The clash between the so-called liberating forces of globalization and the conservative forces of tradition came face to face last May. On May 27, 1999 the board of the National Association of Securities Dealers (the parent organization of Nasdaq) announced that it planned to open an evening trading session for stocks between 5:30 pm and 9:00 or 10:00 pm. Nasdaq president, Richard Ketchum added, "there may come a day when we trade 24 hours." He did not say that the "24/7 week," as they say in Silicon Valley, is already here. One can now trade twenty-four hours, seven days a week (including holidays), on the Internet. One day earlier the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the board that guides Reform Jews, voted to call on its members to return to the observance of traditional rituals such as observing the Sabbath, wearing a skullcap, and keeping kosher. Numerous other religious groups, including practically all Christian denominations, already have in place drives to renew their religious commitments.

At first it may seem that there is no conflict between trading around the clock and religious renewal. One can wheel and deal five days and nights (even six) and rest on the seventh day, as the Lord prescribes. Nor is the conflict between commerce and family, community and religion, a new one. At the very onset of industrialization, concerns were already raised that having looms at home might entice people to work "after hours." That conflict between work and home intensified as many mothers followed most fathers to labor outside the household. Cyberspace, however, presents a qualitative jump in the scope of opportunities and temptations offered, because it knows no clock or calendar.

For those who seek to trade or labor within the Internet's rapidly expanding confines, any time is as good as any other. While in the old world, banks still close some hours and days, rapidly rising e-banks are operational at all times. And while out there some shops stay open late nights and weekends, only on the Internet can one safely assume that it matters not what time it is or day or date. Nobody needs to ask about the Internet mailman's rest day; email flows into your PC seamlessly, nonstop. In short, cyberspace has neither Sabbath nor holidays, not even Christmas or Yom Kippur. It stands to eradicate whatever is left from what sociologists call "institutionalized" barriers, those that are used to protect, at least to some extent, the sacred from the secular, the social and spiritual from the economic.

All these new opportunities to trade, bank, and shop have rushed at us so quickly that we have barely had a chance to examine their full significance. Most new books exploring cyberspace and globalization (including those by Thomas Friedman and Benjamin Barber) proceed in ways that several Tikkun authors (such as Roger Friedland, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, David C. Korten, and myself) find profoundly mistaken. These books associate the onrush of enriching choice with the West, and suggest that other parts of the world resist the spread of the Internet, and more generally, of globalization, out of traditionalism and parochialism. In short, those not enamored with cyperpossibilities are viewed as parochial if not worse. Viewed in this way, it's small wonder the Nasdaq move was greeted with so little fanfare. In contrast, the rabbis' call was greeted with the mix of consternation and criticism that is rained on those who try to roll the clock back in the name of tradition.

As I see it, the renewed call to redouble our efforts to secure room in our lives for family, community, and religious life is not simply traditional and certainly not "backward." It is not a simple call to return to the past, to observe rituals and tenets "because that's the way we've always done things" or "because that is the way the Lord or the scripture commands."
Instead, we face more choice; we are asked to examine which rituals we will adapt and which new rituals we will develop to protect life beyond commerce and work in cyberspace. We look to define turfs where cell phones will be turned off, and bringing laptops will be considered inappropriate. In seeking such places away from the glare of computer screens, we are not limiting ourselves to the shade of old olive trees, but are choosing what to plant and cultivate to replace them.

If we need a symbol for the new world of chosen rituals it may be the lowly dinner. Unless Nasdaq traders plan to have dinner at 11:00 pm or so, they are extremely unlikely to share a meal with their families on weekdays—unless they choose to miss the evening session. Most of the rest of us have long faced the decision of whether, given our busy households and conflicting schedules, we plan to have shared dinners—at least on some agreed days of the week. (Such meals surely no longer just happen because food is always served at a given time and everybody knows they are expected at the dinner table.) Indeed, additional deliberate choices are involved: those who seek dinners that are occasions where family members can truly communicate with one another must formulate "policies" on matters such as turning off the tv, not answering the phone, and staying at the table until an agreed time.

The same now increasingly holds for weekends and holidays. Cyberspace makes it even more necessary than in the past to decide where to draw the line. While it has long been possible to bring home briefcases bulging with work, the Internet makes it much easier and hence more tempting to trade from home or the beach, to call up the office, or to exchange work-related email messages.

The fact that selection, rather than a simple return to tradition, is what we now face is evident when we compare those rituals we seek to uphold or adapt versus those we choose to ignore. These are decisions we increasingly make on the basis of what seems meaningful to us rather than what is handed down to us from earlier generations. Observing the Sabbath thus may well be one of those rituals that is meaningful to many because they see the virtue of securing time away from economic activities. At the same time, following the Jewish tradition of purification in a public bathhouse for women after they have their period may well be one of those rituals that may lack the same contemporary conviction for most--to put it mildly.

I am not suggesting that tradition will play no role. It is one major source of options people consider, rather than the depository of the answer. In effect, religion may be viewed as a place where earlier approaches were preserved so that we now can re-embrace them—not merely because that is the way we are commanded by religious authorities or what we learned from our forefathers and mothers, but because we find them compelling and meaningful, because they speak to us. The way people plan weddings these days is a case in point. Various alternative rituals are considered, from traditional nuptials to newly composed vows, tailored to the particular couple.

Some of these decisions people are able to render as individuals and as families. For instance, whether or not—and when—to attend church. Other choices, though, require communal dialogues and shared decisions; for instance, whether committee and board meetings, which are increasingly conducted on listservs, will be conducted only on work days and during "regular" hours (whatever that means) or if they will go the way of twenty-four-hour stock trading.

The conflict is not between choice and tradition. Rather, cyberspace poses a new opportunity for us to choose how much space we are willing to dedicate to spiritual, cultural, and social activities in the coming digital century.