

Torah in a Connected World

A Halakhic Perspective on
Communication Technology and Social Media



Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

**TORAH
IN A
CONNECTED
WORLD**

**A HALAKHIC PERSPECTIVE
ON COMMUNICATION
TECHNOLOGY
AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

The Lax Family Edition

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Torah in a Connected World
A Halakhic Perspective on Communication Technology
and Social Media

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*Dedicated in loving memory
of our dear sons and brothers*

*Jonathan Theodore Lax, ז"ל
Ethan James Lax, ז"ל*

לעילוי נשמת
יונתן טוביה בן מרדכי ז"ל
איתן אליעזר בן מרדכי ז"ל

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

*Marsha and Michael Lax
Amanda and Akiva Blumenthal
Rebecca and Rami Laifer*

This book is dedicated to my beloved father, the late

Lloyd Zerker

*Though your physical presence may be absent,
your spirit continues to guide and inspire me.
I carry your values and teachings within me, and they serve
as a constant reminder of the incredible man you were.*

Howard Zerker



Dedicated in memory of

Moe and Rose Litwack



Meyer and Masha Simon

Alan & Resa Litwack

*Dedicated by Marvin and Roberta Newman
in loving memory of our dear parents:*

Samuel Newman – שלמה מאיר בן משה ז"ל –

Piri Newman – חנה פרל בת יצחק דוד ז"ל –

Harry Lensky – יהודה צבי בן משה ז"ל –

Phyllis Lensky – פרומה בת לוי משה ז"ל –



In loving memory of our parents

Naftali Ben Mendel



Chaya Dabrusa bat Sarah

And in honour of our dear children and grandchildren

וראה בנים לבנך

Mimi & Byron Shore

To Rabbi Jonathan Ziring.
In appreciation and friendship.
Wishing you continued success in Torah scholarship.
Gershon Green and Marjorie



Dedicated in loving memory of our dear parents
David and Edith (Waldman) Klein



Uvian and Sela (Schlussel) Oster
who rebuilt their families with wisdom, compassion and enduring love.

They continue to inspire us.
Ruth and Gerard Klein



In loving memory and לעלוי נשמות

רות בת צבי
רייכל בת מנחם מנדל
אסתר בת נתן הלוי



Dedicated by Allan and Malka Rutman
in memory of their parents

גדליה בן יצחק ז"ל, לאה בת חיים דוד ז"ל
יוסף מתתיהו בן אברהם יצחק ז"ל, חיה שרה בת שמחה בונים ז"ל



In memory of my mother

ז"ל Evelyn Silverberg
הלכה לעולמה כ"ו אדר תשפ"ג
Samuel Silverberg



Dedicated in appreciation and gratitude of Rabbi Ziring
and in honor of my wife Shari on our 35th wedding anniversary

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Halakhah, a system designed to guide us throughout our lives, must constantly address changing reality. This is both a spiritual need to instill sanctity into modern life and a practical necessity to enable us to properly fulfill our religious obligations. Throughout the ages, it has constantly evolved and developed as it responded to the challenges posed by economical and technological innovation as well as societal and historical forces. Anyone familiar with the Halakhic literature of the 20th century is well aware of this dynamic, as its discussions, dilemmas and decisions regarding the issues that arose in consequence of our return to *Eretz Yisrael*, the establishment of a state, the introduction of electricity into our lifestyles and medical breakthroughs not only provided practical advice but also enriched the halakhic literature and enhanced our religious sensibilities.

The time has now come to address the issues of the 21st century. Technological innovation is a constant of human life and, therefore, halakhic analysis of the changing circumstances must follow in its footsteps. This is not the place to discuss the crucial question of whether the shift to a digital society will bring about a fundamental change in our lives or will simply facilitate communication and the sharing of information while the basic human condition is not altered. Regardless of one's position on this issue, we must recognize that halakhic guidance relating to the digital age is necessary and that the formulation of clear guidelines to fulfill this need is imperative.

