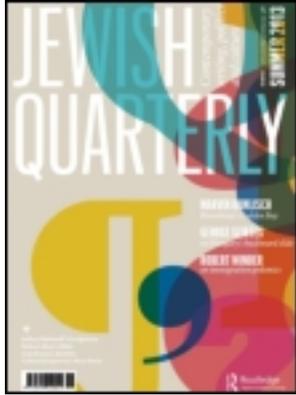


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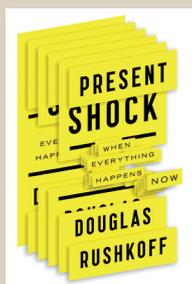
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TRADITION AND TECHNOLOGY: CONTRACT OR COLLISION?



End of the Jews: Radical Breaks, Remakes and What Comes Next

by Dan Mendelsohn Aviv

THE KEY PUBLISHING HOUSE • 2013

Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now

by Douglas Rushkoff

CURRENT • 2013

Review by Keith Kahn-Harris

Abraham Joshua Heschel famously argued that Judaism was a religion of time. In the post-Temple era, Jews located the sacred not in buildings and places, but in the flow of time. For Heschel, the apotheosis of this was the Sabbath, a slice of holiness carved out of the weekly routine. But perhaps he could have pointed to another form of Jewish preoccupation with time—Jews' obsession with locating themselves in history. History, for Jews, is a site of mourning and longing. The catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple is to be perpetually mourned; the hope of the messianic era is to be affirmed

(and deferred). The commemoration of Jewish historical events is embedded in rituals marking the Jewish year. Each generation situates itself in this history that is at once lachrymose and celebratory.

Another classic of modern Jewish thinking, Simon Rawidowicz's essay *Israel, the Ever-Dying People*, highlights a kind of Jewish fear of history. Jews throughout the ages have feared that they were "the last". Zionism has always been in part a response to such fears, an attempt to restore historical agency to the Jewish people.

Recent and current Jewish thinkers and leaders who share this historical obsession have been unable to apply it with greater rigour than previous generations. So it is that the spasms of panic that have gripped Jewish policy-making circles since the late 1980s regarding the possible disappearance of the Jewish people through assimilation, were grounded in discussions of complex demographic data of varying levels of sophistication.

In our information-saturated world, Jews are now in a position to situate themselves historically with ever greater accuracy. The quasi-Olympian "helicopter view" over Jewish history that this enables can pay rich dividends in understanding the past and present.

Dan Mendelsohn Aviv, in his *End of the Jews* makes a decent stab at dividing Jewish history into periods. This is not an academic book, but it is a good primer for Jews seeking to understand the Jewish present in the light of the past. For Aviv, Jews have ensured their survival by going through a series of radical breaks, engendered by particular "crises", in which Jews "remake" Judaism. A remake "makes significant changes while remaining loyal to a previously established continuity". Aviv highlights five such remakes, beginning with the break from Abrahamic family religion to a more formalised and institutionalised, Temple-based Judaism; and ending with the crisis of emancipation and enlightenment that took place from the 18th century onwards.

Aviv uses this periodising scheme to argue that Judaism today is confronting a significant crisis that necessitates another radical break in Jewish history and another phase of remaking. He highlights four D's that characterise the current crisis: Disaffiliation (the weakening of institutional ties); Demographic Delay (smaller Jewish family size and delayed childbearing); Disaffection (with Israel); and Dissolution (of Jewish institutions since the 2008 financial meltdown). He focuses on younger American Jews, implying that the trends they are embroiled in have universal significance. Although he does at times clarify the wider application of his argument to other sections of the Jewish world, he is on shaky ground in according his four D's such epoch-making significance in Jewish history. It is unclear how far Charedi Judaism, to mention the

most obvious example, could in any sense be described as being in the throes of a crisis.

