INTERNET MEDIATED MIRACLES: THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE’S ONLINE IGROS KODESH

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of the Internet by Lubavitcher Hasidim. It focuses on the (now deceased) Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Igros Kodesh* — a compilation of his writings. Following his death in 1994 it became commonplace for Lubavitchers to consult the physical text to seek the Rebbe’s advice, blessings and ‘miracles’ - a modern day form of bibliomancy.

Recently it has become possible to perform this activity online. Using data from a chat forum I analyse attitudes towards the online version and discuss my findings in relation to studies examining the relationships between online and offline religious experience using Durkheim’s categories of the sacred and profane.

Introduction: Online Religion

This paper focuses on one specific online activity among Lubavitcher Hasidim - the use of the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Igros Kodesh* — a compilation of his writings, which Lubavitchers deploy as a form of bibliomancy. Through the analysis of messages displayed on a chat room message board, I examine the relationship between online and offline activities and how they conceptualize the Internet in terms of the Durkheimian distinction between sacred and profane.

Religion has become one of the most popular and pervasive topics of interest online. Although for many conservative religious groups, religious practice and lifestyle are shaped by their rejection of modernity, which is seen as secular, as Hadden and Cowan (2001: 8) rightly note ‘There is scarcely a religious tradition, movement, group or phenomenon absent entirely from the net’. Research on religion on the net has focused upon several interconnected themes: virtual community (Dawson 2004); identity (Lovheim 2004); evangelism and proselytization (Caraega 1999); the status of cyberspace as sacred or profane (O’Leary 1996, Cobb 1998,

Modern communication technologies have changed the meaning of place, space and religiosity and Internet-mediated rituals raise interesting issues concerning the sacred and profane. O’Leary (1996) asserts that the Internet is approached as a technological landscape that transforms religious expression and understanding. As Durkheim (1912/2001:36) asserted, religious thought categorizes all things “into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the words profane and sacred”. Durkheim stated that the sacred represents that which is “ideal and transcendental,” while the profane represents the material world.

What constitutes the sacred varies according to faith/religious group. Durkheim argued (p. 37): “The circle of sacred objects cannot be determined … once for all. Its extent varies infinitely, according to the different religions.” … Nothing is inherently sacred, i.e., humanity classifies things as such; “there are sacred things of every degree.” (p. 38) and continued (p. 229): “The sacred character assumed by an object is not implied in the intrinsic properties of this latter: it is added to them. The world of religious things is not one particular aspect of empirical nature; it is superimposed upon it.”

In a similar way Eliade (1983) suggested that sacred space is somehow marked out and distinguished from profane space. Wagner (2012: 79) remarks that the appearance of virtual reality on the conceptual scene has spurred a rehabilitation of Eliade’s terms to examine how the virtual relates to contemporary religious belief and practice. As she correctly points out, there has been some divergence of opinion as to how the ‘virtual’ relates to the ‘sacred’. Are they identical, can the sacred manifest in both the physical and the virtual worlds or are some ‘worlds’ sacred while others profane? The answer to these questions varies according to different authors and they cannot be solved in any normative way. As Wagner (2012: 96) notes, as we are forced to address the problem of virtual reality, we are increasingly forced to recognize our own roles in demarcating space, in labelling it as sacred, profane or, perhaps, as a combination of the two.

Internet Mediated Miracles

One aspect of religious experience that has attracted little academic attention is the relationship between online and offline requests for divine
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interventions including blessings and ‘Internet-mediated miracles’. Most work in this area has concerned online prayer requests within mainstream Christianity (see Young 2004 on Christian prayer sites) although websites representing other faith traditions as diverse as Buddhism and neo-Paganism sometimes include petitionary activities including online prayer. Within other faith traditions, as with Orthodox Judaism, there may be differences of opinion concerning the authenticity of such undertakings. For example http://www.balkantravellers.com/en/read/article/2273 reports the Romanian Orthodox church’s disapproval of one such service. There are examples from Buddhism (http://en.tibet328.cn/01/01/201202/t1098875.htm ‘Buddhist temple offers e-blessing service’, Dec 2012) and Paganism (http://spiralgoddess.com/Homage.html).

