Jewish Q&A Online and the Regulation of Sexuality: Using Foucault to Read Technology

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Abstract
Religion has the power to shape our understanding of gender and sexuality through various forms of practice, discourse, authority, and regulation. As religion is increasingly experienced through digital media, we can postulate on how the use of digital media might impact religious conceptions of gender and sexuality. This research offers a first step in that direction. More specifically, I examine Jewish Question and Answer (Q&A) websites to illuminate how this medium informs and regulates understandings and practices of gender and sexuality. This study illuminates how religious (self-)regulation is happening online, through the practice of asking and cultural and technological affordances that invite users to “confess” their sexual transgressions. I suggest the term “technological incitement to confess” as a way of thinking about how digital media might shape the religious practice of Q&As. That is, offering a Foucauldian analysis, I suggest online Jewish religious Q&A websites operate as digital panopticon, where the practice of asking becomes a tool for self-regulation. Although new to the online sphere, the practice of Q&As has a long tradition in Judaism, known as Responsa. Traditional Responsa is understood as a legal document, but when this practice takes place online, I argue that, at least relative to topics of sexuality and gender, users themselves are not looking for a legal consultation, but rather seeking a space to confess their sins. What was once a legal, public matter becomes via new media a form of personal self-regulation.

Keywords
online self-regulation, Digital Religion, sexuality and gender, Jewish Q&A, new media

In the 21st century, textually or verbally sharing our thoughts, behaviors, and deeds through social media or other new media conduits has become common practice. We expose ourselves to friends and family, experts, and total strangers without giving this relatively recent practice much thought. The technological abilities of social media sites and cultural logics (Burkart, 2010; Marshall, 1998; Taylor, 2010) seem to assure us that sharing online is part of our daily communicative actions, and most of the time, we do not consider the risks to privacy, the potential loss of intimacy, or how changes in our communication habits might also change us. The following research offers an example of possible incitements integral to new media technologies and how they may slowly be changing some religious practices and conceptions.

The study of the relationship between religion and the emerging media of the 20th century—that is, the Internet—has been ongoing for the last three decades. The field of Digital Religion, as it is currently referred to, explores the “evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously” (Campbell, 2013, p. 1). The present study examines a specific religious practice—Jewish religious Question and Answers (Q&As), which was practiced offline for many years—examines how this practice is carried out in digital form, and how issues of gender and sexuality are negotiated through it. More explicitly, I ask, to what extent does the practice of online Q&A function as a tool for self-disclosure, regulation, and/or confession?

In the last 30 years, through the creation of online safe spaces and the possibility of anonymity, religious users started questioning sexual habits and feelings and expanding the discourse on these topics (Lövheim, 2013). Thus, websites are used for questioning and opening up traditional notions of sexuality and gender. Previous research on Jewish sexuality and gender online has demonstrated the Internet’s liberating possibilities for religious users (Baumel-Schwartz, Texas A&M University, USA

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2013; Theobald, 2012). However, I argue that a close reading of online Jewish religious material reveals a disciplinary use. The websites that will be examined in this article can be seen as religious confessions that strengthen religious authority and regulate religious norms. They do so in several ways—that is, employing religious experts, maintaining the discourse within the religious-traditional worldview and terminology, normalizing correct behavior, and inviting users to seek rabbinical approval. Thus, I suggest the creators of the religious Internet Q&A websites encourage religious self-imposed surveillance and self-discipline via the digital media affordances. I speculate that through what I call “technological incitement to confess,” this online practice regulates and disciplines religious users to behave and think in terms of traditional gender roles and sexual conduct. By using Foucault’s discussion of confession, self-regulation, and governmentality, we can conceptualize how this use of new media is not just empowering open sexual discourse but also regulating it. In this way, the Internet can be used for religious correction and discipline.

Understanding Jewish Sexuality—Before and After the Internet

Even before the coming of the Internet, sexuality was a complex topic in religious Jewish theology, as it is subject to both negative and positive attitudes. As a general rule, sexual intercourse is not only permitted but encouraged. A healthy sexual relationship is both a virtue and a duty for married couples (Rockman, 1995). Marital sexual relations are governed by two Mitzvos (commandments): the obligation to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1.28) and the husband’s obligation to give his wife her conjugal rights, which are understood as regular (at least once a week, according to some Jewish scholars) sexual relations. If a husband refuses or is incapable, this can be a legitimate reason for the woman to seek a divorce (Mishna, Ketovot, 5:5-6). In short, Jewish law and thought do not understand sex as an unclean, sinful activity, but rather as the core upon which a healthy Jewish married lifestyle must be based.