Nevertheless, the four D's are real enough to warrant serious attention, even if one confines the crisis to American mainstream non-orthoprax Jewry and perhaps to other non-orthoprax sections of other diaspora communities. Aviv tries to identify the "seeds" for the "next, great Jewish remake", out of which the "next Jew" might emerge. He coins the term "protean tribalism" to describe "the newest form of Next Jew-ish identification". This would be a "tribe of radical individuals", a circle that Aviv argues can be squared based on evidence from the Jewish presence on the internet. He is not quite so crude as to argue that the Jewish future is online but at times comes close to doing so. Of course, there is much about Jewish activity online that he rightly highlights as positive and powerful. Online, Jews can find a voice they may have been denied in the past; they can form lasting commitments; they can mobilise in new and radical ways. Aviv points to phenomena such as Open-Source Haggadot as offering exciting new possibilities and, in the case of Charedi blogs, ways of challenging Jewish establishments. He observes that Jewish blogs can, in the way that each text is accompanied by online commentary, draw on the best aspects of the Jewish tradition of argument. Online, Jewish learning and Jewish community engagement is more available and accessible than ever before. But there is a naive glibness in such claims as, "blogging might become Tora she'Baal Peh for the digital age", and rhetorical questions such as: "Is it possible that these new supposedly alienating technologies have brought back the intimacy of the shtetl, where Jews mixed, mingled, argued and learned together?"

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Does the creation of online versions of venerable Jewish institutions and practices really constitute such a radical "remake"? Further, not only is there a dark side to Jewish online conversation with the proliferation of online abuse and anger over Israel and other issues, but the more profound forms of online Jewish engagement require commitment that only a minority can make. The same issues that bedevil Jewish life offline—lack of time and other resources, struggles to cope with difference, countering apathy etc—also apply online.

Aviv's enthusiasm for Jewish innovation is laudable, as is his desire that the Jewish future be remade. Yet his techno-utopianism, while not completely unqualified, is unfortunate. While new technology has undoubtedly pioneered new ways of being, identifying and organising, it also has consequences that we are only just

beginning to grapple with. In this respect, it is instructive to read *End of the Jews* alongside *Present Shock*.

Douglas Rushkoff might easily (and wrongly) also be categorised as a techno-utopian. Since the early 1990s, he has built a reputation as a commentator on the intersection between media, technology and society. He has both predicted and nurtured nascent online trends, popularising terms such as "viral media". In recent years, however, Rushkoff has been concerned about the more ambivalent consequences of new technology. He has written persuasively on the dangers of corporate control of online media and now, in *Present Shock*, he has turned his attention to how new technology is changing our relationship with time itself.

Rushkoff uses the term "presentism" to describe the symptoms of "present shock"—a kind of perpetual "now" that obliterates any sense of the future. This is about more than just the exhaustion of "always on" lives, in which we are perpetually checking our phones. Its symptoms are varied, from the inability of movements such as Occupy to consider long-term goals, and "overwinding" by packing too much into single moments, to being overwhelmed by a sense of the world's interconnectedness. *Present Shock* has sensible things to say on how we might counteract today's present shock—by taking regular time-outs from online interaction and finding ways for technological innovation to truly respond to human needs rather than the other way round.

Rushkoff's 2003 book, *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism*, advocated an "open source" approach to Judaism, seeing this as consistent with the best of the Jewish tradition of contestation, inquiry and transparency. After *Present Shock*, I wonder how he might now qualify his 2003 work. Certainly, Dan Mendelsohn Aviv should read Rushkoff's latest work and ponder how present shock might subvert some of the positive remaking potential that he sees in online life.

The key question is whether present shock is as ubiquitous a phenomenon as Rushkoff implies and how fundamentally transformative it has been and will be. If we are condemned to live in a "perpetual now", then this will have profound consequences for the traditional Jewish preoccupation with time. Perhaps it will have a liberating effect, freeing Jews from the weight of constant fears for the future. As for Dan Mendelsohn Aviv's projected radical outcomes of online Jewish life, there is good reason to see these as having effects that are more complex and hard to interpret. Overall, the pre-messianic Jewish future remains unknowable. —JQ

Keith Kahn-Harris is a sociologist and author of 'All That Matters' (2012) and the forthcoming 'Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community'.

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