

## ACC Yom Iyyun 2011

### **Study Guide, "Technology and the Transmission of Oral Tradition in the Contemporary Jewish Community" by Dr. Jeffrey Summit**

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#### For the facilitator:

I've suggested questions and answers in two broad categories: understanding the major points of the article, and eliciting participants' sharing of their experiences and views. The questions in the second category (and a few in the first) do not have factual answers--they are meant to stimulate discussion. Feel free to edit, skip, add questions as you see fit. The CCPD would be grateful if you could write down answers to the last two questions in this guide, and forward them to us (c/o Janet Leuchter, jleuchter@nyc.rr.com).

#### **UNDERSTANDING THE ARTICLE**

*Q1: What is the subject of Rabbi Summit's article?*

A: The first line of his article states: "This paper focuses on the impact of [computer] technology on the transmission of oral tradition--specifically the cantillation of the Torah, in the contemporary Jewish community."

*Q2: According to Rabbi Summit, what is the significance to modern Jews of learning to chant a Torah text?*

A: First, the "message" of bar/bat mitzvah is that Torah/Haftarah reading is one of Judaism's "core authentic religious experiences." Second, many Jewish laypeople spend hours mastering Torah reading for Shabbat services in search of this "authentic" experience. (page 1, first paragraph; page 7) In a non-Orthodox service, laypeople view Torah reading as one of the few roles they can master that "places them at the center of the service" (page 7).

*Q3: What is the traditional Jewish way to teach text "performance"? How does the new technology change this model?*

A: The traditional way is to study with a teacher--cantor, rabbi, "ritual director," and other authorities. Today, "new" technology--computer programs, the Internet, digital music players--reduces or eliminates the necessity of studying with a teacher face-to-face, reduces the authority of clergy and other Jewish professionals, and makes the average Jew more self-sufficient and independent of the community (page 17-18).

*Q4: Rabbi Summit discusses how the "old" technology like LPs and cassette tapes has given way to the digital revolution. He found that the developers of the earliest computer software (the Levys of Lev Software) set out to promote the learning of trop, to contrast with the rote memorization promoted by the old technology (page 10). Do you think this promise has been realized in the way today's Jews today actually learn a Torah text? Does it matter?*

*Q5: Rabbi Summit presents several alternative models of computer-based learning of a Torah text (Lev Software, cyberTROPES, Navigating the Bible II (website). What are some of the differences among them? What are some of their plusses and minuses?*

A: a) the use of a live voice vs. a computer-generated voice;

b) the opportunity for a local cantor or teacher to insert his/her own voice vs. the necessity of listening

to one specific voice predetermined by the software creators  
c) the presence of a fully-sung text vs. tropes only  
d) problems in accuracy

Q6: *What are the differences, according to Rabbi Summit, between child bar/bat mitzvah students and adults in their use of the new technology?*

A: Since the adults think it important to foster a relationship between synagogue staff and children, the kids tend to use the technology as an adjunct to face-to-face learning with staff. However, adults often prefer to use online and computer software for several reasons: to fit study into their busy schedules, practice in private, review last-minute, get acquainted with what their kids are studying, and for some women, enter into a heretofore male religious sphere (pp. 10-11)

## **EVALUATING THE ARTICLE, SHARING OUR EXPERIENCES AND IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE**

Q7: According to Rabbi Summit, the Levys of Lev Software "perceived" that North American trope melodies had become standardized and simplified, and therefore decided to offer just three different systems (page 12). However, Trope Trainer, a widely-used software program not considered in the article, offers more than a dozen Ashkenazic melodic systems alone (all computer-generated). *What have been your own auditory models for cantillation? Have you ever heard a "traditional" baal korei? What do you think of the perception noted by Rabbi Summit that kids don't like listening to a "bima" voice?*

Q8: What programs or websites do you use, how do you use them, and what are their pluses and minuses? What are your congregants using on their own, do you even know, and are you happy with their choices (and why/why not)? What would be your ideal way to teach Torah and Haftarah performance to your children and adult congregants?

Q9: Rabbi Summit examines how technology has changed the study of text over the last two millennia. He shows how rabbinic authorities have initially opposed and then adapted the new technology (e.g. written word, law codes, printing press) in ways that enhanced their role as teachers. He says (page 4) that few of their fears of a broad undermining of their authority have come to pass. Do you agree?

Q10: Although cantors were not traditionally Torah readers, the economic mainstay of the modern cantorate has become b'nei mitzvah tutoring. To what extent has our authority been challenged by the new technology? How do you think our role in this area should change or adapt?

Q11: A decade or so ago, the URJ, under the editorship of Cantors Josee Wolff and Marshall Portnoy, published state-of-the-art books and CDs for the average Hebrew-literate Jew to learn one version of every Ashkenazi cantillation system. For cantors working at that time, how did these materials impact your teaching? Is it time for a new effort by the ACC or the URJ to reclaim its leadership in this area using the new technology? How can the ACC better help its members develop their professional skills in the use of new technology and the teaching of Torah reading?

Q12: Can the group define any "take-away" from this article and discussion? Has it stimulated interest in a) exploring more websites and software, b) differentiating teaching approaches for kids and adults, c) discussing your synagogue's teaching of Torah reading with your fellow clergy and staff, d) other?