

Fourth Annual
OXFORD SUMMER INSTITUTE
ON MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY JUDAISM
(OSI – MCJ)

3 July – 10 July 2017

Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies
in conjunction with the
Phillip and Muriel Berman Center for Jewish Studies, Lehigh University

Modern Judaism, Technology, and Authority:
Historical, Social Scientific and Theological Perspectives

The Oxford Summer Institute on Modern and Contemporary Judaism (OSI-MCJ) is an academic seminar framework founded in 2014 by Dr Miri Freud-Kandel of the University of Oxford and Professor Adam Ferziger of Bar-Ilan University under the auspices of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. It is intended to raise innovative and challenging perspectives that have the potential to influence broader thinking about contemporary Judaism. It functions as an advanced workshop in which a combination of outstanding senior scholars of Jewish religion and culture from around the globe join with UK based experts and a select group of early career European Jewish studies scholars for eight days of intensive study and intellectual exchange.

OSI-MCJ 2017 will be convened by Miri Freud-Kandel, Adam Ferziger, and Hartley Lachter (Lehigh University) from 3 July to 10 July. This year's theme is "Modern Judaism, Technology and Authority: Historical, Social Scientific and Theological Perspectives."



"I downloaded them from a cloud."

The interface between Judaism and technology has been recorded since ancient times – from biblical descriptions of the building of the Tabernacle and the First Temple, to Talmudic debates over what types of ovens can become ritually impure, to the role of the printing press in establishing normative ritual and the dramatic increase in the speed of mercantile ships and its influence on the swift spread of belief in Sabbatean messianism, to name but a few examples. No doubt, navigating these interactions has long presented religious authorities with critical challenges. Nonetheless, the breakneck pace with which novel forms of communication, transportation, production, armaments, and medicine have emerged, and especially more recent advances in computerization and "virtualization," have placed technology at the centre of contemporary existence.

Indeed, western society has framed technology and the scientists who generate it as authoritarian sources for wisdom in a manner that was previously generally reserved for theologians and philosophers. As such, technology is often viewed by "defenders of the faith" as oppositional, if not outright damaging. Under these circumstances, some have laboured to articulate a discourse that acknowledges the power and benefits of technological change, without undermining the viability of religion and religious interpretation. Among twentieth-century Jewish efforts, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's "Lonely Man of Faith" stands out as a seminal theological and existential engagement. On the other hand, the critical role of technology in the Nazi industrialization of murder, along with the unparalleled levels of destruction rendered by nuclear warfare, have shaken the "faith" of many in the association between technology and "progress."

OSI 2017 will be dedicated to exploring the multiple ways in which modern and contemporary Jewish life, thought, and practice have responded to a broad range of innovations. The multi- and inter-disciplinary approach of the seminar is designed to bring into conversation distinct fields of study and to attract a diverse range of specialists. The spectrum of research areas that are relevant to the seminar can be illustrated through the following very partial list of potential topics: virtual space and the sanctity of place; databases and hierarchies within the religious canon; universal knowledge and the role of the rabbi; digital resources and Jewish feminism; biomedical ethics; transsexuality and Jewish identities; media communities outside of

traditional communal and classroom physical boundaries; the impact of technology on Ultra-Orthodox communities; bio- and geo-engineering and the notion of *Kedushah*; technical circumvention of the law and the meaning of Sabbath observance; electronic scanning and text criticism; and technology and the future of Jewish coherence.

To be sure, many of these topics have been addressed in the context of other faith communities, and as in the past, we intend to invite outstanding figures both from within Oxford as well as other UK institutions of higher learning who will present their findings and analyses in respect to the religious frameworks that they study. Beyond the specifics of each presentation and discussion, the question that will sit at the foundation of this seminar is: what is the role of emergent technologies in the evolution of modern and contemporary Judaism?