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MODERN ORTHODOX ARGUMENTS AGAINST TELEVISION

We do not own a television and, with rare exceptions, do not utilize our computer for watching television programs. When I inform people of this choice, I often wonder whether they immediately attribute to me Haredi inclinations. On one level, such a reaction is eminently reasonable. Haredi ideologues tend to denigrate watching television while Modern Orthodox spokespeople do not, and percentages of families owning televisions in the two communities seem to reflect the same divide. Yet I contend that this sociological reality masks a profound misunderstanding on the part of the Modern Orthodox community. Many of our most precious ideals should motivate us to turn off the small screen. In some ways, our community has far more reason than the *Haredim* to reject this medium. In the ensuing pages, I will outline a series of ideals frequently attributed to Modern Orthodoxy. While the reality of Modern Orthodoxy does not always reflect these lofty ideals, they do signal values the community deems important. Each description will be followed by analysis of how TV might impact on the ideal in question. Of course, some readers may contest my understanding of the aspirations of Modern Orthodoxy. I request that they evaluate the arguments against television on their own merits irrespective of the accuracy of my perspective on Modern Orthodoxy.

Many will deem this discussion outdated since contemporary adults and children spend more time looking at computer screens than sitting in front of a television. Yet my anecdotal research suggests that the overwhelming majority of Modern Orthodox Jews still own a television and watch it fairly often. More importantly, I want to include in my discussion of television not only programs watched on a television set but also movies seen in the theatre as well as television shows, movies, and videos watched on laptops, iPads, and other electronic devices. All of those activities share the main characteristics relevant to our examination.

TRADITION

Furthermore, I see the television as a symbol for the broader question of how we spend our leisure time. From that perspective, reading trashy novels, playing mindless computer games, or engaging in *frum* gossip deserve analogous criticism. Nonetheless, I contend that TV watching and closely analogous pursuits merit special censure.

Some general words of introduction help provide an intellectual framework for our analysis. Marshall McLuhan famously stated that “the medium is the message.” In other words, the vehicle of expression is not just a technical means for conveying content. Rather, the means of communication invariably shapes the content. Whether we teach a concept through oral discourse, a printed text, or a motion picture changes what we will say. McLuhan used the light bulb as an example of the mistaken notion that the medium has no effect on the message. While the light bulb appears content free, it actually changed how we conceive of day and night.¹

The shift from books to television and movies marks a move from verbal to visual media. While printing introduced a visual element absent in oral discourse via the physical appearance of the book, books with certain exceptions still communicate mostly through words. In TV and movies, on the other hand, the visual dominates. This influences the content of movies and television in a myriad of ways. A visual medium requires movement because we do not enjoy watching people stand still. Thus, TV shows tend towards scenes which move quickly, include a great deal of action, and avoid extended conversations. This greatly influences the content of TV programming and movies. When Hollywood converts popular books such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* into movies, interesting dialogue is invariably cut while action scenes expand. The news reflects a good example of a visual medium’s influence. Television news allots an average of forty-five seconds to each story.² Such small segments mean that the news cannot possibly present multiple angles on one issue or fill in the historical background needed to truly understand any conflict. Americans, educated by TV news, know everything about the last twenty-four hours but very little about the last sixty years.³ All of the

I would like to thank Dr. Yoel Finkelman, Dr. Will Lee, R. Jeffrey Saks, and Dr. David Shatz for their insightful comments.

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, MIT Press (1994), pgs.7-13.

² The number is taken from Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin Books: New York, 2006), p. 103. Postman first published this book in 1985 but I do not believe the number has changed significantly since then.

³ The above paraphrases a quote from Bill Moyers cited by Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 137.

above contrasts with printed media such as books which can feature dialogue, exposition, and explanation more prominently than action and allow for explorations that last longer than a few sentences.

I posit that the overwhelming majority of television shows and movies consist of mindless entertainment even when lacking objectionable material. This article will not argue at length to prove this assertion since I contend that a few days of random TV watching suffice to clinch the point. Does the vacuous nature of TV and movies reflect commercial forces or something inherent in the medium? According to the first position, TV shows could deal sensitively with a host of ethical, religious, and personal challenges. It currently fails to do so because car chases, fight scenes, sexual situations, and humor prove far more lucrative for those producing programming. The second position, adopted by Neil Postman, argues that the visual medium of TV and movies invariably leads to a “dumbing down” of content. From that perspective, it does not matter who produces TV shows or what money they hope to make; the end result will be, more or less, the same.⁴ Accepting Postman’s view certainly strengthens the case, but even if we reject it the question regarding our attitude to the current fare produced in Hollywood and by the networks remains. We can engage in an interesting theoretical discussion about what TV could become, but our decision to watch it or allow our children to do so depends on our evaluation of what currently appears on TV. Someone who finds that harmful should react accordingly.