However, this positive attitude toward sex is applicable only to highly regulated sexual behavior (Schwartz, 2012). In his book Kosher Sex: A Recipe for Passion and Intimacy, Rabbi Boteach (2000) celebrates the following Halachic (legal) restrictions: First of all, sex outside of marriage is strictly forbidden. This includes both adultery and sexual relationships between two single people. For Boteach, heterosexual monogamy is an idealized sexual lifestyle that stabilizes society. He goes further to explain how sexual relations should occur—in the missionary position, preferably in the dark (Boteach, 2000). Furthermore, Halacha forbids coitus or any physical contact during the woman’s menstruation and for 7 days thereafter. Of course, homosexuality in all its forms is strictly forbidden. And finally, male masturbation is prohibited.

Although earlier rabbinical texts permitted greater flexibility during coitus—for example, Maimonides (n.d.) allows for oral and anal sex (Rambam, Mishne Torah, Issurei-Biah, 21:9)—Boteach represents an authoritative contemporary rabbi (Theobald, 2012), as well as the general rabbinical movement toward a more restrictive view of sexuality (Standler, 2009). Standler (2009) and Theobald (2012) agree that this growing anxiety about sexual “purity” is a response to the sexual “promiscuity” of the modern, Western world.

This reactionary behavior and attempts to control and regulate sexuality more forcefully in contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy speak to the relationship between the public and private spheres in Jewish communities. In many ways, for most of the rabbinical Jewish tradition, the private (sexual intimacy) was made public through a system of laws, communal washing houses, and community court systems (Biale, 1984). For example, as mentioned above, Jewish law forbids sexual relations during a woman’s period cycle. After the last day of bleeding, the woman must check for 7 days to make sure she is clean; if she is, she can go to the Mikveh, a public washing house/ritual bath, where a female religious authority figure examines her and helps her immerse in the water. When the ritual is over, husband and wife are usually expected to be intimate. While many women speak of the sensuality and “magic” of this ritual (Biale, 1984; Westheimer & Mark, 1995), one can clearly see how the private becomes public through it. Not only is the woman’s body examined by a public figure, the ritual act also broadcasts the couple’s return to intimacy.

Another example of civic power over private actions is the fact that both husband and wife are legally entitled to seek divorce if their spouse does not satisfy them sexually. This is a public process, conducted before a court of at least three judges. Furthermore, if a woman decides not to go to the Mikveh, her husband can sue her in court, and she will be officially designated Moredey, a rebellious wife. Although they change in various Jewish contexts depending on time and place, these traditions exemplify some of the ways in which traditional Judaism regulated and disciplined sexual behavior through public, communal norms and legal power structures.

It is important to note that for many Jewish religious people, even the act of talking about sexual acts, behaviors, or concerns is regulated. Open discussion of sexuality is severely frowned upon (Theobald, 2012). Marriage preparation manuals clearly state it is immodest for a woman to discuss sexual issues with her husband, or even her friends (personal collection). Additionally, confession of sexual sins (or any sins) is not a popular practice in Jewish life. Religious individuals are allowed either public regulation of sexuality (as discussed above), or a private one between them and god. They may consult the rabbi for a legal perspective, but they generally do not confess their sins to the rabbi. Judaism has a different notion of confession than Catholic Christianity: Instead of an individual confession coupled with penance,
traditional Judaism has a more communal idea of confession (Hymer, 1995). Individual verbal revelation of sexual desires or acts is largely discouraged. Therefore, most people struggling with issues of sexuality feel highly uncomfortable speaking to their spouses, family, friends, or even rabbi. The Internet might provide an outlet for religious Jews to discuss these taboo issues.

The introduction of the Internet and the anonymity it provides have inspired scholars to examine how religious individuals who wish to explore sexuality without abandoning their religious community might use new media for such purposes (Lövheim, 2013). As noted above, in the case of Judaism, those who might need to discuss their sexuality most—people who practice “non-normative” sexualities or even conceive of such practices—are left with no place to go and no one to counsel them. The Internet, it is argued, creates this much-needed safe space for them (Baumel-Schwartz, 2013; Lev-On & Shahar, 2011; Pitkowsky, 2011; Theobald, 2012). For example, Theobald (2012) shows how the Internet is used by Jewish community members for playfulness and experimentation with identity while maintaining community boundaries within “digital enclaves” limited by language (Yiddish) and content (Jewish terminologies and community topics). In his research of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI) websites and online support groups, Theobald (2012) claims, “Orthodox community members have used digital technologies to step outside the narrow confines of communal control and create ‘safe spaces’ for the exploration of non-hegemonic sexual practices and sexualities . . .” (p. 289).

