The Virtual Parent

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It is hard to be a parent in today's modern world. And it is harder to be a Jewish parent.

It is hard to be a parent because in today's media-frenzied world it is almost impossible to keep up with the technology around which our children's lives are centered. We know that our children are consuming all types of images and information from all types of media sources, and that much of the content is of harmful moral value. Yet it is extremely difficult for most adults to successfully supervise the myriad media channels of today's youth and to stay informed of everything their children are digesting.

It is harder to be a Jewish parent because we feel like our religious lifestyle has failed us. To whatever degree that each family practices observance or tradition, we Jews have always had an unspoken contract with our God that assured us that the problems that happen "out there" don't happen to us—especially not to our kids. Being part of the semi-insular and practicing Jewish community was supposed to come with a guarantee that everything would turn out all right for our families.

And so, when we suddenly realize that the bubble has burst and the wagons have uncircled, and everything out there is suddenly also happening "in here," Jewish adults are faced with a profound and painful crisis of faith. Our contract with God and Judaism has been breached.

There are parents and religious institutions that see media as the enemy. They lament the influence that television, Internet, movies, music, and video games have on our children. They lament that media has enormous influential power. And they are correct. It does.

But it is not the media channels themselves that are harmful, but rather the content they carry. The same channels and media tools that can intensely influence our children toward poor choices, can also equally influence our children for good. The influence of these media is established. The question is simply how that influence is put to use.

In this article, derived from a new workshop that my organization, In-Reach (www.In-Reach.com) is offering to Jewish communities across the United States, we will explore the relationship of teens and media companies, the impact of this relationship on the Jewish family, and how parents can successfully adapt their parenting techniques in order to reclaim influence in the lives of their teens.

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Prior to starting In-Reach, which is a not-for-profit new-media Jewish youth organization, I worked for over ten years on the commercial side of the media industry, helping companies along the lines of AOL and MTV use the Internet to engage teenagers and make lots of money off of them. I also worked in the lifestyle branding business, a unique form of branding that centers around helping brands move beyond being simply popular, to actually becoming an emotional and identifying part of a person's lifestyle and identity. Brands like this include Radio Flyer, Levis, Osh Kosh B'Gosh, and R. J. Reynolds.

It was my job over those years to understand on a profound level how media and kids relate to each other on an identity level, and to capitalize on that relationship in order to manipulate teens into becoming dollar transactions.

The teen market in the United States represents over 112.5 billion dollars in direct spending. That's how much teens 14 to18 years old spend a year on the things they love to buy. In addition, teens are seen as primary influencers in adult spending on everything from electronics to computers to cameras, and even cars. This is because more and more parents rely on their teens to do the online research for these big-ticket items. This puts the value of the teen market, both direct and indirect, at well over 400 billion dollars.

Beyond the vast economic incentive, teens are very attractive to consumer companies for four highly unique reasons:

1. Teens are loyal spenders. Teens get into a brand and then they stick with it. Once they love a particular brand, very little innovation has to be invested on a product level for several years and the teen will still keep buying. So its "innovate once, sell repeatedly." A good example is the many varieties of Nike Air sneakers, nearly all of them the same components rewrapped, and rewrapped again.

Adults, in contrast, will often reevaluate products and brand quality each time they return to make a new purchase.

2. Teens are cult spenders. Teens spend as groups. Get one popular teen into your product, and you could see your product go viral to a school, town, or even national market.

3. Teen cash is liquid. Teens don't carry the burdens and financial responsibilities of adults. If they have cash, by and large it is there to burn.

4. Teens are on the narrow end of the "upside-down funnel." Adults tend to filter the noise out of any media engagement. Our tastes are set, and we only seek those things that align with or fulfill our tastes. When an adult goes online, typically we go on for very specific information and then we get off. It could be news, sports scores, a Torah lesson, weather, and so forth. Anything else gets 'x'ed out. This is also how adults see the world of ads, be those ads on buses or in print. In advertising, we call this "the upside-down funnel." Adults take in the commercial end as if they are at the wide end of the funnel, looking down the narrow-end to see what meets their narrow field of interest. Everything else gets filtered out.

