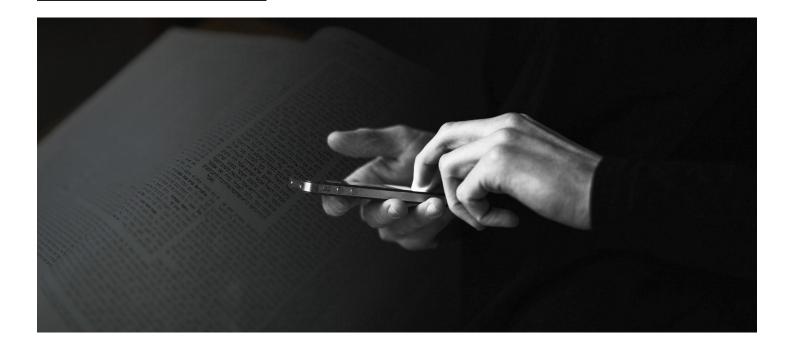Mrs. Chaya Batya Neugroschl

Head of School, YU High School for Girls

CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL CULTURE: A CHALLENGE TO OUR COMMUNITY, OUR CULTURE AND OUR TEENS

Chanukah marks the victory of the Maccabim who famously rallied under the banner "*Mi LaHashem Elei*" in defiance of the challenge of Hellenism. The Maccabean revolt was triggered by the policies of Antiochus IV, who, in a sharp departure from his father's more mild and accommodating policies, imposed a radical program to force the Hellenization of Judea. Aside from the political context and the inherent religious conflict between the Jews of Judea and the Syrian Greeks' radical Hellenization, the events of Chanukah are an opportunity to examine an age-old question: when is cultural integration positive, and when it is best resisted? Even while acknowledging the positive contributions of Greek culture, our traditional sources mostly focus on the insidious threat that cultural integration posed to Judaism and to Jewish survival.[1] In every age, as cultural paradigms shift, we must consider a similar question, discern a worthy threat brewing in our midst, and consider what correctives are needed.

Certainly, finding fault lines or paradigm shifts in cultural developments is challenging. It's common for many adults to consider the challenges of any new generation with mild contempt. Just being distant from the realities that kids face makes it easy to justify dismissing their challenges as comparably insignificant. Anyone can finish the sentence "When I was your age …" with numerous conclusions, from serious to humorous, to convey that kids nowadays have it easy. A paradigm shift, however, is defined

by a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumption, and this means that the realities before and after the shift are essentially different.[2] In 2018, when digital device distraction has become a near ubiquitous cultural concern, we can identify a number of major shifts in our contemporary reality that have the potential to challenge both the behavior and the ethics of our community.[3] I would like to explore a few specific features of our contemporary culture, emerging from the digital age, and how they are even more prominent and problematic in the emerging "teen culture." These include personal relationship building, membership and group affiliation, and general mental health. Teenagers spend an average of seven to nine hours a day dedicated to device time. Multiple social media platforms replace in-person prosocial relationships.[4] Our teens are growing up with new assumptions about their relationships, their loyalties, and themselves. These experiences are part of a profoundly challenging set of norms that teens must navigate as they develop their increasingly counter-cultural identities as Orthodox Jews.

Understanding Culture vs. "Teen Culture"

What is changing about the experience of culture for our teens? An investigative report, published by *The New Yorker*, explored the fact that the word "culture" was named the most popular word queried in the Merriam Dictionary search engine. This spike in searches for the definition of the word culture, it was suggested, reflects a new need to understand how the word Culture (capital C) was changing.

The traditional definition of Culture as aspirational self-betterment was shifting toward its use to describe a commonality, a trend in ideas or behaviors of a specific sub-group; as it is used in "teen culture, rap culture, campus culture, culture of privilege, etc." This type of culture inducts you into a group and is absorbed through osmosis in the group's experiences. In contrast, the institutions of "high culture" are aspirational and support those who consciously work toward self-betterment. And these institutions still persist, as does the self-conscious ladder of cultural improvement. However, when language changes, it signals a paradigm shift.[5]

