

The Dark Side of Multimedia (Part I)

Potential dangers inherent in using multimedia as a teaching vehicle

by Torah Live Staff

The use of multimedia as a teaching aid is a developing new field. Clearly there is no need to provide data as to its popularity as one finds it everywhere one goes. But while exploring the potential, positive aspects of what may be the ultimate tool for inculcating values (see parallel article, [The Bright Side of Multimedia](#)) we must also come to grips with the possible negative effects involved. What pitfalls await us as we travel down the road to an increasingly multimedia imbued world?

You can take for granted that whenever you come across a positive force in our material world that a corresponding, negative force is not far behind it. We know that in physics any spinning object creates a centrifugal force that causes objects to fly off it. Were it not for gravity, we would be unable to stand with our feet planted firmly on planet Earth. So too, when any original concept is born — even though its originators intended it only for good purposes — a counterbalancing force seeking to exploit the good for dangerous, evil purposes is seldom far behind.

This article is meant to take stock of the negative aspects lurking within the pleasure garden of multimedia (leaving aside, for now, the dangers of internet connectivity.) Though the article does not intend to present an encyclopedic or exhaustive presentation on the subject of multimedia and Torah, it does mean to be a good start.

As pioneers in the realm of digital media, Torah Live has undertaken to ask world renowned Torah educators and preceptors for their guidance in how best to use multimedia as a tool. How do they perceive the dangers of multimedia when using it to teach Torah?

When asked, Rabbi Reuven Leuchter said that the first thing that a teacher must be careful of when using multimedia to teach Torah is to make sure that he doesn't let sophisticated technology make up for a lack of real Torah knowledge. Bluntly stated, just wowing them is not enough.

A teacher who is strapped for time — who got home late from a wedding or has a sick child in the family — cannot let exciting slides and videos fill in for his own lack of real preparation and a proper grasp of the subject at hand. He could easily think, "Well, I don't have absolute clarity on this point, but the class will never notice. They'll be overwhelmed by my graphics and that will make up for everything."

Anyone who thinks he can make up for a lack of real knowledge by passing himself off as an expert behind a haze of multimedia gimmicks is mistaken. The only one he has succeeded in fooling is himself. Glitzy presentations do not absolve a Torah educator of the need to crystallize his own perception through the hard mental labor that is the only real way to grasp the truth.

So too, at Torah Live each of the presentations is thoroughly researched over a number of weeks, minutely exploring all sides of the matter at hand, before the

graphic element is even considered. This is because the power of multimedia is such that it can leave an indelible impression in the viewer's mind, an understanding that will not fade even after he has forgotten all the pretty pictures and high-end graphics. Torah Live feels that it has a responsibility not only to the student but even more so to the Torah itself.

Rabbi Leuchter also pointed out the terrific power that a teacher wields and that he must learn to be careful, as well as expert, in how he applies it. Pictures and videos have a way of influencing people such that they are nearly powerless when in their grip and cannot help but accept what they see.

This means that one must be particularly careful not to use the multimedia aspect of pictures unless one is absolutely sure of the veracity of the message.

Consider how scientists have influenced the masses that Darwin's theory of evolution must be true simply by placing a picture of an old man next to a photograph of a monkey. By just pointing out similarities between the two, they persuade multitudes of people that Darwin must have been right.

How many times have you encountered multimedia presentations of a scientific scenario of the creation of the universe? It is very difficult to try to imagine flaming, hurling objects unless one has been shown them at least once. But having seen them accompanied by the stepped up beat of soaring music and a commanding narrative voice, one could be all too easily convinced.

It may be that because multimedia closely parallels the way that the mind works, given that it's possible to think without words, that we are particularly likely to wholeheartedly believe what we have been shown. It all seems so obvious.

Rabbi Leuchter compared the use of multimedia to the power of a gifted orator who can enflame the masses with his stunning use of language and speaking skills. A good orator has to be careful not to employ his gifts to persuade people to take action or influence their beliefs unless what he has to offer them is absolutely true and for the ultimate good of those listening.

Rabbi Zev Leff pointed out yet another hazard lurking in multimedia. Never, he said, use multimedia to portray historic events that are best left to the imagination. World shattering events such as the exodus from Egypt and receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai were so terrifically, physically powerful that the human mind cannot possibly encompass them. Modern technology with all its stars, bells and whistles will never come even vaguely close to the sanctity and supremacy of that kind of event. On the contrary, by trying to reproduce that kind of divine grandeur you will ultimately make it seem small, childish and even toy-like.

The moment at Mount Sinai when the Torah perceptibly entered the world was so spiritually laden that, as the Midrash states, all those present perished at every word they heard and had to be brought back to life only to pass away again at the next. No video presentation, however life-like, can recapture that amount of energy. And even if it could be done, it would be better not to (1).

Other Torah educators have expressed their concern that exposure to multimedia makes it harder to go back to learning from texts. How can you now approach the Gemara when it doesn't have words flying off the page?

They point to prolific research on how a long discredited medium like television has negatively affected academic levels. The program "Sesame Street," for example, although originally intended to teach children their ABCs, made it more difficult for children to concentrate in the classroom. Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center reported that "Sesame Street creates a psychological orientation in children that leads to a shortened attention span, a lack of reflectiveness, and an expectation of rapid change in the broader environment."

Rabbi Leuchter, however, pointed out that as long as the multimedia presentations are kept interactive — meaning that the audience is challenged to think for themselves — a great deal of good, rather than harm, can be done.

This is, in fact, one of the hallmarks of Torah Live presentations. In the Torah Live LiveLectures™ this danger does not exist. In contrast to the above mentioned studies based on findings in a purely passive medium like television, the kind of multimedia that you will find here makes constant demands on the viewer. Being required to process information as he passes from one stage to another in the learning process demands that the viewer do a reality check at each level of his growth experience. Thus no correlation to the negative aspects of those television oriented studies can be made.

Multimedia need not be like a darkened room that one enters without a clue as to whom or what he will find on the other side of the door. As a medium and teaching tool it can be a positive and creative force to enlighten rather than just convince. We at Torah Live hope that by strictly adhering to the advice of our mentors that we will be able to provide you with not only a positive, but even a life changing experience.

NOTES:

(1) When asked why this would be different from the countless illustrations everyone has seen of the splitting of the Red Sea, Rabbi Leff explained that a drawing is so clearly not a true recreation that it doesn't cause the same kind of problem. A two-dimensional artist's conception leaves one constantly aware of the medium he has used, even if the illustrator has done a good job of it. But a video as a medium constantly strives to make you forget that you actually have entered it from a different reality, and that is where the problem starts. Thus you have to be more careful.