The easiest and most common attack on television focuses on the recurring images of sex and violence that permeate this medium. I certainly identify with this criticism and often wonder about what parents willingly expose their children to during tender years. Watch an episode of *Friends*, once an immensely popular show among Modern Orthodox youth, and count the percentage of jokes relating to sexuality. Yet our analysis will take a different direction. The problems of TV and movies range far more deeply and prove more subtle than the more glaring issues of sex and violence. Careful study of those broader issues raises questions especially pertinent to Modern Orthodox thought.

Our discussion will remain within the world of ideas rather than that of statistics because of my strengths and interests, but I think the ideas are coherent and convincing regardless of statistical proof. We frequently

⁴ Postman writes “One suspects that if every network executive and program director were replaced tomorrow, by, say, the faculty of the Harvard Divinity School, television programming would in the long run remain quite close to what it is.” See Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Vintage Books: New York, 1994), p. 83.

TRADITION

make important life decisions lacking statistical guidance by relying on good judgment and appealing to our own experience. However, a good deal of literature exists indicating a causal relationship between television watching and poor scholastic performance as well as anti-social and aggressive behavior. George Comstock and Erica Scharrer's *Television: What's On, Who's Watching and What It Means* cites a host of studies and provides extensive analysis of the statistical data.⁵

Culture and Wisdom: Modern Orthodoxy believes in benefitting from the wisdom of the broader world. We support university studies and view them not only as a means of acquiring skills necessary for earning a livelihood but as a value in their own right. Our most articulate spokesmen, such as Rabbis Aharon Lichtenstein and Norman Lamm, have spelled out this ideology. This stands in marked contrast to the Haredi community which tends either to prohibit university studies or to grudgingly allow such study purely for the sake of a livelihood.

Does watching television enhance the goals of absorbing culture or enhancing wisdom? Does it provide insight into the human condition or help us appreciate the glory of the cosmos? Are there TV shows comparable to reading Shakespeare or Camus or studying the anatomy of the human eye? Neil Postman argues that television fails whenever it attempts to talk about something serious.⁶ News shows and educational programming provide two good examples of this assertion. Sesame Street taught some children how to read, but where are the educational programs that instruct beyond the first grade level? Furthermore, Sesame Street does more than teach the alphabet. It also conveys that education happens in a context of passivity, simplicity, entertainment, short attention spans, and training to be a consumer.⁷ Sesame Street, long considered the successful paradigm of pedagogic television, may stunt or shortchange the educational process. Ironically, the same show that teaches children the alphabet simultaneously undermines the character traits and personal skills necessary for encouraging reading

As any kindergarten teacher can tell you, identifying the letter A is about as central to reading as defining shortstop is to playing baseball—necessary, but wildly insufficient. The skills required for reading are a complex mix of concentration, persistence, the linking of concepts, the mental

⁵ George Comstock and Erica Scharrer, *Television, What's On, Who's Watching, and What it Means* (Academic Press: San Diego, 1999).

⁶ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, chapters 7-10.

⁷ See the discussion in Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerdlow, *Remote Control* (New York Times Book Company: New York, 1978), pgs. 178-183.

recall of autonomous memories and images-the same skills that allow an older child to engage in analytic thinking. *Sesame Street*, by contrast, appeals to the most primal parts of the brain-its reflexive attraction to movement, light, and noise.⁸

The visual medium of television means that action footage dominates the TV news. A burning building, especially at night, will beat out a story on the budget – irrespective of the relative importance of each issue. I once saw a news segment about a fellow who put his bathtub in a tree. There was nothing newsworthy about it, and it also failed on the level of human interest, but the producers could not pass up the video footage of a bathtub in a tree. The short amount of time devoted to each story and the bias toward exciting footage lead Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerdlow to coin another rule about television news casting – “The Trivial Will Always Drive out the Serious.”⁹ Admittedly, this formulation overstates the case since important stories often dominate news shows. A more accurate rendition might read – “The Trivial Will Always Compete with the Serious.”