Judaism and the Internet

Orthodox Jews comprise a specific group that has been neglected in terms of the study of Internet use. Zaleski (1997) examined a variety of religious websites including those of the Jewish Chabad-Lubavitch, the Zen Mountain Monastery, and the Catholic Information Center. Although these cyberministries capitalise on the latest technological advances, representatives of all religions interviewed repeatedly point to the limitations of the Internet because of its break with the body. Although a few see this new frontier as sacred, most think of it only as “a holy tool.”

Research on Judaism and Internet use to date has largely focused on the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. Use of the Internet is viewed by Orthodox Jews in an ambiguous way (Livio and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2007). On the one hand, it is a carrier of secular values, a gateway to the outside world and is therefore considered a threat by undermining religious values such as gender hierarchy. On the other hand it presents significant socio-economic opportunities. The inherent tension between modern socio-economic necessities and the desire to protect the community’s traditional and religious values — the ‘dangers’ and ‘possibilities’ — renders the Internet a site of constant deliberation and ambivalence (see also Cejka 2009).

Formally, rabbinical authorities have issued several proclamations and rulings over the past few years, expressing different positions on the use of the Internet. These range from a complete ban on Internet use (pronouncing the new medium a “lethal poison”)) to permitting Internet access solely for professional use or religious purposes (Horowitz 2001).

Livio and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2007) note that Ultra-Orthodox Rabbinical authorities have traditionally denounced nearly all forms of
modern communication (except newspapers), maintaining that they signify secularity and idolatry (see also Tsarfaty and Blais 2002). This applies first and foremost to television, which is considered by them to be one of the major evils of secularism and whose potential harmful influences are often constructed in terms of defilement and contagious diseases within Ultra-Orthodox discourse. Initially, the rabbinical authorities also banned other technologies, amongst them the telephone, mobile phone, and to a certain extent also radio, until socio-economic necessities resulted in their introduction into the community (Horowitz 2001). However, the use of these technologies often remains a dilemma, in some cases involving compromises such as “kosher” mobile phones, which offer conservative Orthodox Jews a phone free from ‘corrupting’ influences.

In practice, despite these reservations, a growing number of Ultra-Orthodox individuals deploy the Internet for both work and leisure, although there are very few accurate data (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Portnoy 2004). As Cejka (2009: 100) notes ‘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); some Haredim even use Facebook’.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe

Hasidism is a form of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism which derives from Eastern Europe and was founded by the Baal Shem Tov (Dein 2002). What differentiates Hasidism from other forms of Judaism is the Hasidic emphasis on the tzadik – the spiritual leader who acts as an intermediary between God and Man. Most Hasidic communities abound with stories of miracles that follow a yechidus, a spiritual audience with a tzadik: infertile women become pregnant, individuals with terminal cancer are cured, wayward children become pious, businessmen become rich. Many Hasidim assert that miracles can occur after partaking of the shirayim (the leftovers from the Rebbe’s meal), such as miraculous healing or blessings of wealth, marriage or piety.

Lubavitch is one of the largest Hasidic groups and is popularly known as Chabad. Founded in the 18th century by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, it has an almost worldwide presence. Its headquarters is at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights in Brooklyn — called ‘770’ by
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Lubavitchers — and served as the office of the last two Lubavitcher Rebbes. There are other large communities in London, Amsterdam, Tel Aviv and Toronto. From 1951 Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe who died in 1994, led the group. For several years prior to his death his followers held him to be Moshiach — the Jewish Messiah. Following his death a schism developed between two opposing factions — the messianists who maintain that his death was illusory and he is the long-anticipated Messiah and the anti-messianists who contend that he could have been Moshiach if God had desired, but having died, his messianic status is invalidated (Dein 2010, 2011). During his lifetime much Lubavitcher lifestyle centred on the Rebbe who was seen by his followers as a ‘miracle maker’. Followers would regularly write, fax, or email him asking for a blessing in anticipation of ‘miraculous’ changes in their life. Typically they would petition him regarding advice for health, wealth, education and marriage and few would make any major life decision without first consulting the Rebbe. His perceived supernormal powers derived from the fact that he was seen as an intermediary between God and mankind allowing Divine energy to flow into the world.

Many people met the Rebbe personally at a weekly ceremony called ‘Dollars’ at which each person attending would receive a dollar and ask the Rebbe for a blessing. Up to 6,000 people at a time attended this ceremony where Lubavitchers reported miraculous events resulting from the Rebbe’s blessings — healing of a relative’s sickness, finding a spouse, providing infertile couples with children, or the acquisition of wealth. I have previously reported upon several instances in the illness context (Dein 2001).