Torah in a Connected World sets out to fulfill this need. R. Jonathan Ziring, a dear *talmid* and an accomplished *talmid hakham*, who is well aware of the digital landscape and highly knowledgeable of the halakhic material, provides us with a

comprehensive work that addresses the halakhic issues of contemporary technology. It is important to realize that such a work is, by definition, the first word but not the last word on its subject matter. The reader should be aware that due to its role as a book addressing cutting-edge technology and evolving social reality, and the nature of the halakhic process as taking into account different perspectives and many opinions, that much halakhic material relating to these topics will be added, debated and deliberated in coming years as the implications of the new reality become clearer and the halakhic perspective comes into sharper focus. It is safe to assume that R. Ziring will have to update the work in the future and that others will also add their say. I state this not to diminish the accomplishment, but rather to emphasize its pioneering nature, to recognize the great service of establishing the need for such a halakhic work and to applaud the achievement of embarking upon this important halakhic discussion. The best wish and the truest *berakha* that I can give R. Ziring is that he will have the need and the privilege to issue an updated version in due time.

May the KBH grant R. Ziring health and happiness to continue his halakhic work and may He grant him the privilege to enlighten us on this and many other issues.

יהי רצון שהרב המחבר יזכה להפיץ את מעיינותיו החוצה בכתב ובעל פה
ויזכהו הקב"ה ללמוד וללמד מתוך בריאות גופא ונהורא מעליא, לאוי"ט.

Mosheh Lichtenstein
Alon Shevut
ערב זמן מתן תורתנו, תשפ"ג

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Introduction: Motivation for This Book

For almost two decades, the web has changed the world and revolutionized how information is stored, published, searched and consumed. The ripple effect has spread so wide that it impacts not just businesses and industries but crosses over into politics, medicine, media and breaches geographical locations, cultural boundaries and ultimately, affects people's day to day lives.¹

The drastic improvements in communication technology – and more recently, the explosion of social media – have radically changed how people live their lives. However, while much academic and popular writing has been devoted to analyzing these effects, little has been written about how it affects halakha or the ways in which halakha can address the fundamental questions raised by these technological advances.

Several years ago, I began to think deeply about these issues, first by analyzing and teaching about some of these issues in the Toronto Jewish community when I served as the *sgan rosh beit midrash* of the Yeshiva University Torah MiTzion Beit Midrash Zichron Dov (now the Beit Midrash Zichron Dov of Toronto), and later by writing a series on halakha in the age of social media for Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash (VBM). (I began to focus on issues of *lashon hara* as a fellow at the Summer Beit Midrash of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership

1. Jennifer Alejandro, "Journalism in the Age of Social Media," Reuters Institute fellowship paper (University of Oxford, 2010), available at: <https://bit.ly/2IRuiPR>.

and later as a fellow at the Tikvah Fund.) The focus of the VBM series was social media, though in truth, the series was more an exploration of halakha in the digital age. In my concluding comments for that series, I explained why I felt that I needed to explore this issue:

Recent studies have found that on average, social media users spend two hours and twenty-two minutes a day on social media.² The average American adult spends over eleven hours on screens daily.³ That is more time than is devoted to most other pursuits. According to those numbers, it is common for people to spend more time on screens than praying, eating, sleeping and learning Torah; social media usage alone takes up more time than the combined three daily prayers for most people. Nevertheless, while books have been and continue to be written (and for good reason) on the *halakhot* of prayer and *kashrut*, much less has been presented to provide halakhic guidelines and Torah perspectives on how we utilize the powerful and easily misused tools that the internet and social media offer us. It was to remedy that, to some extent, that I wrote this series.

One of my teachers, R. Aryeh Klapper, writes as follows: “There is more and more Halakha, and ever more punctilious observance, and yet less and less of Halakha is relevant to the real moral and ethical issues facing individuals and communities.”⁴ Much of the community has begun “seeing Halakha more as an obstacle course rather than a moral highway.” In discussions I’ve had over the year with people who wondered what I could possibly write about in a series on halakha in the age of social media, I’ve seen these sentiments to be true. Either people thought there was nothing to write, or they thought the sum total of the series should be a few *shiurim* spelling out how the laws of *lashon hara*

2. Available at: <https://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2019/01/how-much-time-do-people-spend-social-media-infographic.html>.
3. Available at: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/people-are-spending-most-of-their-waking-hours-staring-at-screens-2018-08-01>.
4. *Acharayut Ketuvah: Responsibility Inscribed*, vol. 1, ed. Rachel Gelfman Schultz (The Center for Modern Torah Leadership).

apply in the modern world. The notion that communication technology in general and social media in particular have shaped the way we experience life and therefore the Torah, and that the Torah can in turn orient the way we utilize those tools, was surprising to them. But it should not be.