This leads not only to trivialization but to distortion as well. A need for action favors disturbance over calm and violence over peaceful demonstrations. The bias towards action and excitement both distorts television’s portrayal of reality and helps thrust less serious people into the headlines. Who represented the African American community for TV news viewers of the 1960’s? “When [Stokely] Carmichael, particularly if exotically dressed, raised his fist and cried ‘Black Power!’ it was far more of a television spectacle than when Roy Wilkins soberly analyzed the failure of the Federal Housing Administration to provide federal housing...”¹⁰ TV does not always generate this result; Martin Luther King Jr. managed to convey something of substance via television. At the same time, this medium tends to propel less significant people into the limelight. TV news fails to truly educate its viewers about political and social issues of the day.

Additionally, since the news does not change very much from day to day, news shows manufacture major events to fill up the time slot. Daniel Boorstin coined the term “pseudo-events” to describe this aspect of modern media. For example, a major story might be the anticipation of an important announcement even though the speculation beforehand does

⁸ Kay S. Hymowitz, “On Sesame Street, It’s All Show,” *City Journal* (Autumn 1995).

⁹ *Remote Control*, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pgs. 108-109.

TRADITION

nothing to enhance understanding, and the actual announcement proves anticlimactic. While the same critique applies to daily newspapers, it remains true that irrelevant material fills significant segments of TV news.¹¹

Nuance and Complexity. Modern Orthodoxy prides itself on its sensitivity to nuance and the need to balance competing values. We combine criticism of secular Zionism with endorsement of the religious value of the Zionist dream, search out the best elements in Western literature even as we remain wary of problematic aspects of general studies, and recognize the good done by other Jewish denominations while simultaneously not granting them equal legitimacy. A standard claim for the advantage of our community is that *Haredim* take a more “black and white” stand on the world.

TV programming shuns nuances and subtlety. The quick pace of any conversation plus the desire for sensationalist and attention grabbing snippets prevents the deliberate discussion needed to develop different angles on a topic. Even programs with talking heads demand short bursts of analysis and will never give a speaker the floor for ten minutes. Boorstin notes that since television and radio “abhor silence and ‘dead time’” participants are not allowed to stop and think before answering, even though “the most thoughtful and illuminating answers to difficult questions come after a long pause, and...the longer the pause the more illuminating the thought that follows it.”¹²

Todd Gitlin, a well known liberal activist, tells a story that exemplifies this problem. When the first Gulf War broke out, Gitlin wanted to convey his conflicted feelings. He opposed the war but did not think the soldiers engaged in the effort to combat Saddam Hussein were evil. To indicate the latter, he decided to donate blood for wounded soldiers. When a news program interviewed Gitlin, he explained how his feelings pulled him in different directions regarding this issue. The segment that appeared on the show featured footage of Gitlin donating blood and conveyed the message that a noted left winger was supporting the military endeavor. The other part of Gitlin’s message was lost.¹³ This kind of distortion or oversimplification emerges directly from the nature of TV news. The short amount of time devoted to any story mandates that

¹¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (Harper and Row: New York, 1961), pgs. 7-76.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³ Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives* (Harvey Holt and Co: New York, 2002), pgs. 122-125.

quotations be pared down and analysis reduced to the extent that rendering a complex message with different angles becomes impossible. Furthermore, the desire to find a sensationalist headline attracting viewers away from competing news programs proves irresistible. In this world, ambiguity, nuance, and complexity have no place.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict reveals the nature of television's impact on political thought. During the first year of the second intifada, media outlets spent little time presenting analysis of the history of this conflict or the arguments of each side. Instead, the Palestinians employed the image of a little boy named Muhammad al-Durrah caught in crossfire before ultimately being shot and killed. No doubt, the image was poignant and tragic. but the power of the image bypassed all discussion and argument. This gave the Palestinians the upper hand until the video footage of a Palestinian mob lynching two Israeli reservists came out. Now I do not deny that the emotional force of an image can provide inspiration, but it should not supplant serious analysis as it does in contemporary news shows.

Communal Involvement. Modern Orthodox Jews pride themselves on their sensitivity to communal needs and on a commitment to benevolence. They sometimes contrast their approach with a Haredi view that tends to prize Torah study above other values. For example, Modern Orthodoxy supports service in the Israeli army, viewing it as an essential component of communal religious responsibility. Modern Orthodox high schools might cancel a day of study for the sake of a rally on behalf of Jews in distress. To some degree or another, they are also more likely than their right wing compatriots to involve themselves in a joint project with the broader Jewish community. All these examples point to a strong belief in the ideals of civic service and volunteering for charitable causes.

Where does television fit into the above? Robert Putnam argues in his book, *Bowling Alone*, that American involvement in clubs, charity organizations and the like, has been dwindling in the last four decades. While he mentions several causal factors such as suburban sprawl and an increased need for two incomes to support a family, he identifies television as an essential component.