For Theobald, the Internet is used to liberate and create a safe space for minorities within the Jewish community, thus serving as a tool for (positive) liberal change. Similarly, Michelle Pitkowsky (2011) presents the possibility for liberating Jewish religious women through their use of online Q&As. In her article, Pitkowsky reviews questions sent to rabbis in the last century and compares offline questions to online ones. Pitkowsky analyzed 72 women’s online Q&A uploads to the website Kipa.co.il during 2010. She celebrates the power online Q&As provides these women, as far as access to knowledge and a voice in legal religious debates: “I argue that the Internet has in a sense changed the rules of the game by allowing women almost unbridled access to rabbinic authority” (p. 134). She is aware gatekeepers still exist (the women uploading questions are, after all, asking male rabbis), but claims this gatekeeping is reduced due to the participatory nature and easy access provided by new media technologies. She further claims this has positive, liberating affordances for religious women:

The gatekeeper’s role, which has often hindered women’s access to rabbinic authority, is minimized . . . A woman with access to the Internet can address a rabbi directly, without the involvement of anyone else. Cloaked in anonymity, she can ask questions that touch upon the most intimate aspects of her personal and sexual life. (p. 150)

Pitkowsky’s appreciation of the liberating power of the Internet is clear throughout her article. At the same time, she does recognize the fact that this practice has the potential to normalize behavior and perpetuate existing patriarchal rabbinic authority. For the aforementioned scholars, however, the liberation associated with these new technologies is the most important aspect to consider. It seems, then, that academic scholarship generally sees online religious Q&As and other spaces in which discourse on sexuality and gender occur as positive, liberating spaces, which construct an open discourse about gender and sexuality. In what follows, I will highlight problems with these assumptions.

**Theoretical Framework: Using Foucault to Read Technology**

The idea that the democratizing nature of digital media might not be completely positive or liberating is supported by those who question the power structures, surveillance capabilities, and cultural hegemony that can be facilitated via digital media (Andrejevic, 2006; Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015; Fuchs, 2009; Tokunaga, 2011). These scholars challenge us to consider how, where, and why digital media is used to empower those already in power. For example, Mark Andrejevic (2006) argues that interactive technology—mostly thought of as “participatory culture”—has the potential to allow, encourage, and normalize surveillance: “the positive association of interactivity as a form of two-way, symmetrical, and relatively transparent communication have been assimilated to forms of interaction that amount to little more than strategies for asymmetrical, nontransparent forms of monitoring and surveillance.” (Andrejevic, 2006, p. 393). Although some scholars have theorized that surveillance can also be a playful and empowering activity (Albrechtslund, 2008), and that this type of information gathering is critical for a functioning society (Giddens, 1995), I argue that there are always practices of power, regulation, and discipline enacted in this form of digital media sharing. Supported by scholars such as Foucault (1988) and Fuchs (2009), I would like to press the argument that online spaces in which users share their experiences, thoughts, deeds, and questions can function as spaces of confession and surveillance, of disciplinary and regulatory practices.

How do online Q&A websites function as regulatory practices? A first step in answering this question is understanding the inherent structure of the websites. I use Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour’s (1992) concept of “technological script” to explain this. Akrich and Latour argue that tools have “scripts” associated with them, concealed in their shape and structure. A script is “the text of what the various actors in the settings are doing to one another” (p. 259). The example they give is of heavy hotel
It is important to remember that in rabbinical Judaism, a have a formal tradition of confession to a religious authority. Not encourage the verbalization of sexual sins and does not Judaism, in contrast to certain strands of Christianity, does sexuality is created through a confessional discourse in . . . The concept of script tries to capture how technological objects enable or constrain human relationship as well as relationship between people and things" (p. 9). Similarly, Stig Hjarvard (2013) suggests we consider James Gibson’s concept of affordance to understand how a technology’s structure might determine its possible uses. Trying to maintain agency of users and not step into technological determinism, Hjarvard (2013) argues that although “the affordances of any given object make certain actions possible, they exclude others and structure the interaction between the actor and user” (p. 27), we must also recognize that in the design stages, a media technology is “open for a variety of social and cultural influence” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 28).