R. Haim David HaLevi argues in several places for the critical need to have halakhists approach the issues that challenge each generation, arguing that to fail to do so borders on heresy. As he writes: “Some argue that God’s Torah is incapable, as it were, of answering new questions that arise in modern society, as if the Torah of God does not have a solution to social, economic, political and other problems. In this claim there is half truth; nevertheless, a person is not entitled to make this claim unless he has filled his belly with *Shas* and *Posekim*. This is because the simple truth is that for many of the problems that plague modern society, a reasonable halakhic solution can be found in every generation. A person who thinks otherwise is nothing but a heretic in the fundamentals, for one of the foundations of faith is that the Torah is from heaven, and God announced the generations in advance, foresees and looks until the end of all generations. Is it possible that His Torah should be ineffective in any time period?! There is no greater heresy than that!”⁵

Then, in 2019, the world was hit by the global pandemic of Covid-19. Suddenly, the world was turned upside down. Digital communication no longer supplemented our socializing, but in many cases, it replaced it. In Israel, there were weeks when, barring permitted outings to purchase food or medicine, all people were mandated to remain within a hundred meters of their home – even if they were not in quarantine. We barely saw our next-door neighbors. Zoom went from being a platform used by some for meetings to the main way in which many of us worked, went to school, and communicated with our family and friends. Zoom became the “scotch tape” of videoconferencing, the household name for

5. See *Responsa Aseh Lekha Rav* 3:56 and *Daat Torah BeInyanim Mediniyim, Techumin* 8: 365–367.

all similar communication. As I ready this book for publication, the world is still facing new waves of this virus, bringing into question whether the efforts to reopen will be slowed or reversed. With the encouragement of some friends, I decided that it was time to revisit the material in light of what I had learned and help myself grapple with these new realities.

The Rapid Development of Communication Technology

To understand why so little has been written about these issues, especially in the halakhic sphere, one must remember how quickly, in historical terms, these technologies have developed. In 1989, Ursula Franklin delivered the University of Toronto Massey Lectures and later collected and expanded those talks in a book, *The Real World of Technology*.⁶ Though this was written several decades ago, and the developments in the relevant technologies have advanced rapidly since then, many of her comments capture the issues perfectly. She writes:

We ought to keep in mind that the effects we perceive as so large come from technologies that are very recent in historical terms. For example, practical applications of electromagnetic and electronic technologies that have so profoundly changed the realities of the world are not more than one hundred and fifty years old. Think for a moment of the speed of transmission of messages; this really didn't change between the time of antiquity and about 1800. Whether Napoleon or Alexander the Great, even emperors had to rely on teams of horses and riders to send their messages and receive their responses. Then suddenly, around 1800, the speed of transmission of messages changed from the speed of galloping horses to the speed of the transmission of electricity – the speed of light ...

In 1833, Gauss and Weber, two German professors, strung a mile and a half of copper wire over the roofs of Göttingen and sent electrical impulses along it. And at that time in the United States, Samuel Morse (of the Morse Code) experimented with signal transmission. It was 1844 before he was able to string a line

6. U. M. Franklin & CBC Enterprises, *The Real World of Technology* (Montreal: CBC Enterprises, 1990).

over sixty kilometers and transmit a message in Morse Code. He transmitted the sentence, “What hath God wrought?” and thus began the first usable method for the quick transmission of messages. In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received his patent So it was essentially during the last 150 years that the speed of transmission of messages truly changed. This, in turn, so completely changed the real world of technology that we now live in a world that is *fundamentally* different.⁷

In historical terms, the pace of these advancements was quicker than at any other point in history. And humanity has not fully digested the full implications for our lives. It has changed the realities we live in, creating a world, as Franklin claims, that is “fundamentally different.” We have also not sufficiently processed the nuances of how varying kinds of technology have shaped our lives, each in its own distinct way, with each advance in communication technology altering how we relate to others.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication Technology

Recently, researchers, primarily in the fields of psychology and education, have attempted to distinguish between the effects of synchronous and asynchronous communication technology.⁸ Synchronous technologies are those in which people communicate directly and simultaneously, though without being in each other’s presence, such as phone calls and videoconferences. Technologies such as email and social media are referred to as asynchronous, as one can respond to the communication at a later point. However, it seems that this very distinction elides critical insights into the way these technologies have changed our experiences.