What is the impact of such a widespread popular redefinition of culture? How might this shift impact the way Orthodox teens consider their own ethical and behavioral norms? Our teens, born after 1996, are part of Generation Z and the iGeneration.[6] This generation represents the pendulum swinging away from the "Millennials." The Millennial Generation confronted the shifting sands of their personal, financial and global security in the wake of 9/11 and the economic crises of 2000 and 2008. When it comes to Jewish identity, millennials predominantly self-reported that being Jewish was very important to them.[7] GenZ/iGen children, on the other hand, were raised in a substantially different world. While millennials are described as self-absorbed and unrealistic, GenZ members are "conscientious, hard-working, somewhat anxious and mindful of the future."[8] These GenZ characteristics are clearly positive personal traits. Those researchers using the label iGen are describing both the "i" of the internet as well as the "i" of a high degree of

individualization that characterizes the increasingly personalized user experience of the internet and all digital platforms. From music choices to online shopping and news stories, our online browsing histories are a data mine refined for algorithms that reflect our personal preferences. So while market researchers are tracking the social economic trends of this demographic in order to harness and retail to their needs and interests, we ought to consider how these trends might impact identity formation for our teens, as their online experience is increasing shaped to meet their expectations.

Customization: Echo Chambers and Silos Can Hinder Development

It is well established within developmental psychology that part of the "job" of a teenager is to find the boundaries in their lives, test them, and in "testing" these demarcating lines, developing their own sense of right and wrong.[9] For most teens, this expresses itself normatively, as they collect experiences and encounters with both ideas and people, familiar and new, and approach them all with a newfound lens of curiosity. Through this process of self-reflection and individuation, teens often try on idealism, skepticism, enthusiasm or contempt as they attempt to explore all the contours of their world, whether intellectual, social, or emotional.[10] Teens may find themselves reshaping their relationships as they develop answers to personal identity questions: Who am I? What do I stand for? Who do I agree with? Whether with parents or peers, this doesn't always indicate rebellion; instead, it is a

key part of solidifying their growing independence. What happens when online platforms are customized to reflect their personal interests and "likes," and neatly avoiding sites, news items or issues that they "dislike"? It creates an echo chamber of the familiar, where they engage primarily with customized content that essentially prevents them from encountering a broad range of ideas, experiences, or other content that they may not agree with or "like." Therefore, it is important that the iGen expects to experience a constant series of "new and better." Every purchase is a "new generation" that not only replaces old features with new ones that are faster, brighter, and more engaging, but that also includes a higher level of customization. Instead of the World Wide Web being a portal to a broad range of culture, news, etc., it is increasingly a carefully curated and customized platform that reflects only the popular trends that we have chosen to react to over the course of our internet surfing. The comfort and convenience factors aside, this is essentially narrowing our online communities, and creating silos of "friends" and echo chambers of ideas. Certainly everyone online needs to contend with whether the benefits outweigh the costs of digital distraction.[11] However, these customizing algorithms may target teens disproportionally, since they are potentially even more vulnerable to the negative impacts. Quantitatively, teens spend much more time online, whether gaming or on social media platforms, and qualitatively, these curated communities become their online identities that are reinforced in these silos and echo chambers.[12] Even teens are worried about the impact of their digital "addictions."[13] Whereas

the Millennial Generation has full non-digital communities as well, for the iGeneration these online identities may be replacing real-life communal identities that are relatively less significant in their lives. In discussing the negative impact of digitizing children's free time, Dr. Steiner-Adair, clinical psychologist and instructor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, reflects that, "children have to know that life is fine off the screen. It's interesting and good to be curious about other people, to learn how to listen. It teaches them social and emotional intelligence, which is critical for success in life."[14] Instead, the contemporary "teen culture" is dominated by online identities and online communities that are being shaped by likes and preferences; behaviors that may be more reactive to powerful neurostimulants than to aspirational cultural engagement in the pursuit of self-betterment.

Without a conscious effort to counteract these realities, many teens of the iGeneration will shape personal identities that may be limited by their inability to explore differences freely, and to thereby develop their own opinions with greater breadth and depth. As one blogger put it: "Does digital engagement encourage better decision-making, or merely reinforce prejudice?"[15] Dr. Steiner-Adair adds, "The big disconnect really is the paradox of the age. We are unbelievably connected to each other in ways we've never been able to be and yet the quality of our connection has led to an increase in loneliness, in face time, in speaking to one another, in being fully present with each other. All the human attributes that make us fully human in our connections to each other."[16]

Research in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology is needed to explore antidotes to all of us struggling with digital distraction, especially in support of the prosocial development of identity formation in iGen teens. However, I want to suggest, humbly, that our community seriously considers our responsibility to our teens (and our adults) with the following midrash in mind. The verse is Kohelet (4:12) states:

וְאִם יִתְקְפוֹ הָאֶחָד הַשְּׁנַיִם יַעַמְדוּ נֶגְדוֹ וְהַחוּט הַמְשֻׁלָּשׁ לֹא בִמְהֵרָה יִנָּתֵק.