People who say that TV is their "primary form of entertainment" volunteer and work on community projects less often, attend fewer dinner parties, and fewer club meetings, spend less time visiting friends, entertain at home less, picnic less, are less interested in politics, give blood less often, write friends less regularly, make fewer long-distance calls, send fewer greeting cards and less e-mail and express more road rage than

TRADITION

demographically matched people who differ only in saying that TV is *not* their primary form of entertainment.¹⁴

Putnam concludes that television watching is the most consistent predictor of low civic engagement. “Nothing – not low education, not full-time work, not long commutes in urban agglomerations, not poverty or financial distress – is more broadly associated with civic disengagement and social disconnection than is dependence on television for entertainment.”¹⁵ Putnam identifies three possible ways in which television reduces civic engagement. It “competes for scarce time”; those who come from work and watch television for four hours will have little time for other pursuits. Secondly, television has “psychological affects that inhibit social participation.” It encourages lethargy and passivity, traits that keep a person on the couch even when the TV is off. Additionally, TV allows viewers to feel emotionally connected to others and engaged with the community even though caring for characters on a soap opera provides a shallow substitute for authentic relationships. Finally, “specific programming content on television undermines civic motivations.” Few successful sitcoms or action movies inspire us to help others, become politically involved, or contribute towards a charitable cause. To the degree that television promotes materialistic values, it further works against social engagement.¹⁶

Activism and Human Initiative: Modern Orthodoxy values human efforts and initiatives within the natural order to help alleviate human suffering. Haredi writers often teach that our efforts do not truly offer results. Rather, we give in our “*hishtadlut*” as a tax, and God brings about the results. Modern Orthodox thinkers frequently have a less intensive conception of divine involvement in arranging the day to day flow of human affairs. Thus, they view cancer research as a very worthy occupation for a religious Jew, superior to selling watches. *Haredim*, on the other hand, are prone to portray involvement in medical experimentation as a distraction from the more important task of Torah study.

¹⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 2000), p. 231. For Putnam’s response to the potential counterargument that television watching is the result and not the cause of lack of social involvement, see pages 235-246. He concludes that there is powerful and circumstantial evidence, if not absolutely conclusive, for TV watching playing a causal role.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. pgs. 237-246.

The culture of TV encourages the spectator role over that of the participant. Putnam comments on declining numbers of Americans active in political campaigns.

Barely two decades ago election campaigns were for millions of Americans an occasion for active participation in national deliberation. Campaigning was something we did, not something we merely witnessed. Now for almost all Americans, an election campaign is something that happens around us, a grating element in the background noise of everyday life, a fleeting image on a TV screen.¹⁷

Though other factors also help generate voter apathy and indifference, TV watching encourages the idea of life as a spectator sport.

Independent and Critical Thinking: Modern Orthodoxy contends that it allows for more independence and diversity of thought than the community to their right. Whereas *Haredim* tend to homogenize all of rabbinic thought into one hashkafic position, Modern Orthodox educators present the diversity of opinions in the history of rabbinic thought. Additionally, Modern Orthodoxy adopts a less authoritarian position about Jewish communal issues. Note that “*daas Torah*,” the idea that rabbis should decide issues of politics and determine personal life choices, is roundly rejected by the Modern Orthodox world.

Television represents a great gift to propagandists of all kinds. Since it works through images rather than through argument, it does not lend itself to deliberate consideration or to debate. Postman captures this idea as well: “It cannot be said often enough that, unlike sentences, a picture is irrefutable. It does not put forward a proposition, it implies no opposite or negation of itself, there are no rules of evidence or logic to which it must conform.”¹⁸ TV plants various assumptions in the mind of its viewers. Television viewers imagine that lawyers spend the bulk of their time in court arguing cases because they never see the drudgery of lawyers’ reading technical documents looking for errors. They imagine that policemen solve cases mostly through clever reasoning and forensic evidence rather than through paying informers. They also think that law enforcement officers use their weapons on a weekly basis when the average policeman does so only a handful of times in his career.¹⁹ To clarify,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁸ Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Vintage Books: New York, 1994), p. 73.

¹⁹ See the discussion of television’s portrayal of doctors, lawyers and policemen in *Remote Control*, pgs. 248-275

TRADITION

the point of this critique is not the lack of realism per se but the effectiveness of this medium at implanting images and ideas in viewers.