Teens, on the other hand, have the funnel wide-end out to the world, with the narrow end in their mouths. Adolescents are just beginning to identify and define what will one day become their adult tastes. And just like a one-year-old must put every physical object in his or her mouth no matter what we tell them, teens must taste every adult experience for themselves. So when teens go online, *they surf.* Teens will spend hours clicking from link to link, thirstily drinking in endless hours of exposure to new ideas of what might make them hip or cool or simply more socially acceptable.
It is specifically due to the upside-down funnel that teens are being more and more frequently targeted for their parents' big-ticket purchases, not as a second line of advertising, but as the first line! Parents are sending their kids to do the research, and kids are more susceptible to commercial manipulation. So much of today's ad dollars for adult products are being redirected from parents to their children.

These five combined factors make teens an extremely attractive target-audience: Teens are worth over 100 billion dollars of direct spending, and hundreds of billions more of secondary spending. Teens are receptive. Teens are loyal. Teens spend en-masse. And teen money is there to spend.
The ultimate dream of any marketer is to be able to create a reflex-response by the consumer. That is, I, the seller, tap your knee; and you, the buyer, act by compulsion and buy my product.
With teens, two such hot-buttons exist: Their angst and their libido. Teen sexuality and issues of identity/acceptance are raw and unprotected. Poke either of those nerves and you can get teens to do most anything to cover up their insecurity.
And so it is these two buttons that industry goes after, and today's commercial companies go after teens with impunity.
But before we can examine how commercial business is targeting our kids, we must first understand why these companies are so free to do so. Has something changed dramatically since the time when we were kids? If so, what is it, and what does it mean to us as parents?

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Most parents will tell you that the gap between parents and teens is timeless. We reassure ourselves that our teens will turn out okay, because we did, and so did our parents. "The distancing between parents and their children during the adolescent years is a natural rite of passage," people say, "and we needn't give heed to the alarmists that say that today's kids are more at risk than kids in the past."
But this is not true.
Although the gap between parents and teens is timeless, the consequence of that gap has become much more serious.
There are three key factors that have changed the playing field dramatically, making the growth-stage of distance between parents and teens of greater concern than ever before. Those three factors are:

1. Push Technology
2. A Back Door for Learning and Questions
3. Standards of Content

[H2] Big Change 1: Push Technology
Push technology means that a company no longer has to wait for you to talk to them or voice interest in their product. They can talk to you whether you are interested or not. They can push their way into your world.
The best example of this is spam email. Today, most of us run the most advanced anti-spam filters available to end-users. It is built in to Outlook, Gmail, Yahoo Mail, and nearly all popular email programs. Yet we all get spam offering us opportunities to enlarge various parts of our anatomy, or readily find exotic young women ready to fulfill all of our wildest fantasies.

Like viruses vs. anti-virus software, purveyors of spam are dedicated to finding ways around the software written to block out their emails to us. But unlike viruses, spam is motivated by overt monetary goals.
Most adults pay little heed to spam, deleting these emails with a bored yawn. But teens click on them with thirsty curiosity. These emails tap into the natural curiosity of any adolescent.
Think back twenty years to the then-equivalent of spam. That would be the Val-Pack coupons we used to get to our homes. But now imagine that Val-Packs were specifically addressed to your eleven-year-old child, with products like genital enlargers (along with pictures), and solicitations of nude foreign women available for purchase as mail-order brides. Such mail would not be tolerated for a moment! Legal action would be taken and townships and States would be up in arms!
Not so with Push Technology. Push Technology has placed images, ideas, and illicit values in front of our kids at highly impressionable young ages. It was not this way last generation.

[H2] Big Change 2: Back-Door Learning
When we were kids, if we did not like the values in our home, our school, and our synagogue, where were we going to go? To the library?
Sure, maybe you could get your hands on a dirty magazine, but that was about as radical as you could get until you were 18 years old and on your way to college.
Today, a pre-teen in the sixth, seventh, or eighth grade need only close the door to his or her room and turn on the computer, and he or she can run as far as their imagination and questions take them. And combined with the provocations of Push Technology, that might be pretty far from home.
We are no longer the gatekeepers of our children's learning. What we don't discuss with our children, someone else will.
Once upon a time, when kids brought up certain age-inappropriate topics with parents, parents could lay down the law and tell their children that such subjects would have to keep until the child was older and more mature. Today, when we shut down a topic, we are simply shutting down our role in the discussion. Our children unplug us—and plug in online.
We don't get to choose what subjects our children will and won't explore. We only get to choose if we will be part of that exploration, or if we will be left out.
It wasn't that way when we were kids.