Also, if one attacks, two can stand up to him. A threefold cord is not readily broken!
Kohelet Rabba explains that the "threefold cord" refers to Shabbos, Torah and *chesed*.

The first strand of this strong cord is Shabbos, which allows us to reconnect to our faith, to Hashem and to each other. Shabbos is a prominent prosocial tool that has become recognized as a technology addiction antidote, singled out as a prime example of establishing "no tech-zones" as part of a family's routine. Whether at dinner, in the living room, between specific hours, or in the car, it is recommended that families establish these habits to provide their kids (and themselves) a refuge, a mental and behavioral break, during which they can reconnect with each other. Shabbos is a built-in reconnector. It is the anchor of our spirituality, our relationship with Hashem, and asserts the centrality of that faith above the centrality of technology. Of course the neurostimulants that are associated with digital temptations make this a new challenge for some frum kids, and parents must be prepared to create plans around the possibility that their

children may be too connected to their devices to easily disconnect even for Shabbos. Having no-tech zones, or times, throughout the week, can serve as important training spaces for our children to exercise asserting their counter-cultural identities and breaking the bonds that otherwise may develop as part of their regular development.

Second is the strand of Torah, which certainly refers to our commitment to Torah law and Torah ethics, as the barometer of our choices, behaviors, and values:

כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו ובהם נהגה יומם ולילה.

For [Torah and mitzvot] are our lives and the length of our days and we will reflect upon them day and not.
Ma'ariv prayer

However, in the age of highly curated digital identity, where teens are used to having multiple identities on varied digital platforms, this compounds the need to pursue a Torah ideal of some objective truth, not the virtual "truths" that surround them. Living a Torah life means that we are guided by rules and values that are not affirmed by the numbers of likes in our virtual communities. That we are proud to be counter-cultural in our assumptions requires that we expose the vacuity of the relativism promoted by media coverage of facts and alternative facts, by the growth of fake news platforms, or viral trends as more and more normative. This means that we must proactively educate our children about how, in the age of information, there is also a surplus of misinformation. While it is all at their fingertips, they may need to work harder to develop the discernment necessary to truly pursue truth. We need to model, discuss, provoke and explore

ways to bring our children, and our community, out of the echo chambers that are growing around us and in which we may all feel so comfortable. The iGeneration will likely know their way around the internet much more deftly than we could even imagine — and we must add to their navigation, the skills needed to find the nuance, complexity, uncertainty and confidence to be critical consumers of the "teen culture" that surrounds them. "In" the culture but perhaps not "of" the culture.

The third strand of this threefold cord is *chesed*, acts that require us to give to others. There is no shortage of *chesed* opportunities in our community. However, it is very important for our teens to be connected to our local community in a giving capacity. *Chesed* activities allow teens to see themselves filling a communal need and connects them with parts of our community that they would otherwise not naturally associate with.

In an age where online activities are designed to engage our time and attention, our buying capacity and our affiliations, we must work hard to avoid them replacing some of our core real-life identities and assumptions. These three core values, these three mitzvot, Shabbos, Torah and *chesed*, have the combined power to strengthen a counter-cultural move to secure an Orthodox identity for all of us, and especially for our developing iGeneration.

Endnotes

1. https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/785181/mrs-c-b-neugroschl/yafta-elokim-l-yafet-vayishkon-b-ohalei-shem-can-we-beautify-judaism-with-greek-culture-/

2. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradigm%20shift

3. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/opinion/sunday/smartphone-addiction-teenagers-stress.html

4. http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/08/22/how-teens-and-parents-navigate-screen-time-and-device-distractions/

5. https://www.newyorker.com/books/joshua-rothman/meaning-culture

6. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/rewired-the-psychology-technology/201003/welcome-the-igeneration

7. https://www.barna.com/research/beliefs-behaviors-shaping-jewish-millennials/

8. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/fashion/move-over-millennials-here-comes-generation-z.html?_r=0

9. http://journalpsyche.org/jung-and-his-individuation-process/

10. https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence2.html

11. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/07/the-dangers-of-distracted-parenting/561752/

12. http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/08/22/how-teens-and-parents-navigate-screen-time-and-device-distractions/

13. http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/

14. https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/06/screen-addiction-is-taking-a-toll-on-children/?_r=0

15. http://rozenbergquarterly.com/digital-engagement-in-a-post-actual-world-silos-echo-chambers-and-lies/

16. https://dianerehm.org/shows/2013-08-14/catherine-steiner-adair-big-disconnect