Following the Rebbe’s death Lubavitchers continue to email or fax his gravesite — the Ohel, in Queens, New York — whereby his secretary reads out the request. Like other tombs of Jewish saints, the Ohel attracts tens of thousands of visitors a year, who often travel long distances to ‘commune’ with Rabbi Schneerson and has become a major pilgrimage site for Lubavitchers and non-Lubavitchers alike. His grave is carpeted with Kvitilim (petitions) over a foot high.

An Instance

Mordechai travelled from the United Kingdom to visit the Rebbe’s tomb. Born into a Lubavitch family in Stamford Hill, London, Mordechai had spent many years teaching in a Jewish Boy’s school. Married with nine children, his mother was seriously ill with bone cancer. When visiting the Ohel he petitioned the Rebbe to provide a cure for her and give her the
ability to get through her chemotherapy. During my interview with him several months after he had returned to Britain, he recounted that his mother had gone into remission and was functioning well. He impressed upon me the fact that despite his ‘apparent death’ the Rebbe is still very active in the world.

*Lubavitch and the Internet*

“Judaism on the Internet at the speed of light.”

Lubavitch has readily deployed the Internet as a way of teaching Jewish values and practices. The Chabad leadership see it as a neutral medium, which has the potential to be holy. One article states: “Everything that G-d created in His world, He did not create but for His glory” (Ethics 6:11) The Internet, too, is G-d’s creation — intended to increase His glory; to bring the world to a greater awareness of its Creator. (http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/675087/jewish/Is-the-Internet-Evil.htm). There is little doubt that the Lubavitcher messianic campaign has benefitted from the use of modern media technology deployed for this purpose since the arrival of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe in the United States in 1940 to the death of the ‘current’ Rebbe and it continues into the present. As Shandler (2009) remarks, Lubavitch has forged a new spiritual relationship with the Rebbe through innovative and provocative media practices: print advertising, photography, radio, the Internet, and television. Unlike other Hasidic groups in the United States, Lubavitch has a commitment to visibility in the public sphere and this commitment is central to its mission of fostering increased religious observance and propagating their messianic ideas. Emphasizing the visual experience rather than the typical logocentric emphasis in the study of Hasidism, Katz (2010) underscores the fact that the Chabad-generated image is the leading image of contemporary Jewish religious life in American popular culture. As he points out (p. 13), the messianists have deployed this image in the years after the Rebbe’s death for their own ideological purposes. They have used the vast number of images from his leadership years to anoint him visually as King Messiah.

Throughout his leadership, which began in 1950, the Rebbe advocated an energetic outreach program to non-Orthodox Jews involving high-tech equipment: radio, television, telephones, beepers, and finally, computers. Far from being opposed to modern technology the Rebbe readily embraced the resource — which was far from surprising given his own background in electrical engineering at the Sorbonne. Rabbi Schneerson never saw any ideological or practical contradiction between faith and
scientific research. For him, objective research reveals our unity with the Creation and brings us closer to our faith in the Creator of the world. As the Rebbe once told journalist Shlomo Nakdimon, “Every new revelation in the realm of science undermines its predecessor and shows the temporary nature of scientific theories, as compared with the permanence of Toras Moshe (The Law of Moses).”

The use of the Internet by Lubavitch is far from new. The website www.chabad.org, started by Rabbi Yosef Kazen, came online in 1993, providing access to texts such as Tanya (the Lubavitcher mystical text), images, and audio and video recordings. It currently claims to serve up to a million people yearly displaying information about Chabad philosophy and history, Jewish holidays, life cycle celebrations and religious practices. The website is available in several languages, and it targets different audiences such as women and children. Through the site, it is possible to submit prayers to be read at the Rebbe’s grave, donate to charitable causes, post questions for a rabbi, and shop on various Judaica sites. Links are also provided to various Chabad centre websites worldwide.

A highlight of Chabad’s Internet resources is askmoses.com, a unique Jewish website offering confidential, free and live chat for spiritual guidance 24 hours a day, 6 days a week. Instant advice from qualified scholars and rabbis for Jews and gentiles alike seeking information on any subject in English, Hebrew, Russian, Spanish and French is readily available. It is also the only website offering a personalized SMS service for Shabbat and Holiday reminders.