[H2] Big Change 3: Standards of Content
Do you remember what used to earn movies an R rating? Do you remember when erotic attire, partial frontal nudity, full rear nudity, gross use of expletives, and strong sexual language were not allowed in mainstream media? Such was the standard less than twenty years ago. Today, material that was deemed inappropriate for children and teens just one generation prior is now freely syndicated over network television, FM radio, and in public street signage.
Consider the billboards for the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show on the sides of buses. The women depicted in various states of undress are the height of the art and business of eroticism, the sensuous science of the minimum coverings to leave on a person in order to ignite passion to take everything off. Women as undressed as these were once deemed inappropriate for the eyes of children under the age of 18, whether in magazine or movie. Today such images are street signage.
When I was a boy, I remember my brother sneaking me in to a Chevy Chase movie called *Modern Problems* that was rated R because they showed Chevy's tush in the movie. Such nudity is now allowed on prime-time network television. So too, graphic language that earned Smokey and the Bandit part III an R rating in the early 1980s is also standard to many of today's most popular teen (and adult) television programs.
The imagery and language that we were protected from by our society when we were kids is no longer taboo. A much lower moral standard of highly sexualized content is being mainstreamed into the eyes and ears and minds of our children through virtually every media channel.

How blessed were we that we were protected from such material when we were young and impressionable kids.
Put such mainstream content together with Push Technology and a back door for learning, and the timeless generation gap has become a very dangerous chasm.
It is this chasm that media companies exploit—and they exploit it ruthlessly. People accuse the media companies of being immoral because of their approaches to marketing to youth. But this is a confused assessment. Media companies are not immoral, they are *amoral*.
The driver of a publicly traded company is its quarterly projections and its sales against those projections. As a business with a bottom line that must be met, the question that is being asked is the best way to meet that bottom line and turn potential consumers into dollar transactions. Morality is a question left for the house of worship. In business, it is an amoral question of sales. And if it sells, use it.
As parents and as people of faith, we make a mistake when we begin to expect businesses to protect and limit the content that they share with our children. They won't.
It is up to parents to set the moral bar. Companies, like children, will continually test our limits. We can fight companies by lobbying and protesting loudly, and this can help (as it has in the past). But we can also learn to understand the language of media marketing, and in doing so discover how best to conduct our own interactions with our kids. Within the science of these media relationships are deeply understood psychological factors. And many of them are good news for faith-based communities and caring parents.

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There are four strategies for successful youth marketing that pervade today's media consumer industry. They are:

1. Cookie-Crumbing
2. Blurring the Moral Barometer
3. The Trojan Horse
4. Delegitimizing Role Models

As would be expected, these strategies are the combined product of our country's top MBAs and social scientists, and incorporate the unique vulnerabilities of today's teens, as we have enumerated in the 'Big Changes' above.
For the sake of this article, I will summarize them on a cursory level. In our parenting workshop we explore these media strategies at much greater depth.

[H2] Cookie Crumbing
Cookie Crumbing recognizes that there are those media outlets that parents supervise more closely, and those that parents supervise less closely. Although parents may pay attention to what their teens are watching on television or what music their teens are listening to, few parents will follow online to the web-communities and discussion groups that these programs and music artists spawn.
So while operating in the more exposed and parentally supervised media outlets, media companies are more careful in the way they position and feed content to kids. These programs, however, are designed to lead kids down a bread-crumb trail and into an online environment where teens can be more freely and aggressively manipulated.
Another aspect of Cookie Crumbing is creating merchandise trails. Most of today's teen entertainment icons have apparel lines, cosmetic lines, sporting-goods brands, and more.

Once upon a time a bad-boy band was only as bad as the band's lyrics. Even if you liked Mick Jagger, the Rolling Stones did not make any money if you chose to dress like him. Today, a great deal of the pop icons are manufactured specifically for their commercial appeal. They are a package meant to create a lifestyle concept in teen minds, and lead teens from the music into stores to make an array of purchases around the given image brand.