I propose we use the concepts of script and affordance as building blocks in understanding how religious Q&A websites enable a sharing behavior. (Social networking sites are another interesting example, but cannot be discussed in full here.) In other words, online Q&A websites encourage users to ask, share, reveal, and confess. These practices allow varying levels of public and self-regulation. Self-regulation because the user asking has to make the decision to ask and describe his or her behavior as problematic, question-worthy. As Brickell (2012) argues, “To post [a profile] is to create, present, project and regulate oneself simultaneously . . .” (p. 34). It is also a public sort of regulation because the site’s editors and commenters take part in negotiating the meaning of the question and the answer posted. I argue the fact that these Jewish Q&As can be thought of as both a halachic practice and a personal sense-making and regulatory practice, similar to the practice of confession. As will be shown in the analysis, many of the questions asked are not explicitly seeking an (religiously inclined) answer, but rather are tools for sharing, creating, and regulating oneself. Perhaps, inspired by a confessional culture (Burkart, 2010; Marshall, 1998; Taylor, 2010) and encouraged by the websites’ structures and affordances, religious users visit these sites with a need to confess, position themselves within the norms of their religious society, and regulate accordingly. I propose we think of this as a “technological incitement to confess.”

According to Foucault, confessions can help us construct our identity and serve as technologies of self-knowledge and regulation. Confessions are also usually tied to our understanding of sexuality (Foucault, 1988). As previously noted, Judaism, in contrast to certain strands of Christianity, does not encourage the verbalization of sexual sins and does not have a formal tradition of confession to a religious authority. It is important to remember that in rabbinical Judaism, a praxis-based religion, there is a court system in place which is meant to publicly punish sinners (Dosick, 1995). Thus, it seems individual confession focused on verbalization of inner thoughts has little significance in Jewish religion. What place then do these online Jewish religious Q&As have, and can they be read as confessions? Foucault’s genealogy of confessions might come in handy here.

Using Foucault, we can distinguish between three types or practices of confessions—public ritual, private as a way of self-knowing, and private as a way of self-regulating. Early Christians, Foucault (1988) claims, conceived of confession in the mode of Exomologesis, which “rubs out the sin and yet reveals the sinner” (p. 42). Exomologesis was a public ritual in which the truth was brought out (literally, Exomologesis means the bringing out, the identification of fact). This public ritual involved becoming a penitent for several years, fasting, tearing clothes, and other prohibitions on sex, food, and quality of life. Christianity also has more individualized, private confessional modes, self-examination for “bad intentions” and inner thoughts that Foucault (1988, p. 33) claims were inspired by the Greco-Roman practice. Foucault shows how in the philosophical culture of Hellenism, examining oneself was part of Plato’s call to “know yourself.” This was done via various practices, all of which include writing down, verbalizing, or taking mental note of the inner-person’s thoughts and ideas. Later Christian traditions have embraced the verbal, personal notion of confession and abandoned the public ones. They have constructed a religious incitement to confess (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 18). However, this private confession has evolved into a tool for authoritarian control. Foucault has criticized Christian verbal confession as a space not only of self-knowledge but also of self-regulation, truth construction, and power relations: “The confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex” (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 63).

In his discussion of confessions in The History of Sexuality Part 1 (Foucault, 1976/1998), Foucault shows how the Catholic ritual of confession exemplifies the effect of political and regulating powers, as well as a tool to build a “truthful,” “scientific” discourse about sexuality. Foucault argues that Western civilization holds a scientific approach to sex, regarding it as scientia sexualis instead of ars erotica. To do so, we have “developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth about sex . . . I have in mind the confession” (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 58). This confession practice constructs a knowledge power that gives authority and supremacy to the listener, instead of the self. In that way, truth about sexuality is created through a confessional discourse in which sin is the main conduit for conceptualizing sex. Confessions are meant to help us discover ourselves and reveal the truth about ourselves, but in doing so, we in fact give the power of judging the truth or the nature of our behaviors to our confessors (which, in the case of Catholic Christianity, tend to understand many sexual behaviors as
deviant). Foucault crystallizes this notion when he claims, “The confession is a ritual . . . that unfolds within a power relationship . . . the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault, 1976/1998, pp. 61-62).

Although in the case of online Q&As the authority does not “require the confession,” we will see how Foucault’s notion of power-knowledge is still pivotal for understanding how authority is negotiated in those texts. I suggest using Foucault to think of online religious Q&As as confessional, thus highlighting the regulatory power structure inherent in this digital practice.

Combining theories about technology with Foucauldian thought, I like to suggest the term “technological incitement to confess.” In the following pages, I will give empirical evidence showing how Jewish religious Q&A websites contain a “technological incitement to confess” and argue that the texts posted in those websites can be seen as confessions and regulatory.