Glen Cochrane, an instructional designer at Bow Valley College, noted that Franklin highlights a critical nuance often overlooked:

7. Franklin, 83–87, emphasis in original.

8. See, for example, D. Graham, T. Anderson, and D. Hassell, “The Viability of Skype to Reduce Learner Perceived Sense of Isolation,” *Journal of Online Higher Education*, vol. 4, issue 12 (2013): 1–32.

Society has come to a point, thinks Franklin, where the prevalence of asynchronous activity is so dominant over synchronous activity that there is little reciprocity left between the two. *Her observations are based on a definition of the word “synchronous” that has perhaps changed under our noses over the few decades since she recorded her ideas.* Drawing on the aspects of synchronous that are communal and undetachable from context, her concept is distinct from digitally situated, real-time activity. *Asynchronous enhanced synchronous communication tools (like Hangouts and Skype) are commonly referred to as “synchronous,” and have afforded instructional designers with powerful educational options, distinct from asynchronous communication in their own right. Yet, the synchronous activity of digital environments is also distinct from off-line synchronous activity which cannot be overridden by a slew of asynchronous features, in the way that a Skype call bridges geographic distance digitally, and can be augmented with text, video, or countless other types of human controlled digital manipulation. It is the unmediated concept of “synchronous” that Franklin draws our attention to, where we are forced to delegate control and choice to a greater context.*⁹

Franklin herself captured this with the following illustration:

Have you ever been in an overflow audience where they had to listen to a lecture on closed circuit television in an adjacent room because the main auditorium was full? Most people in this situation are quite disgruntled and feel cheated, although they see and hear exactly the same thing as people in the main auditorium. Still, they say, it doesn't feel real, it doesn't feel right. By the same token, the great hope of using TV or film to let many students benefit from exceptional interpreters, letting them be a part of an outstanding lecture, has not been realized. Students just do not like to be taught by a television screen. This does not mean that one can never make good use of a new technology, but here it

9. The emphasis is my own. Article available at: <https://hybridpedagogy.org/synchronous-asynchronous-technologies-real-worlds-collide/>.

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seems to work only in a supplementary mode, in terms of illustration and extension. Teaching on television is rarely engaging in the way news reports of floods and famine are.¹⁰

Yet, Franklin noted that there are other circumstances in which people find it adequate to interact virtually, even without any reciprocity. She notes:

[V]iewers are riveted to television proceedings of judicial inquiries or public hearings. It seems that in situations where reciprocity is neither permissible nor desired – such as when observing an actual inquiry – images are acceptable substitutes for reality. However, whenever the potential for reciprocity exists and is valued – as in the lecture or teaching situation – images won't do.

It seems that synchronous digital communication can *almost* completely replace in-person experience in cases where people feel no need to interact directly. To be a spectator in such a situation by live feed is often good enough. The more involvement that is expected on behalf of the spectator, though, the less digital communication can compensate. This could be direct involvement, or even the participation of fans at sporting events, which adds significantly to the atmosphere, even if they are not truly part of the game.

As many universities have moved their courses online, and “Zoom-fatigue” has become an all-too-common phenomenon, some have begun to articulate why videoconferencing is not the same as in-person communication, forcing us to more carefully distinguish between “real” communication and synchronous communication.