[H2] Blurring the Moral Barometer

There is a concept in Jewish spiritual philosophy regarding a person's evil inclination. We are taught that our evil inclination does not tell us to do bad things, because nobody wants to feel bad about him or herself. Rather, the evil inclination blurs the lines between good and bad, until a bad thing can be rationalized as being acceptable, and then we are free to do it without feeling guilty.

Media companies get this. And it is central to their relationship with today's youth.

It is hard to get teens to buy into superficial and hedonistic concepts of life and an array of supporting products, especially since most teens are hungry for much deeper forms of validation and connection. By blurring a teen's innate values, the teen becomes much easier to manipulate.

MTV stands for Music TeleVision. Most adults know this. What most adults do not know is that today music content makes up less than 20 percent of MTV's broadcast content. The other 80 percent is what is called "Reality Programming."

Why? Because MTV is not about music. Music is the hook. But defining culture and selling product is the business.

And these programs are not like *Survivor* on CBS. A good example of an MTV reality program would be Tila Tequila, where sixteen guys and sixteen girls compete for Tila's passion. Because, you see, Tila is not sure if she is a lesbian or heterosexual, so contestants compete to see which way they can "flip" her.

The Tila program is only aired after hours, when teens are not watching TV (supposedly). But on MTV.com, which over 65 percent of online teens visit, you can see the show twenty-four hours a day. What does this have to do with music? Nothing. But it has everything to do with dictating values to young people and owning the conversation over what is hip and what is not, and what makes us, as people, worthy or unworthy.

[H2] The Trojan Horse

The Trojan Horse is when the media companies use parents to sell a lifestyle icon to their kids, and then cut the parent out of the conversation. Classic examples of this are Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake ('N Sync), and Christina Aguilera, who were all marketed as graduates of Disney's Mickey Mouse Club. These performers were healthy alternatives for parents to steer their children toward, representing family values and chasteness, and providing an alternative to the dark music world around us.

Today, all of these pop-icons are highly sexualized with myriads of consumer products ranging from perfume to tequila. And just in case you think that this is because their audiences grew up, Britney's new line of apparel, just announced in March 2009 to be carried exclusively at Kohls, is for *Juniors*. The clothing line includes black lace thongs for eleven-year-olds.

The change-up in the lifestyle-icon's image is done suddenly and according to specific timing. The icon is allowed to percolate in the home and earn central status and approval by the parents for their youngster. And once the marriage is solidly consummated, typically after a few patient years, bang! An overnight image-change manifests, and it is too late for the parent to undo the sell. Suddenly our child is being led in a very frightening and new direction, as we are helpless to intervene.

[H2] Delegitimizing Role Models

Here comes the good news. This component of media-strategy is actually based upon statistical facts that media companies are very aware of, but most parents are not.

Most parents believe that the primary influence in their teen's moral decision-making is their teen's friends. This is false. While the majority of adults believe this to be true, the majority of teens in the United States assign this influence to their parents.

In addition, 71 percent of teens in the United States would like religious leaders to be more active in addressing moral and high-risk issues. Most parents and rabbis do not know this. All media companies do. And so, delegitimizing role models is critical to their success, because an engaged parent or rabbi can undo the whole ball of wax, and all those careful marketing dollars can go down the drain.

This is why shows like Dawson's Creek, Beverly Hills 90210, and The OC all reverse the roles of parents and teens. All important life-decisions are made by the teens on the shows, while parents are shielded and protected by their kids as being too fragile for many of these hard questions. Kids on these shows are very respectful in the ways they talk to their parents, and so our guard as parents does not go up. But the underlying message is: "You can't talk to them. They are not capable of understanding. You are old enough and strong enough and wise enough to decide for yourself."

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As parents, we are surprised to hear that we are the primary influence in our teens' moral decision making. It doesn't seem that way! We *know* that our teens talk to their friends about so very many intimate topics that they simply do not broach with us. So how can this statistic not be a lie? The answer is that no one said that your kids talk to you the most. The kids are simply saying that your influence as a parent is primary, and that of their friends and others is secondary.

Deep inside, we all know this to be true. Even as adults, we still care deeply about what our parents think (or might think, if they knew) about the decisions we make. The judgment of our parents haunts us, and in some cases charms us. But it is always there. Whether our parents were good or bad, kind or cruel, their judgment and influence looms over us in every important life-decision we make.

"So great," you say. "We have the influence, but our kids don't talk to us! What good does that do?"