Nor should we mistakenly identify the many choices television provides as an encouragement of autonomy and individuality. As Jacques Ellul notes:

[F]reedom is not necessarily having lots of consumer goods to choose from...the individual is free as a consumer but he is only free as such... modern man can choose from a hundred automobile makes and a thousand kinds of cloth – i.e., he can choose *products*. On the level of consuming, the range of choice is vaster. But on the level of the role in the body social, on the level of functions and behaviors, there is a considerable reduction. The choice among technological objects is not of the same nature as the choice of human conduct.²⁰

Someone who participates in the consumer culture experiences a wide variety of possibilities within that world, but that world remains quite narrowly circumscribed.

Additionally, television makes it more difficult for families to carve out a space of their own – separate from the messages popular in society. Before modern media, a person's home could serve as a refuge from external currents; now, that has become nearly impossible. As Allan Bloom puts it: "...first radio, then television, have assaulted and overturned the privacy of the home, the real American privacy, which permitted the development of a higher and more independent life within democratic society. Parents can no longer control the atmosphere of the home and have even lost the will to do so."²¹ Democratic culture weakens when more and more children experience exposure to identical messages.

A medium that hinders independent and critical thought could, in a worst case scenario, encourage a nightmarish political reality. The best analogy for this would be not Orwell's *1984* but Huxley's *Brave New World*. Leaders can control populations through pleasure and entertainment as much as via terror and torture. Postman powerfully captures the distinction between the Orwellian nightmare and that of Huxley:

In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours. There is no need for wardens or gates or Ministries

²⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System* tr. Joachim Neugroschel, (Continuum Publishing: New York, 1980), pgs. 320-321.

²¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1987), pgs. 58-59.

of Truth. When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people becomes an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture death is a clear possibility.²²

While the threat of *1984* looms large in parts of the world, a peril akin to *Brave New World* represents a more serious danger in many contemporary Western nations. An entire society may willingly relinquish the ability to think critically. Beyond all of the above, reading encourages critical thinking in a way that TV does not. The reader sets the pace; he can stop and think over a paragraph or reread a point to check if he understood it clearly. Even in the world of DVDs, when was the last time you witnessed someone stop a TV show or a movie to think over a point or to discuss it with someone else?

Lack of critical thought manifests itself in a unique aspect of the television medium, the utter absence of self-criticism. Most media contain some kind of internal self-analysis. Authors write book reviews, and Siskel and Ebert, among others, evaluate motion pictures. Yet where does any critical appraisal of television programming appear? Not on television. As David Marc writes:

As if that is not a problem enough, not a single program dedicated to television criticism appears on any of the national networks, including PBS, or on any of the scores of national cable services or, to my knowledge, on any of the hundreds of individual stations that hold FCC licenses "in the public interest."²³

Why does such critical analysis not exist? Perhaps the shallowness of most television shows would not stand up to a more searching scrutiny. Alternatively, commercial forces involved in the television industry understand how critical appraisal might hinder sales and consumer fun. Whatever the cause, this unusual phenomenon further illustrates the mindless quality of the entire television endeavor.

Looking Beneath the Surface: The Haredi world heavily emphasizes appropriate dress. Yeshiva fellows wear white shirts and dark pants and put on a hat and jacket for davening. Girls in the Beis Yaakov system hear a lot about sleeve lengths and neck lines. In contrast, Modern Orthodoxy

²² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pgs. 155-156.

²³ David Marc, *Bonfire of the Humanities: Television, Subliteracy, and Long - Term Memory Loss* (Syracuse University Pres: Syracuse, 1995), p. 16.

TRADITION

often downplays discussion of clothing, arguing that it pays to focus our attention on what's inside. Behavior and character matter far more than appearance.

Yet few institutions promote superficiality and valuing appearance more than television and movies. Only handsome and pretty faces with attractive bodies need apply for most major acting jobs. Aging women who no longer seize the attention of men often find their acting roles dwindling. Nor does this only apply to sitcoms and action shows; the same applies to the TV news. Apparently, insightfully discussing sanctions against Iran or the economy of the European Union depends on good looks. Those with large noses or droopy eyes will never see the anchor's desk. Commercials convey the identical message. Buy the correct car or drink the right beer, and all the good looking people in the neighborhood will want to spend time with you. This reflects a double superficiality since it encourages the idea that good looking people matter more, and it teaches that the route to success hinges upon owning a fancy looking car. In essence, advertising turns the conversation away from the quality of the product and redirects it towards the insecurity of the buyer. Neil Postman says it well:

Images of movie stars and famous athletes, of serene lakes and macho fishing trips, of elegant diners and romantic interludes, of happy families packing their station wagons for a picnic in the country - these tell nothing about the product being sold. But they tell everything about the fears, fancies, and dreams of those who might buy them. What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer.²⁴

Does this world of advertising move us towards depth and authenticity?