Susan D. Blum, a professor of anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, recently wrote a reflection about her experience teaching on Zoom and how anthropology can help explain why even synchronous digital communication is not the same as in-person communication, “ordinary conversations,” even while admitting its advantages over

10. Franklin, 103–105.

asynchronous technologies in creating holistic communication.¹¹ While noting the benefits that all videoconferencing platforms have over other forms of communication, and their contribution to allowing people to remain connected even while physically apart, she outlines where they fall short. Explaining why Zoom classes have left her drained in a way that regular classes do not, she comments:

[It] is because videoconferencing is *nearly* a replication of face-to-face interaction but not quite, and it depletes our energy. And anthropology can help explain what's different

In a Zoom classroom with 30 students, we see faces – just like in a classroom. We see eye movement. We can hear voices. It can even be enhanced by chat – almost like hearing people thinking out loud. It is multimodal, to some extent. We see gestures, at least some big ones. All this is information used by our human capacity for understanding interaction. So far, so good.

Zoom works well for faculty members who lecture, or for groups that have formal meetings, with rules for who speaks and how to signal an interest in speaking. As long as the symphony is directed by an authority figure, order can be kept. The trumpets come in on cue. It is calm. Information and views can be exchanged. It beats a long email exchange any day!

But in the more interactive, active classrooms that I aim to create, this is terrible. When a classroom aims for (doesn't always achieve) democratic nonauthoritarian conversation, rather than orchestrated teacher-centered pedagogy, all the tools of human interaction are recruited.

Anthropologists, linguists and sociologists who analyze conversation, which surely varies around the world, have shown some common traits. N. J. Enfield's recent book *How We Talk* and the work of conversation analysts such as the late Charles Goodwin points to multimodality, rules about eye gaze, patterns for rapid turn taking, and near-universal reliance on microsecond

11. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/22/professor-explores-why-zoom-classes-deplete-her-energy-opinion>.

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timing. Goodwin reminds us that “co-operative action sits at the center of human language, and symbols are essentially co-operative structures in which one party is operating on another.”

This is not what my Zoom classrooms are like.

Her concluding comments perfectly capture the difference between “ordinary” conversations and those carried out over videoconference:

When I see that technological platforms such as Zoom provide some imitations of face-to-face interaction, what I notice the most is that I miss the three-dimensional faces and the bodies and the eyes and the breaths.

Humans are delicately attuned to each other’s complete presence. If a perfectly tuned conversation provides a “vision of sanity,” then it is no wonder that an awkward, clunky, interrupted conversation provides the opposite. We are constantly interpreting others’ movements, timing, breaths, gazes, encouragement. It is our beautiful endowment. So we’re interpreting the misaligned gazes, the interrupted conversation, as stemming from the technology, not from the interlocutor. And that, my human friends, is a tale of human-technology-semiotic mismatch.

When I first wrote about these issues, I implicitly related to these categories, but my experiences teaching and socializing over Zoom have forced me to re-examine my treatment of many of the halakhic issues and more carefully distinguish between the various modes of communication – both paying attention to synchronous and asynchronous digital communication, and how they are in turn distinct from in-person interactions.

Carefully considering these distinctions is particularly important in this work because of the nature of the project. One of my *havrutot*, R. Dr. Shlomo Zuckier, noted that my methodology in treating these issues has, in many ways, been the reverse of that of much of modern halakhic literature. Many incredible books have been published to help guide people *min hamekorot ad lamaaseh*, from the sources to the practical implications. As we have seen, without a *siman* in *Shulhan Arukh* on the laws of social media, we have had to invert this process. I start by

asking about the ways in which our lives have been affected by communication technology and social media, and then turn back to potentially relevant issues in the Torah to gain insight. With that framing, it is even more important for me to understand the precise ways in which we are affected by and experience these various kinds of technology.

This book is divided into five sections, each assessing different realms of the human experience.

1. The first focuses on how definitions of relationships and community have changed. This is explored through topics as varied as the blessing recited upon seeing friends, to the parameters of rabbinic power and halakhic custom in a globalized community.
2. The second section focuses on our responsibility for what is posted online. As everything we write can become global (and permanent) in an instant, both users and platforms must consider their responsibility for what they post and what they facilitate.
3. The third section focuses on issues of perception. Halakha dictates how we view others and how we present to the world. When we are often connected to many without knowing who they are or how they will perceive what they see about us, we must explore the way in which these laws must adapt to the modern world.
4. The fourth section explores those topics most commonly identified with halakhic issues and social media. These include gossip and shaming – both their negative aspects as well as the opportunities they create for constructive communal criticism.
5. The final section is relatively short and addresses the performance of mitzvot through mediated experience. While this topic is extremely rich, the conceptual issues are distinct from those presented in the rest of the book. However, a basic overview of the issues, especially as they were implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, is necessary.