**Analysis: Reading Q&As as Regulatory Practices**

**Sample and Method**

In order to illuminate how religious online Q&As enable a type of self-regulation and confession, I have created and will critically analyze a sample of Q&As culled from leading Jewish religious websites. The sample includes 60 questions, 20 from each of the following websites: Aish.com, Askmoses.com, and Kipa.co.il (in Hebrew, translated by the author of this paper).

Kipa.co.il was the first Israeli site for the religious community, established as early as 2000. It is one of the leading Israeli-Jewish religious websites (Campbell & Golan, 2011), and it offers a variety of services: forums; rabbinical Q&As; information about synagogues and other religious service providers; content about Jewish life, family, and holidays; kosher food recipes; entertainment and events; and artistic outlets. Kipa also has a daily email distribution, a Facebook page, and commercial slots on their website directed at the National-Religious community (e.g., a commercial for a religious college) (Kipa.co.il, 2015b). Kipa is the most prominent online enclave for the National-Religious movement in Israel. (According to similarweb.com, it is ranked higher than similar religious websites in Israel, with a high of 730,000 visitors per month.)

Aish.com, also founded in the year 2000, is similarly one of the most visited websites for Orthodox Jews in the United States. Much like Kipa, the website offers a variety of services; it also claims to address every Jew: “Aish.com has become the leading Jewish content website, logging over a million monthly user sessions with 380,000 unique email subscribers . . . Aish.com’s goal is to give every Jew the opportunity to discover his or her heritage . . .” (Aish, 2015a). The website was also awarded USA Today’s “Hot Site” award (Aish, 2015).

Unlike Aish and Kipa, which serve as examples of leading websites for the religious Jewish community online, Askmoses.com was selected because it is representative of a website dedicated only to the practice of Q&As. According to the analytics website semrush.com, Askmoses averaged 1,500 daily visitors in the last 2 years. Although the site is relatively small, it is the leading site dedicated only to Jewish Q&As. It is also the only Jewish religious site offering live chat and text-messaging services for consulting with rabbis. The site was founded in 1998, and “Since the site’s founding, its scholars have held millions of live chat sessions, answered hundreds of thousands of e-mails, and written thousands of essays” (AskMoses.com, 2015c).

The 60 questions gathered from these websites include questions about issues of sexuality and of gender, ranging from “why should one get married” to “how to stop masturbation.” I offer a critical-discourse analysis of these texts, centering on the power relations, the construction of gender and sexuality, the emotive discourse, and the worldviews presented in them. The analysis will first focus on ways in which the websites’ design encourages sharing practices, then explore the language used by the askers and the rabbis answering, using Foucauldian theory to illuminate the power structures inherent in this online dialogue. The analysis will stress the ways in which the users are subject to, and perform their confessions within, the productive power relations enabled by this medium.

**Analysis**

I have argued that certain technological scripts encourage certain sharing practices. One general example would be Facebook’s probe, asking “What’s on your mind?” Similarly, religious Q&A websites incite a hierarchically based confessional asking performance. They do this in various ways via the designs of their interfaces and their explicit or implicit rhetoric. For example, the design of their interfaces includes blank spaces for posting questions, attractive buttons for question submission, and the ability to publish previously asked questions. Furthermore, even while looking at previous questions, the “ask a question” button is always near—continuously inviting the user to add questions (see Images 1 and 2). Askmoses.com uses what can be considered the strongest “technological scripts”: the website’s homepage is focused on the users’ ability to ask questions, with the entire page left blank except for the inviting script “Type your question here . . .” In a small font, a line at the bottom of the page offers access to the site’s archive with the note “or, browse existing questions” (AskMoses.com, 2015a). When users examine existing questions, the design continues to invite them to ask their own questions. The web designers divided the entire website into two halves: on one side of the
screen, the user can browse through questions, and on the other side, they can send a question or start a chat with the rabbi. That way, the website is never used just as an archive—the participatory aspect of asking questions is always present (see Image 3). This offers a technological script or call to action: ask!

Another strategy is to promote a sense of anonymity. On the Kipa.co.il website, for example, although questions can only be submitted using a registered user name, the user name does not appear in the archived question. Furthermore, in the comments section, one may choose to answer with the registered user name or anonymously (Kipa.co.il, 2015b). Similarly, when posting chat sessions on the archive, Askmoses.com adds the following disclaimer: “All names, places, and identifying information have been changed or deleted in order to protect the privacy of the questioners” (AskMoses.com, 2015b). This textual and technological script suggests users’ privacy will be protected, and thus, the possible risks of sharing are reduced.