Although the Internet is readily deployed by Lubavitchers to provide information, its founder expressed concerns about the performance of online Jewish ritual. According to Zaleski (1997), Kazen himself questions the authenticity, indeed the actual possibility of performing some Jewish rituals online. When asked about ‘virtual’ synagogue ritual he asserts:

“It can be duplicated, but only to a certain extent. There are limitations. For example, in Jewish life, the man who is above the age of thirteen has to put on tefillin or phylacteries [leather boxes containing scrolls of Torah passages] you’re putting it on your arm, and you’re wrapping it on your arm and you’re putting it on your head and you’re saying a specific prayer. Yes, the prayer itself can be read off the Net. But the actual act needs to be done by a physical person. The concept of Judaism in general is using the material — the animal cowhide, the hair of the lamb created into wool — so that there’s actual participation in all the different four levels: the inanimate, the flora, the fauna, and the human being — all into one aspect… Can I have a virtual meal?” he continues.
“How long is it going to hold me for? I can read a recipe, but I still have to go out there and buy the eggs, buy the sugar.” (http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/335578/jewish/The-Soul-of-Cyberspace.htm).

In a similar way, he asserts that a virtual minyan (a collection of ten men for public worship) is not possible since such a minyan requires a physical embodied presence.

**Connecting with the Rebbe**

In recent years various messianic websites have been developed through with the aim of enabling connection with the Rebbe. Like other religious groups Lubavitchers have shaped and negotiated the Internet for their own purposes. Since the Rebbe’s death it has been used as a forum to propagate the views of the messianists who assert the illusory nature of the Rebbe’s death and his status as Moshiach. The anti-messianists have also widely deployed this resource to oppose their views (Dein 2010, 2011). The messianists have utilized the web to provide several ‘spiritual’ benefits of an educational and ritual nature. Internet technology enables them to transmit the messianic ideology rapidly around the globe, creating a sense of community and potentially bringing new members to the movement. The sites combine written information with video footage of the Rebbe’s farbrengens (joyous gatherings) and audio recordings of his numerous discourses. Some of the websites contain video clips of the Rebbe distributing dollars and sound recordings of his followers singing the yehi- a song referring to the fact that he is alive. There are autobiographical accounts of individuals whose lives have been significantly influenced by the Rebbe, emphasizing his miraculous feats. Many sites provide ‘proofs’ of the fact that the Rebbe remains ‘alive’.

Examples of such sites include:

- YechiHaMelech.org available on chabloglubavitch.blogspot.com/
- Moshiachtv.blogspot.com
- www.kingmessiah.com
- www.770live.com (referring to the Rebbe’s last abode)
- www.moshiach.net (including “Living With Moschiah”, described as “A weekly digest about Moschiah for the visually impaired and blind);
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- www.chabad-uk.com which is compiled in the UK and represents the views of Beis Menachem, a messianic Group based in Stamford Hill, UK.

It has now become possible to petition the Rebbe online and request a blessing. One site http://www.kingmessiah.com/ provides visitors with a link to write to the Rebbe and ‘behold miracles’. Prior to requesting help petitioners are requested to recite:

‘I am taking upon myself to add in learning Torah, giving *tzedoka* (charity) and to be more strigent fulfilling *mitzvos* (good deeds)’

They then state:

Finally they recite:

I pray to G—d to hasten the revelation of the Rebbe King Moshaich and proclaim: ‘*Yechi Adoneinu Moreinu VeRabeinu Melech HaMoshiach Leolam Voed!*’ (Long live the Rebbe King Moshiach forever!)¹.

*Internet Mediated Miracles and the Rebbe’s Igros Kodesh*

Bibliomancy, the use of books in divination, has been a popular pursuit throughout the history of Judaism (Trachtenberg 1977). Biblical passages have been deployed to ward off evil spirits and the Bible has been used for amulets and talismanic purposes. For instance Exodus XV
26 has traditionally been used for healing purposes. Genesis was used to protect against hailstorms and thunder. Although the practice has always been controversial, Rav Shlomo Aviner, one of the leaders of the Religious Zionist Movement, opines:

‘The commentators of the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 179:4) mention that it is permissible to open a holy book and find an answer, and this is even called a “minor prophecy”. This means that there is no prohibition.’ (http://www.ravaviner.com/2009/05/igrot-kodesh-holy-letters-of.html).