Political campaigns and debates represent another good example of this flaw. Only slim and reasonable looking individuals need apply for the presidency. It would be unthinkable in our day and age for a corpulent man such as Taft or a wheelchair bound invalid such as FDR to run for the presidency. How could their political handlers and spin doctors overcome their lack of aesthetic appeal? When the physically fit candidates do debate, the focus remains on external qualities. Questions such as which

²⁴ Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (Vintage Books: New York, 1993), p. 170. Jeffrey Sacks correctly pointed out to me that the same criticism applies to newspaper and magazine ads. However, TV is more successful and more pernicious about it. Many TV watchers enjoy the commercials as much as the programming but how many people read newspapers for the ads?

candidate looked confident dominate discussion more than the actual issues argued. According to one historical account, Nixon lost a debate to Kennedy because it looked as if he had not shaved. In today's media, "a candidate's 'image' has become more important than his plans, a product's 'image' more important than its usefulness."²⁵

The Role of Women: Modern Orthodoxy proudly stands for greater educational opportunities and leadership positions for women. Unlike our Haredi counterparts, we teach women gemara and promote women for leadership roles in major Jewish organizations. Does the video camera's obsession with attractive women enhance these goals or harm them? Will a constant barrage of images of women's bodies cause men to treat them with more dignity and respect? A recent report by the Parents Television Council notes the rampant sexualization of female adolescents in some of the most popular shows such as *Glee*, a show watched by many of our students.²⁶ Our community currently promotes a cruel irony. We encourage our female children and students to study Torah on an advanced level and to strive for professional fulfillment, while at the same time we let them watch shows instructing them that the only truly meaningful things in their lives are getting thin, looking pretty, and sleeping with boys.

Books and Television: Readers will raise an objection to my preferring reading books over watching television and movies. Since a good deal of trashy literature exists, moving from the video store to the bookstore or library does not necessarily improve the situation. Obviously, the trip to find a good book requires good judgment; but I contend that the trip to the library involves far more positive potential. I can think of many hundreds of books I want my children to read but cannot think of thirty movies they should see. Postman sees this situation as inherent in the medium. Of course, other explanations also exist. Book writing is a much older institution and it is far less costly to produce a book – many more books exist than movies. Granting the cogency of those explanations, it remains true that we can benefit from much worthwhile literature and cannot do likewise from the fare on the smaller or larger screens. Furthermore, books promote several virtuous habits; television does not. Reading books often demands patience, endurance, concentration, and serious thought. What character traits are needed to watch television? As Postman

²⁵ Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Vintage Books: New York, 1994), p. 74

²⁶ See http://www.parentstv.org/FemaleSexualization/Study/Sexualized_Teen_Girls.pdf

TRADITION

notes, we speak of people improving at reading, but no one gets better at watching television. Of course, the above assumes a certain minimum level of complexity of our reading material. Some contemporary writing, such as USA Today or James Patterson's novels, reads more like a television show on paper. On the other hand, most books make some minimal demands on the reader.

Marie Winn outlines many of the advantages of books over television in terms of fostering character:

Every reader has experienced difficulties with that first stage of reading a book, but perseveres with the knowledge that he will soon be safely settled into the book and commence to enjoy it. There is no equivalent 'getting into' process in viewing a television program. Although a certain amount of confusion about names and characters may also exist at the start of a television experience, the program moves on with far less effort required from the viewer to unsort and imagine and understand. The physical world of the television program is immediately available to the eye - no taxing description of people or places need be endured before the action moves on.²⁷

No doubt, some will accuse me of a type of intellectual elitism which unrealistically expects every carpenter and plumber – or even every lawyer and doctor – to read Kant and Kierkegaard in his or her spare time. Moreover, exhausted parents coming home from a long day at the office lack the energy to decipher *The Waste Land* or *Lyrical Ballads*. They need some mindless entertainment to unwind after a day of arduous work. I accept this point. Indeed, too much Modern Orthodox literature focuses exclusively on the intellectuals, leaving out what this ideology means for the majority of its adherents. Yet my rejection of much of popular culture still stands. Modern Orthodox Jews do not watch just enough TV and movies to regain their strength; they spend numerous hours watching TV as an end in itself, often failing to make discriminating judgments about which shows to watch. Furthermore, many options stand between the poles of *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *Days of Our Lives*.