A third strategy involves facilitated sharing. While reading the previously posted questions, one can easily share that question on other social media websites such as Facebook or Twitter, and in this way, the act of asking a question is normalized and made popular, an action easily shared and “liked.” This option appears on all three websites, but to a varying degree: Kipa only allows users to “recommend” a question on Facebook; Aish lets users “like” on Facebook, “tweet,” or share via Google+; Askmoses.com allows sharing to any social media, including Reddit, Tumbler, and multiple other websites (see Image 3).

On a rhetorical level, a fourth strategy is employed—that of promoting the expertise of the rabbis answering user questions, using language like “leading rabbis” (Kipa.co.il, 2015b) or “more than 100 scholars spanning the globe” (AskMoses.com, 2015c), thus encouraging users to engage with these sage men, the experts. Through these strategies and the general cultural notion that one should “share” online, these Q&A websites become spaces for people to share their personal inquiries. These personal inquiries, incited to a degree by the technological affordances and scripts, can then act as tools for legitimization and regulation. As Nectstern (2007) argues,

Not only the asker and the rabbi answering him are exposed to his problems, but all the public that will surf through these archives will get a peek into the private life, and learns that in certain cases perhaps he is not the only one having this certain problem. From here the way to legitimization is very short. (p. 202)

In this way, the personal question—invited, then circulated in the public domain—becomes a way to negotiate and regulate religious norms and practices. This fact becomes even clearer when one examines the Q&A texts themselves. In the following texts, we can see how a once-legal practice designed to help enforce public regulations of gender and sexuality has become, with the aid of new media, a non-legal, personal matter, a practice in which users reveal their thoughts and actions. I argue that in doing so, these sites maintain a practice of public regulation alongside newer forms of self-regulation. An example of the non-halachic use of an online Q&As can be seen in the following question:

I have met a man who is religiously observant [Orthodox]. I grew up Reform and am now trying to learn more about being observant. This man and I have amazing chemistry . . . I am worried that I am not going to end up in the same place as he in terms of religion. I do not want to be blinded by any feelings I may have for him . . . am I potentially in over my head, or can a relationship like this have a chance of success? (Aish.com, 2015b)

What is the woman asking for? Advice, guidance, or fortune telling? It can be argued that this question, which contains many personal details, is about the couple’s (legal?) right to be together even though they grew up in different religious denominations. In Judaism, followers of one of the three major denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) generally marry within that denomination, especially in the case of Orthodox Jews who follow Halacha carefully. Therefore, the woman realizes there might be some challenges in this relationship, and that it is not within the sphere of normative religious Jewish relations. Indeed, the rabbi’s answer is “Yes and no . . . My initial thoughts are that I would imagine such a relationship would prove to be problematic in the long run” (Aish (2015b)). The anonymity of the website could have encouraged the woman to share her story (perhaps without telling her partner), even though it includes personal details.

In similar fashion, many of the questions asked contain personal stories. In the following example, the user explicitly mentions that she is not seeking halachic legal advice, but advice that is more pastoral or therapeutic in nature:

Rabbi: Welcome. I’ll be with you in a moment . . . what’s on your mind?
Rachel: Hi, I need advice more than to ask a question, can you help me?
Rabbi: i can try
Rachel: i have this friend, we have become really close friends and obviously started to feel something more than friendship . . . we havent gone any further because i havent let it go anymore more than a friendship and i dont want to break his heart, i want to make it as easy as possible for him, how can i explain . . .
Rabbi: ok, can i be frank with you?
Rachel: please
Rabbi: for a girl to be close friends with a guy and want it not to go any further, is like eating donuts and not wanting to gain weight. It does happen to
some people that they eat all the donuts they want and they don’t gain weight, but most people who eat donuts gain weight. 

Rachel: yes, i know it is my fault, 100%, but what do i do now? how do i explain that this is not what i want?

Rabbi: this has nothing to do with fault! This the reality of friendships between boys and girls. It is simple nature.

Rachel: how do i explain what i feel

Rabbi: simply tell him that the friendship is giving birth to emotions and feelings that you never intended it to have and you therefore need to put an end to it before it gets out of control . . . you therefore have to end it now.

Rachel: and no more friendship, right?

Rabbi: correct

Rachel: wow . . . tough stuff . . . but yes . . .

Rabbi: good for you—a girl who knows what she wants!