In the coming years, our technologies will continue to change. As I write, the world has begun discussing our move into the metaverse. As new tools are created, these issues will have to be updated. In the meantime, I hope that this work begins the conversation, showing the world that the Torah has insights that can help us navigate this ever-changing world.

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There are many people that must be acknowledged for their contributions to this book. First, while I love teaching, writing has always been harder for me. Had I not had the opportunity to write a series for the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, the body of this book would never have come into being. Thank you to everyone involved at the VBM, especially R. Ezra Bick, R. Reuven Ziegler, and Debra Berkowitz. Furthermore, the feedback I received throughout the writing of that series helped improved the final version of this book.

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The issues of *lashon hara* in the modern world have been an interest of mine for many years. I first studied them with Rabbi Aryeh Klapper in his Summer Beit Midrash many years ago, where my interest the topic began. That summer was my first engagement in studying and writing about contemporary halakhic topics, and there I began my lifelong interest in deeply asking what halakha has to say our modern world. My thanks to Rabbi Klapper for his inspiration, as well as taking the time to review many of these chapters.

I returned to the topic of this book as a fellow at the Tikvah Fund, as a *semikha* student. My thanks to Rabbi Mark Gottlieb and Neal Kozodoy for their insights as some of the early sections of the book took form.

Thanks also to Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Zuckier, my long-time *havruta* and friend, who also reviewed several of the chapters. Thank you to Galina Dostevsky Moerdler for her professional advice on the chapters about data privacy. Thank you for my friends who work in tech and

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As mentioned above, my passion has always been for learning and teaching Torah. I would not have had the motivation to study these topics if it were not for the wonderful Toronto community where I began teaching these subjects. My profound thanks to Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner for his visionary leadership of the Beit Midrash Zichron Dov of Toronto, where I was privileged to serve as *sgan rosh kollel* for three years, and where I was able to expand what, how, and to whom I could teach. Thank you to Mr. Eli Rubenstein for founding the institution and bringing that jewel to the Toronto community. Thank you to all my students of all ages over the years, including those who learned with me in Toronto, who inspired me to probe these issues deeply. Thank you also to all my current students and colleagues who continue to challenge me at Yeshivat Migdal HaTorah.

It is particularly meaningful to me that this book is dedicated by the Lax family in memory of their sons Jonathan and Ethan. I was privileged to learn with both of them, as well as with Michael, and like the rest of the Toronto community, I was deeply shaken by their untimely deaths. I hope that this book and the conversations it inspires will be a merit for them. Thank you to Michael and Marsha Lax for their generosity and friendship.

Thank you to the other Toronto families who learned and continue to learn with me, and have extended friendship to my entire family. I would especially like to thank those families who partnered together to support the publication of this book – to the Green, Klein, Koschitzky, Litwack, Newman, Piwko, Rutman, Shore, Silverberg, Vodiano, Wagner, and Zerker families, thank you for your friendship and support. A special thanks to Charles Wagner and Rabbi Seth Grauer for their help in organizing this partnership. It was amazing learning with all of you during my years in Toronto, and I am glad that we can continue to learn and spread Torah together.

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Introduction: Motivation for This Book

and Byron Shore, for always being there for our family, especially during the three years in Toronto when I was devoted to teaching throughout the entire community all day, every day. To my children, Meir, Aharon, Ezra, Temima, and Ayala, who keep me on my toes and make sure that I take nothing for granted. They make everything worthwhile.

Aḥarona aḥarona ḥaviva – every stage of life has been crazy, and only getting more so. I could not do anything without my wife and best friend, Ora. When I'm stretched thin, need perspective, support, or anything else, she is always there. For the Torah I teach and write, and for hopefully all that you, my readers, shall learn from this book – *sheli veshelakhem, shelah hi*.

And beyond that, thank you to God for ensuring I have been *zoche* to learn and teach Torah for so many years. I always hope I am living up to His expectations for me.

Jonathan Ziring
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