A good deal of worthwhile literature does not tax the brain excessively. Some intelligent writers, such as Oliver Sacks and Stephen J. Gould, excel at conveying important ideas to a wide audience in an engaging manner. Historical biographies may also serve a similar role, as can novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Cry the Beloved Country*, or *The Book Thief*.

²⁷ Marie Winn, *The Plug In Drug* (The Viking Press: New York, 1977), p. 61.

A person need not be a great intellectual to read many critiques of modern society, such as that of Neil Postman mentioned above. Thus, one good option consists of lighter yet meaningful reading.²⁸ Of course, other options for constructive use of time exist beyond the world of reading. We could turn off the TV and the internet in order to play a board game with our children, converse with a friend, or become involved in a communal charity project.

Not only do books contain far more valuable content; they serve as a counterweight to the impact of the TV medium. If TV encourages problematic character traits such as a short attention span, a medium that makes different demands proves helpful. McLuhan argues that we cannot simply watch television while resisting its effect; only different media can remedy the situation.

What possible *immunity* can there be from the subliminal operation of a new medium like television? People have long supposed that bulldog opacity, backed by firm disapproval, is adequate enough protection against any new experience. It is the theme of this book that not even the most lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary “closure” of the senses that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience presented. The utmost purity of mind is no defense against bacteria....To resist TV, therefore, one must acquire the antidote of related media like print.²⁹

The Internet: Some readers will no doubt insist that this article misses the target since it remains stuck years behind. People today do not waste their time watching television; instead, they are busy reading blogs, posting on their Facebook pages, and surfing the internet. Addressing how contemporary Modern Orthodox Jews spend their time demands focusing on those phenomena more than on television and movies. In response, I would point out that anecdotal evidence from friends, neighbors, and students indicates that TV watching at prodigious rates continues even with the additional options offered by the internet. Indeed, the computer sometimes simply becomes a substitute TV screen. In fact, the computer can increase television watching since no limitation exists based on what is on during a given half hour. Whereas missing a movie or TV show once meant waiting until it appeared again, YouTube, TIVO, and several hundred

²⁸ The preceding two paragraphs are taken, with minor modifications, from my forthcoming article “Contemporary Challenges to Modern Orthodoxy,” to appear in *Orthodox Forum 2010: The Next Generation of Modern Orthodoxy*.

²⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 329.

TRADITION

cable stations ensure constant availability for anything we want to watch. Thus, discussing the worth and impact of extended television watching remains relevant.³⁰

I do consider a good deal of internet usage a waste of time if not harmful. Facebook creates the possibility of spending endless hours tracking the lives of two hundred other people rather than enriching one's own. Blogging promotes constant debates without anyone stopping to think deeply about what they write. However, I also recognize many positive usages for the internet. Whether it be a shiur on the Har Etzion VBM, accessing a text from Plutarch, or even just finding driving directions to Baltimore or a recipe for chili, the internet proves immensely helpful. Moreover, the nature of contemporary professional life and communications renders it nearly impossible to function without access to the internet. Though I do call for reducing the amount of time spent watching YouTube videos or reading blogs, I would not suggest that we throw out our computers or cancel our internet connections. Regarding television, on the other hand, so few programs of value exist that I recommend not owning one. Owning a TV but using it sparingly remains an option, albeit a difficult one. The temptations to employ it as all purpose babysitter or as a two hour long diversion after a long day of work are difficult to resist. Simply not having it in the house eliminates the problem.

Even when parents monitor what children watch or when adults avoid certain programs for themselves, they may fall into the trap of what Mankiewicz and Swerdlow call LOP, or the Least Objectionable Program.³¹ In other words, they decide to watch TV and have enough of a conscience to avoid the more tasteless options. However, this does not mean that what they watch has much value. We can commend their discernment even as we note that they would be better served choosing another activity altogether.

No doubt, we could draw several distinctions. We might have more sympathy for someone living alone, lacking regular companionship, who wants to watch television. Parents could justify curtailing their children's freedom to watch more than their own by arguing that only adults make good judgments about employing this medium, or that avoiding TV is

³⁰ Easy availability of TV programs on the internet negatively impacts on the year Modern Orthodox students spend studying in Israel. Educators at post high school *yeshivot* and seminaries testify that students often stay up too late catching up on shows, miss *shiurim* in order to watch, and fail to fully experience the year as an encounter with a new culture different from what they grew up with due to their continued exposure to TV shows.