Rachel: no, i just know what i dont want! Lol. (AskMoses.com, 2015b)

As noted previously, the practice of Q&As, although new to the online sphere, has a long tradition in Judaism known as Responsa. Traditional Responsa have been written since the AD 8th century (Steinitz, 2011) and for 1,200 years served as a testimony for the legal and social issues Jews have dealt with (Epstein, 1930; Goldish, 2008; Mann, 1917). Responsa is connected with the everyday needs, actions, and practices of the Jewish community. Therefore, traditional Responsa is thought of as a public, legal practice, used to create and maintain shared religious civic behaviors and norms. In both the above examples, digital Q&A seems to work in a way similar to the offline tradition with regards to maintaining shared religious norms. It does not, however, seem to carry any legal/halachic or theological discourse—no reference to god, Torah, or Halacha literature (Steinitz, 2011). We can see how both Rachel and Rabbi quickly step away from the legal halachic nature of Responsa and enter into a personal, emotional dialogue. The religious Q&A moves from the sphere of public debate into the personal matters of individual users. In the process, we see online Responsa becoming less of a religious legal practice and more of a personal, confessional practice. Rather than asking legal questions, users are seeking personal support. As Rachel says, “I need advice more than to ask a question.”

We can also see how regulation works in both cases—while the rabbis express ambivalence (“yes and no”) and encouragement (“good for you”), they also are explicit about what these women should do and think. In the dialogue between rabbi and asker, negotiation takes place, but this negotiation is eventually dominated by what both the rabbi and the asker accept as truths. As Brickell (2012) argues elsewhere, these websites, by the nature of their hierarchy, have the power to “inscribe particular knowledges as truths to be assimilated” (p. 33).

In terms of sexual behavior, some of the questions seek legal, Halachic advice, but almost all of them contain personal details, as well as an indication the asker is experiencing distress, remorse, and/or shame and asking for repentance or guidance. A few examples might help illustrate the intensity of this language. In a question titled “we failed,” a married person admits, “My wife was during her forbidden time and we failed, we didn’t have relations but in a moment of weakness there was touch and more, I am really tormented. What can I do to fix this wrongdoing?” (Kipa.co.il, 2015d, my emphasis). Similarly, this wife asks,

I became pregnant when my husband started his military service . . . we are blessed with a lovely son. My husband is only home once every two weeks, sometimes I am pure [i.e., not menstruating] but mostly I am impure. It is hard. Very hard. It happens that we fail in hugs only. We both know it is wrong and want to get better. What does the rabbi recommend? (Kipa.co.il, 2015c)

In both these cases, the people asking questions understand their Halachic, legal wrongdoing. They know what they did is wrong, and they know they need to stop it. What possible, hoped-for answer encouraged them to even ask the rabbi? In fact, the rabbis answering these cases give little legal advice, instead focusing on strengthening and encouraging these behaviors: “I admire you for living so wonderfully, in the army [i.e. protecting Israel] as well as in keeping Halacha” (Kipa.co.il, 2015c). In the first case, the rabbi tells the husband, “you are on the right path . . . say [your sins] during the Morning Prayer confession . . . and accept upon you to become more observant” (Kipa.co.il, 2015d). It seems that in these cases, the online Responsa does not serve as a legal procedure—as a traditional Responsa does—but as a mental process of confession of sin and a rhetorically public process of regulating correct behaviors. Through presenting these questions with boosts like “I admire you” and “you are on the right path,” these Q&As are used as a medium to explain right from wrong and normalize certain attitudes. Similarly, when users ask the rabbis for advice on how to prevent other sexual deviant behavior, such as premarital relations, homosexuality, and masturbation, we find the answers to have little or no religious legal base, but instead act as support, confirmation, or judgment (either positive or negative). The next example shows this type of judgment:

Q: It has been years that I am trying to get married but I keep fearing that it might not work since I am a homosexual that is attracted to men. Every date with a girl makes me fearful and shivery since I am playing the game [pretending] to be straight and in fact I am not. My dream is to have a family based on purity and holiness, but how can I do that? . . . I am
depended, [I] think about death a lot, I see no future, and those whom I asked help from just humiliated me... I am crying, screaming for help, please, I can’t anymore!!!!!! [sic]

A: I hear your scream, the great pain you are in, and I cannot help you. It is not that I do not care about you... You are attracted to men, and I cannot change that. I cannot give you a magic pill... As a man who believes in “reward and punishment” in this world, I believe that your suffering, and your greatness for not acting on your need and doing forbidden deeds, and not marrying a woman in lie, for all this God will pay you [in the world to come] (Kipa.co.il, 2015a).