The Igros Kodesh is a collection of the correspondence and responses of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. It is modelled on the Igros Kodesh Maharayatz of his immediate predecessor. It comprises many realms of discussion including philosophy (Talmudic, Halachic, Hasidic, mystical or other), scientific matters, global events, counsel in private issues, schooling, and social/communal proceedings. Statistics are unavailable detailing the use of this text by Lubavitchers although several members of the London community maintained that it was widely deployed both by messianic and non-messianic Lubavitchers.

For many years Lubavitchers have deployed the physical text to communicate with the Rebbe, to obtain both his blessings and his answers to their requests. This has a long historical legacy. When Hasidim in Russia were out of contact with the Rebbe, they would insert their letters in a Tanya; after the Frierdiker Rebbe (6th Rebbe) passed away the ‘current’ Rebbe wrote in his “general letter to Hasidim“ that whoever can’t make it to the tziyun (grave) on the day of the yahrtzeit (anniversary of death) should put the letter in one of the Frierdiker Rebbe’s seforim, (books) and then send it off to the Ohel (structure built over resting place). In a Sicha (talk) of the Rebbe in 5749 (1988/89) the Rebbe speaks of a minhag (custom) of “many Yidden including both Gedolei Yisroel, simple people, and even women that before making certain decisions they would open a “sefer kadosh (holy book) and look at the place where the sefer randomly opened to and make a decision based on what is written there.

Typically in this form of bibliomancy questions are randomly inserted into a volume of the Igros Kodesh and a response is obtained by opening the page at which it is inserted. In recent years it has become possible to consult the Igros online. One site (http://www.igrot.com/) displays an image of a petitioner writing a request alongside an image of the Rebbe sitting in front of a Hebrew book with a pen lying across its open pages. The site states:
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‘Every person encounters difficult moments throughout his life that requires guidance and assistance in order that he/she will be able to return to and go about his routines with peace and tranquillity. Generally speaking, difficulties are personal and arise from health problems, married couple interaction, love, family, job, a traumatic experience and the list goes on and on. Today we can receive the Rebbe’s advice, blessing and guidance through the “Igrot Kodesh”. Those who turn to the Rebbe via this channel receive immediate answers with amazing precision and merit assistance at no charge and completely confidential.’

Long live our master, teacher and the Rebbe King Messiah forever!

Before consulting the Igros, petitioners are adjured to:

“Wash our hands without a blessing, three times on both hands alternately… right, left and back again. This is done in order to purify the body and soul before submitting a request.”

“Write whatever is in your heart in any language… for requesting a blessing. It’s important for the person requesting a blessing to write the full Jewish name and the name of his/her mother. Judaism declares that these names characterize the person, not his last name.”

“Make a firm resolution i.e., one decides to perform a mitzvah (good deed) such as putting on tefillin (phylacteries), keeping kosher, keeping Shabbos (Sabbath) and performing good deeds for the benefit of another. One declares, “Long live our master, our mentor and teacher, the King Moschiach, forever and ever!” and sends the request that reaches one of the volumes of the Igros Kodesh as they were scanned on the Internet site. The software on site randomly and immediately responds with an answer.”

As Ehrlich (2004: 264) notes: ‘That the method works, at least for believers, is evident from the many stories of fortuitous answers and miraculous occurrences passed by word of mouth in the movement and published in messianist Chabad journals’. However some Chabad rabbis such as Rabbi Ginsberg in Israel have cautioned against its use and have compiled guidelines to limit its potential excesses. Rabbi Ginsberg argues that the Igros is not to be deployed when answers are forthcoming from other sources. For medical issues, a doctor should be consulted and similarly, for religious questions, a rabbi. The only issues for which the process of Igros Kodesh may be endorsed are those for which no ‘normal’
solution can. It is important to note that Rabbi Ginsberg’s views are contentious and are not widely accepted among Israeli Chabad.

The Study

Methodology

This study aimed to examine the dialectic relationship between offline and online ritual and more specifically explored the attitudes of individuals posting messages on a chat forum towards the online version of the Rebbe’s *Igros Kodesh*.

The use of Internet sites for religious research raises significant ethical issues in relation to anonymity and informed consent (Rodham and Gavin, 2006). There is debate concerning the ethical implications of online data collection. Anyone with access to the Internet can view ‘open’ message boards (not requiring registration to log in) and therefore these authors assert that the data are in the public domain and not subject to the requirement that the researcher needs informed consent. http://www.chabadtalk.com/forum/archive/index.php3?t-14.html is an ‘open’ site and therefore in the public domain.