³¹ *Remote Control*, pgs. 69-70.

more important during early habit forming years. While I understand the latter position, it reflects potential hypocrisy in allowing ourselves to indulge in a vice we hold back from our children. In addition, most adults could use their time more productively than they do when watching TV.

Obviously, those who choose to keep the television out of the house can still watch TV programs on the internet and see movies on their computer or DVD player. The essential argument of this paper calls for minimizing TV watching irrespective of the machine employed. However, I do think throwing out the TV or not ever buying one carries significant symbolic import. For our community, such a move conveys that Modern Orthodox Jews make discerning judgments about which aspects of broader culture to encounter. Let us embrace Dostoevsky and medical research while rejecting Madonna and afternoon talk shows. We stand for the wisdom of William James and the compassion of a good social worker instead of the vacuous vanity of *Desperate Housewives* and MTV. Clearly, casting away our televisions in order to read inane novels and surf the internet all day accomplishes nothing. Putting aside the TV should reflect a broader commitment towards using our time well and avoiding the empty aspects of popular culture.

I am not indifferent to some of the joys of television. *MASH* and *Star Trek* were pleasures of my youth, and their appeal has not faded in my middle age. Such shows entertain and, at their best, make us think and feel deeply. Moreover, even empty entertainment has its place for people exhausted and needing to relax or cheer up. I just ask for an honest assessment regarding what percentage of the shows we watch have real value and how often our watching of mindless programming extends beyond the time that does us good. We must also factor in the degree to which TV encourages short attention spans and the need for constant stimulation. Evaluating all these factors should make us consider the possibility that the damage of television watching in general far outweighs the gain.

COUNTERARGUMENTS

Perhaps my contention runs afoul of a different Modern Orthodox ideal. While Haredi Judaism tends towards greater seclusion and isolation due to fears of external influences, Modern Orthodoxy preaches encountering the outside world with the confidence that we can extract the positive from that world. From that perspective, my position appears to move away from Modern Orthodox thought. This potential criticism of

TRADITION

my viewpoint assumes that exposure to secular cultures and subcultures represents a boundless and ultimate value. Yet all ideals know some limitation, and even the most ardent Modern Orthodox thinker presumably finds some aspects of the outside world not worthy of encountering. Identifying as Modern Orthodox does not commit us to finding the good in “gangsta rap” or in the late night club scene. Along the same lines, television may not prove worthy of our redeeming efforts. Additionally, when different ideals clash, some have to give way. If television hinders many of our most precious values, we can relinquish some openness and adopt a bit of insularity in the quest for preserving our most central values such as those I have outlined above.

A different criticism contends that these media reflect the world as we know it, and we cannot fight it; we can only try to utilize the good in it. I deny the impossibility of fighting it. It is quite possible not to own a television or to severely curtail the amount of time we spend watching it. If we are fortunate enough to live near some like-minded families, we and our children may discover kindred spirits among peers. Since we made aliyah in 1997, my wife and I have not owned a television. We have found that we both function far more productively, as do our four children. The children all read ferociously and above their age level. Genetics and environmental factors certainly play a role, but not having a television has contributed enormously. Parent-child conversations and parental reading also increase as a result.

Ironically, the contention that we cannot fight television supports Bloom’s argument regarding the assault on the home. Do we have to accept every aspect of surrounding society, or can we draw dividing lines when necessary? If we assume the former, have we not relinquished our ability to shape the atmosphere of our homes in a manner that fosters religious, moral, and educational flourishing? Should the producers of CBS and NBC influence our children’s upbringing more than parents and teachers? Let us not replace education with entertainment and deeper thinking with quick sound bites just because the broader culture pulls in those directions. Some things are worth fighting for; others are worth fighting against.

Attempting to use certain modern media constructively may ultimately eviscerate any message we try to convey. Make a music video about Purim or aliyah, and the end result will often be just another music video with young men and women bopping about in a nice looking car. Ideas such as standing up for ideals in the face of danger or the remarkable achievement of a people returning to its homeland after an eighteen hundred year hiatus invariably lose out to catchy tunes, humor, and

action. Employ Twitter to teach Torah, and complex analysis gives way to brief declarations adding minimal wisdom or insight. The best way to remain authentic to a vision is to eschew new means of transmitting messages when those new means distort the very messages they intend to convey.

CONCLUSION

If Modern Orthodoxy wants to stand for ideals like nuanced thinking, becoming educated about the world, communal involvement, avoiding superficiality, and promoting a better outlook on women, it should discard Hollywood and abandon the television. Our most precious values should make us even more wary of this medium than are the *Haredim*. Of course I do not own a television. I am Modern Orthodox.