As was true in the case of the married couples hugging or touching during menstruation, this man knows the rabbi cannot help him, cannot give him “a magic pill.” Why then is he posting his problem and asking for an answer? One possible explanation is that these users hope the rabbis will bend the rules for them. This is possible, although not likely given the fact that (a) not many orthodox rabbis are willing to do so, and even if they would, they would do so not through the conduit of online Q&As and (b) the askers themselves recognize the wrongdoing of their actions. Therefore, a more plausible theory might be that the act of posting and reading about your own wrongdoing and pain evokes a feeling similar to that of confession, in which self-disclosure leads to self-realization and discovery. In this sense, these Q&As act as what Foucault considers Stoic confessions. They act as a mirror, revealing ourselves to ourselves. In that case, the listener, or in this case the answerer, the rabbi, plays a less significant role. However, in a fashion more closely associated with Catholic confessions, it could be argued that the rabbis’ answers play a very significant role in affirming or discouraging one’s behavior, and as a result, in constructing communal norms and truths about sexuality. In the example of the homosexual man, the rabbi’s answer can be decoded in that way—that is, affirming the fact that homosexual acts are “forbidden deeds,” and that homosexual desire cannot be changed (“there is no magic pill”). The rabbi listens to the story and, according to Foucault’s theory, at the same time acts as if he has the power to “judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 61). These online Q&As therefore become a stage for confession, correction, and regulation, in which both the users and the editors (rabbis) play a part in stabilizing certain notions as truths.

In these examples and throughout the sample of the Q&As examined, what used to be a legal, communal tool for Halachic debate (Steinitz, 2011) seems to become, through the influence of our confessional culture and the Internet’s technological incitement to confess, an individual, highly personalized phenomena. In these public, online spaces, users share their most intimate fears, thoughts, and deeds. Apparently, they do not do so in order to gain some legal insight, a fact some of the askers themselves acknowledged. I suggest they post their questions concerning sexuality or gender in order to be judged, affirmed, or rejected. Of course, absent specific audience ethnography (and perhaps even without), this remains a theory. There might be various reasons an individual decides to post a question. However, at the meso-level of Jewish online communal discourse, we can start to argue that these practices indicate a slight shift, a move from the sphere of legality to the sphere of therapy or pastoral care. We have seen in this section how in the case of Jewish Q&A practices online media might push the envelope and help shift what once were public, external regulation practices to the privatized and internalized. In this sense, Jewish religious Q&As can be thought of as operating as regulatory tools, confessions. Perhaps this practice can help users attain self-knowledge, but in many cases, it seems to serve the rabbinical authority’s power structure and encourage self-regulation and self-denial. This merging of legal and personal discourses allows religious regulation to happen both internally and publicly, when personal questions act as models for appropriate behavior.

**Conclusion**

I can’t promise you my students will not sin; I can promise you they will feel guilty. (Anonymous Rabbi)

Through confessional language as a regulatory practice online, Jewish religious discourse might be changing. In the past, Jewish sexuality and gender relations were a matter of public, legal concern. The community played a role in regulating those behaviors, through public washing houses for women, public teaching lessons for men, court systems, and so on. As the public space becomes more secular, a need arises for a different, more private avenue for regulation. At the same time, religious Jews are also exposed to mainstream culture, a culture which, as Besley (2005) argues, is obsessed with telling the truth, a culture of the “confessional age” (Besley, 2005, p. 369). Those religious Jews then turn to the Internet, which invites them to “ask the rabbi.” Keeping in mind the fact that many Jewish religious individuals are not encouraged to talk about sexuality with peers—that is, they lack the option to confess—this online, anonymous practice of asking questions can be seen as a Jewish version of personal confession. These personal confessions, when displayed publicly on the websites, are enabling a new structure for religious regulation and normalization of gender and sexual norms. Thus, the use of online Q&As impacts Jewish religious discourse on sex and gender by moving it from the public to the personal, and then, through online sharing, to the public again. As noted by feminist writers, the personal is always already political, and thus public. By making the concepts of sexuality personal, more responsibility is bestowed upon the individual to self-regulate, and in accordance with Foucault’s thesis on self-regulation, this becomes a technique...
for self-denial/self-mastery. However, this self-regulation cannot be complete without a confession. It is at this point that the online Q&As play a double part, as do the Christian confessions for Foucault, as spaces of power-knowledge, as a practice where (traditional/communal/external) authority is empowered, and at the same time, the (individual/internal) self is “created” and (self-)disciplined. I suggest this process is informed by cultural norms and social contexts, and it is mediated and made possible through the technology of online Q&A websites. These websites, through their structures, as well as the general culture of online media as a place for sharing, create technological incitements to confess. I believe this concept explains the behavior exhibited on these websites, but further research into the practices of sharing online might find this concept useful for examining other online behaviors.

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