I searched the Internet for message boards, which discussed attitudes towards using the online Rebbe’s *Igros Kodesh*. One site, www.chabadtalk.com displays wide-ranging topics about Lubavitch, Torah and Judaism and Jewish life and is linked to http://www.chabadtalk.com/forum/archive/index.php3?t-14.html, which focuses on the *Igros Kodesh*. Much of the discussion on www.chabadtalk.com centres on the late Lubavitcher Rebbe and his teachings. New members have to register and then will be able to contact existing members. The site cautions that although the administrators and moderators of Jewish Forum & Discussions — Chabad Talk will attempt to keep all objectionable messages off this forum, it is impossible for them to review all messages.

One section ‘*Igros Kodesh*’—the Rebbe’s letters’ contains a discussion on the use of online Igros and has elicited replies from 25 individuals. Using content analysis I analyzed the discourse of all individuals who posted statements there. I present statements verbatim.

Results

The discussions I saw revolved around whether the Internet was sacred or profane, whether it was the Rebbe or a computer who actually answered;
some likened its online use to ‘magic’. Advocates of online use cited the Rebbe’s positive attitude towards the Internet as a way of spreading Yiddishkeit (Jewish teachings). A selection of these statements appears below.

‘Hannah’ adopted a positive attitude:

“The Rebbe encouraged Rabbi Kazen obm to use the Internet, and supported using technology for things of kedusha (Holiness). What is different from a television where you could get sichos (talks), or the phone to call ‘770’. If used properly, it seems to me (again) that it can be used as a good keli (vessel)”.

Likewise Yossi stated:

“To say that it’s crazy or disrespectfull to the Rebbe **** to place Igros online or to say there is some difference between scanned or printed ones is stupid.”

Others asserted that the Rebbe could answer through the net but did not find its online use acceptable. Talli wrote:

“Although I don’t agree with the Internet Igros, simply because it’s VERY easy to rig the letters with key words etc., however, the Rebbe CAN answer us in any way, even through the net. I disagree with this idea, simply because it makes it into a real horoscope (ch”y) type thing for the not-yet-frum. For the fremder (person who does not know), Igros needs to be consulted along with some who will guide him/her to a hachloto toivo (good decision) along with helping him/her understand the letter.”

Others were opposed to the use of the online version. For instance ‘Shmueli’ stated:

“You may be correct about saying that about the Igros in a general way, but not Internet Igros. It turns it into Hocus Pocus!”

Likewise ‘Yitzchak’ wrote,

“no, ariel770, no! this is completely outta the ball park! there’s no respect here, none @ all. you do not make a website out of a holy thing like this. it’s not just a website whe u can research igrus kodesh, if it waz, then that’s fine, but it’s like ur making a whole horoscope, crystal ball thing out of it. like they have online these dream interpation sites. all you hafta do iz write 3 words & a whole interpation comes up, when
u haven’t even written a dream. you can write whatever you want & some answer will come up, is there someone receiving these questions 24/7, putting them in to the igrus & writing what he found? no it’s some COMPUTER! you are not having the right intentions & you are not receiving the rebbe’s answer. i don’t care how it works! the idea is just sickening. i know i may have used this term too much, but unfortunately this is what people are doing, laigen der rebbe in der shmutz! (To drag the Rebbe through the filth) it’s pashut a shande – simple shame-(of how far ppl. will go with this whole thing).”

According to Reuben

“I have to say that this thing with igrros online is stupid, because it all depends on the characters you type in. If there is a typo, then you will get 2 different answers after and before you correct it. This is even though it is the same question. This proves the baselessness to igros online.”

Similarly ‘Sharon’ voiced her opposition:

“qwert, this website or any other lubav website for that matter is not cheapening the Rebbe, or a hocus pocus, igrros online IS! looking for answers from the Rebbe in the igrus is a very holy thing, there are ways of spreading the crown jewel that it will reach other people NOT thru a website like that. it is a website where you do not get the Rebbes answer. it is a COMPUTER! we have askmoses, chabadonline, farbrengen & numerous ways to sprinkle the crown jewel, WITHOUT making a disgracful site such as igrus online2. “

Several people responded to ‘Sharon’. ‘Aaaron’ replied:

“i think thats disrespectful to the rebbe to say something like that. the rebbe said he would find a way to answer people who ask him. im sure he can find a way to answer even on the Internet! come on, there’s hashgacha protis (Divine Providence) on the Internet to you know. if you believe that you can write to a book then there really is no difference in writing to a computer. i think igrot online is also a beautiful thing. imagine, one person somewhere in the world who needs to ask something from the rebbe can just turn on their computer and get an answer from the igros.it shows how far lubavitch has gone in publicizing an making every aspect accesible to everyone. i still dont understand why you think sichos online or using the actual sefer is any different. Why should we find other ways to spread the crown Jewel? I think i said this before but were not supposed to be limited by anything!”