And here we come to the section on parenting. Because the first step is learning that the power still lies with you. Learning how to use that influence is something we all can achieve.

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The first step in creating In-Reach was to learn what today's Jewish teens are thinking, and to find new approaches to supporting them in their moral and ethical decision-making process. Teens in the Jewish community benefit from a strong support structure. Caring parents, private schools with top-notch teachers, guidance staff, and outreach volunteers and professionals surround our teens with love and offer them many caring lifelines for difficult life choices they may be facing.

But today there is a new outlet, the web, which teens turn to when they want to discreetly ask and answer questions. And when we think about the types of private questions teens might choose to ask online, it is obvious how important it is for us to have a Jewish outpost in cyberspace for these kids. As we have learned, if we are not present to answer these questions, someone else will answer them in our place.

And so, working with leading Jewish clinical experts including Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski and Dr. David Pelcovitz, In-Reach created an online, anonymous social networking system for Jewish teens, a site that actually doubles as a clinically based peer-counseling system. The portal, called TheLockers.net, has served over 10,000 Jewish teens from across the United States and Canada, has hosted nearly 3,000 therapeutically supervised peer-discussions, and has enjoyed more than 27,000 posts from its teen users. Eighty percent of teens who use TheLockers.net come from public schools, most of whom have limited Jewish backgrounds. Twenty percent of our users come from Jewish Day Schools, ranging from Orthodox to Reform.

All activity on TheLockers.net is supervised by specially trained moderators, using a patent-pending online clinical methodology that was developed by In-Reach. And TheLockers community is extremely popular among teens, with over 70 percent of teenagers that hear about the system becoming

users of it.
For over five years we have had the privilege of listening to Jewish youth from across North America share the most intimate and private questions of their lives with us. The primary topics are questions of Judaism and morality. Yet issues have ranged from family, to social stress, to school, to peer pressure, to body image, to drugs and drinking, to sex.
As we listened to and supported Jewish teens of all denominations, we began to learn from the teens about how traditional approaches to parenting were and were not working in a digital generation. Parenting workshops were created, and our learning from the teens was synthesized with the feedback, reactions, and real world experiences of hundreds of today's parents from across the country.
There are seven central principles that were found to be common to all successful relationships between today's parents and today's teens. These principles define and clarify the lens through which traditional parenting approaches may be evaluated for success in a modern era. Furthermore, they provide a priceless guide for any parent struggling to understand, heal, or strengthen their relationship with their teen.
These insights are available to the Jewish community via parenting workshops that In-Reach delivers nationally, and will soon be supported by a book that teaches the seven central principles of value-based parenting. In addition, readers of *Conversations* are invited to be in touch with us via email, at info@In-Reach.com, if there are specific questions we may answer for you.
There are new truths we must accept as a community and essential questions we must answer as parents and teachers.
It is vital that we come to accept the following new realities:

- Although the gap between parents and teens is timeless, the consequence of that gap has become much more serious.
- We are no longer the gatekeepers of our children's learning. If we are not able or willing to address the questions of our children in a meaningful fashion, they will discuss their questions with someone else.
- Absolutes will backfire. Strong-arm parenting and absolute religious rules only work on a hostage audience. Today's youth have alternatives. To succeed, our answers must demonstrate meaning and value.

The questions we must ask ourselves as parents, teachers, and rabbis are as follows:

- If a teen is making a major life decision, would he or she feel comfortable to come to us while contemplating the decision?
- If the decision was already made, and it was the wrong decision, would he or she feel comfortable to turn to us during the fallout?
- Do we know what we believe regarding values and faith—and why we believe it?
- Do we share what we believe with our children, consistently and through meaningful conversation and behavior?
- In a world where all temptations and values are on the table, why would our kids choose Judaism?
- Given the choice again, would we? Why?

The world we grew up in has changed. Our children are faced with choices that we never had to make, and they are assaulted with foreign values that are confusing even to adults. It is essential that we understand how their world has changed, and respect the impact and consequences of those changes.

As a Masoretic tradition—a tradition that is based upon transmission from parent to child and teacher to student—our success as a Jewish community is measured by the ultimate choices our children make. By learning to parent and teach according to values, instead of rules, we can provide our children with a Judaism that is relevant to the questions upon which their modern lives revolve.