

ARE WE SACRIFICING OUR CHILDREN?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

If a person's home is her castle, must she surrender its values?

When a group of Israeli Orthodox Rabbis decided in early January that the Internet's many dangers outweigh its value in a traditional home, the media responded as it traditionally does whenever Israeli Orthodox Rabbis are involved: secular Israeli ferocity pitted itself against plain American clumsiness to see who could provide the furthest approximation from intelligent coverage. The Haaretz daily accused the Rabbis of "*cruising into the caveman era*," while the AP informed us that all Internet use had been banned. Neither provided an accurate description of the ruling or its context; neither, for that matter, expressed an understanding of the legitimate concerns one might have when young people go on-line.

Placing facts before froth, the fervently Orthodox are anything but behind the times with regards to technology.

Beneath black hats and nineteenth century garb one finds a community which defies the stereotypes. Whether via Boro Park e-commerce as described in The New York Times, or the promotion of Jewish beliefs on-line through institutional and private web sites, Orthodox Jews run on the bleeding edge of the digital revolution. As a community they are more computer and Internet savvy than most Americans.

What, then, is this "Rabbinic ban" on using the Internet? The ruling merely suggests removing the Internet from the home, while recognizing its positive value in the workplace. Charedi (fervently Orthodox) schools will not stop using computers; the Charedi Center for Technological Studies will neither close its doors nor change its curriculum. Charedi high-tech will be business as usual. But Orthodox parents who permit unsupervised Internet access from home will--they hope--reconsider.

The media hysteria which surrounded this decision took it entirely for granted that denying children Internet access from their bedroom is, in fact, a bad thing. It would seem worthwhile nonetheless for parents to question this assertion.

First of all, have we considered how much is actually to be gained? There is a wealth of valuable research information available on the Internet, as we all know. This information is, however, available to Internet users in schools as well, rendering the additional benefit largely one of convenience. Learning how to use Internet technologies requires a minimal (and ever-decreasing) amount of effort, especially for younger people. Computer programming can be done without any Internet connection at all. So, despite all of the hype, a fourteen-year-old in Y2K will still be able to grow into a fully functional, technologically-facile adult without a megabit DSL connection shared between den and bedroom.

The downsides of the Internet, on the other hand, are glaring -- so much so that a parent's failure to consider them is evidence of either ignorance about what an Internet connection enables teenagers to do, or an obvious vote in favor of high technology over high moral values.

Several years ago, a PC Magazine columnist made an almost apologetic confession, announcing that he had installed site-blocking software to prevent his teenage son from browsing the Internet unrestricted. The reason was simple: he had caught his son doing just that. And much as he believed in the First Amendment and our alleged moral obligation to accept its downsides, he realized that blocking software had its place. No amount of heart-to-heart chit-chat was likely to stand up to the burning curiosity of an adolescent.

Blocking software, of course, is imperfect. It is designed to be simple enough for a middle-aged technophobe to install, yet powerful enough to withstand the efforts of a

sophisticated teen hacker. The idea that it can actually do both is so patently ludicrous that Scott Adams spent several of his Dilbert cartoon strips lampooning the concept. Bypassing a filtered Internet service provider is even easier for any teen with a modem -- in both the United States and Israel, assorted companies now offer free, unfiltered Internet access to those willing to tolerate on-screen advertising.

When covering this story, the media similarly paid no attention to the troublesome issue of Internet chat rooms. A funny thing, that -- because quite recently, the arrest and trial of a high-ranking Infoseek executive on charges of soliciting a (federal agent posing as a) 13-year-old child in a chat room dominated tech news for weeks. Infoseek, of course, is a unit of the Walt Disney Company, amply demonstrating that there is truly no place on-line where no concern is warranted.

In Israel, as in America, a plague of violence is sweeping the school system. Over 50% of teachers there reported having been physically or verbally attacked by a student within just the last year. When students and parents were asked to identify possible causes, their most common answer was "the Internet" and the values learned there, whether in peer chats or by playing games which simulate -- with ever more realistic detail -- the process of murdering another with gun, knife, or even vehicle. Kids can learn most anything on the Net, including how to build a pipe bomb and which rifles are likely to kill the most classmates in the shortest period of time.

The bottom line: a majority of American parents polled believe that their Internet-wired kids visit sites that they don't approve of; they just feel powerless to stop it. Yet none of this was seriously considered. The Internet was treated instead as a holy grail to which all young children must be brought. Yes, it is obvious that some people are failing to confront today's technologies in a rational manner -- but the guilty parties are not those rabbis who decided that, at least in the Israeli Orthodox community and at least for the time being, it is not worthwhile to

have the Internet in the home.