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Esther retorted:

“I totally respect what you’re saying, to you it may not seem to be the way to get answers from the Rebbe, but everything is hashgacha pratis, (Divine Providence) so if someone opens up a sefer and learns something and it applies to a question they have, or likewise if they open up a website and find the answer they were looking for, both were equally hashgacha pratis. Shouldn’t we use everything in this wold and elevate it? like instead of using the Internet for inapropriate things people are elevating it different ways, same thing with the television- instead of watching television shows, we use that technological advancement to be mekushar (connected) to the Rebbe, through Rebbe videos. I think the Rebbe spoke about this, how we should use technology to spread yiddishkeit.”

Michael, another advocate asked:

“Can you please explain to me what exactly the difference is? Who are you to decide what is considered disgraceful or not? Once you say its disgraceful to have sichos online. Whats the diff? the rebbe told us we shouldn’t be limited in ways of reaching out to others and bringing mashiach. why is this any different. the rebbe was on television and he didn’t say that was disgraceful. what makes this any worse.”

Discussion

To date there has been limited research on how religious groups frame the Internet for their use. Campbell asks how users ‘spiritualize’ the Internet, i.e., how they see the Internet as a technology or space that is suitable for religious engagement (Campbell 2005). She underscores the fact that a need exists for studies that not only define what happens when religion appears online, but also interpret why this is occurring and the implications for religious culture as a whole.

This study was set up to examine visitors to a Lubavitcher chatroom view online ritual in terms of the categories of sacred and profane. We know little about the individuals leaving messages in this chatroom but assume that they have some affiliation with Lubavitch. Within this group there are diverse views concerning the sacredness of the Internet. Those who adopt a positive attitude to the online version also seem to support Lubavitch’s emphasis on publicising its mission of fostering increased Jewish religious observance as a way of bringing forth the Messiah. For many years the organization has deployed modern media for promotion and outreach. Lubavitch has readily embraced the Internet as a way of
disseminating its ideas (Shandler 2009). This contrasts with other Hasidic groups whose accommodation to modernity has been limited.

Proponents of its use assert that, like television and the telephone, the Internet is just another medium through which to access the Rebbe. For them writing to a book is no less legitimate than writing to a computer. Also, since everything is a result of Divine providence — God’s activity in the World — sending a request to a book is no different to sending it to a computer; everything has the potential to be sacred if used for the right purposes. As stated on Chabad.org “Everything in this world was created for a divine purpose. All forms of modern technology can and should be harnessed to make the world a better place and, in the case of Jews, to spread Judaism in the widest possible manner”. As Durkheim (1912/2001) stated, anything can be sacred. In agreement with authors such as O’Leary (1996), the Internet is approached as a technological landscape that transforms religious expression and understanding. Although online ritual may differ in certain respects from its offline counterpart its performance is still legitimate.

Opponents see it as a profane rather than as a sacred space. Petitions go to a computer through the Internet, which is material (profane), rather than to the Rebbe. They disagree with online ritual performance. Interestingly a few opponents liken the Internet ritual to magic or ‘hocus pocus’ which is ironic considering the fact that bibliomancy has always been associated with magic yet they appear to accept its offline use.

Despite the limitations of small sample size and therefore its lack of generalizability, this study provides useful data concerning the views of some Orthodox Jews about the sacredness of the Internet. A future study could attempt to contact these individuals through registering with the website to ask more about their attitudes towards online rituals, reasons for their opposition, and how these relate to their religious backgrounds.

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NOTES

1 The use of the Internet for online petitioning is not unique to Lubavitch. One site ‘Window on the Wall’ http://www.aish.com/w/note/46615192.html provides the opportunity to send a prayer request to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

2 In this study the names of individuals contributing to this site are pseudonyms.