# MP3 for DUMMIES

## BY YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Old age must be setting in. I have clear memories of people walking around with Sony Discmans, listening to music etched onto plastic CDs.

Sobering, isn't it, how last year's cutting-edge technology quickly becomes this year's coffee cup coaster? Chances are that some of our readers even remember—gasp!—audiocassette tapes!

For the moment, MP3 players are what cognoscenti are using to play music and voice recordings. MP3 players are a fraction of the size of CD players. Competition is driving the prices further down and the enhancements further up.

The hardware is handy, versatile and inexpensive. I purchased a small capacity iriver about a year ago for around one hundred dollars. My little gadget holds about twenty hours of material, and runs on a single AA battery. My youngest son more recently bought a comparable device with twice the capacity—for half the price! (If you haven't purchased a player yet, think carefully about the features you want. If taping the *shiur* you listen to in shul is

*Rabbi Adlerstein grabs MP3 Torah between jobs at the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Loyola Law School; he also serves on the editorial board of* Jewish Action.

important, make sure that the player has a voice recording option—and a mike with sufficient sensitivity to do the job well. I have obtained good results from my iriver even when sitting fifteen feet away from the speaker. If you want the option of using an external mike, check to see that there is a line-in option.)

Unlike the older technologies, MP3 players are designed to work in tandem with a home computer. Some potential users may be intimidated by procedures and jargon that are mysterious and new. This article is directed at them, and all others who have not yet taken the MP3 plunge. It will map out the four steps—download, reformat, splice, move—needed to take material from the Internet and transfer it to a personal player.

### Download, Reformat, Splice, Move

Rabbi Shmuel Irons of the Kollel Institute of Greater Detroit gobbles up Jewish history in his spare time. His acclaimed history series combines his knowledge of the past with the insight of a recognized *talmid chacham.* We will use one of his lectures as our demo.

Assume you've found your way to **613.org** (one of the first sites to make a rich assortment of Torah audio available), located Rabbi Irons through the "speaker and singer" list and found a class entitled "Hillel." You would like to listen to the class on the run, rather

than on your home computer. Instead of clicking on the title, right-click on the "d" (for download), which is to the right of the title. (Other sites will offer different methods for downloading, usually by right-clicking on the selection.) In the drop-down menu that appears, select "Save Target As…." A box will open, which will allow you to choose the folder in which to park the downloaded *shiur* as well as assign a name to it. I created a Temp folder for things I wish to use and quickly dispose of; you may find it simpler to use your Desktop. Let's give our soon-to-be-downloaded file the name "Hillel" and click "Save." With garden-variety broadband, you will have the *shiur* downloaded in about a minute.

While the source file was downloading, you may have noticed that its original name ended in .ram. Those last three letters, called a file extension, tell you that the file is not an MP3 file, but was created through a Real Audio format. (Audio files come in a host of formats. The novelty of MP3 is that it crunches down a bulky file into something far more manageable. It gets rid of the parts of the signal that are just not going to make much of a difference to the human ear. This allows for far quicker download time and much more convenient storage.) Your MP3 player will not play files in this format. Before you can move a file to your player, you

want to change it to an MP3 format. (Other files you download may already be in the proper format, and you will then be able to skip this step.) A variety of software programs will do this for you. I use **Switch**, available in a freeware version at **http://nch.com.au/switch/index.html.** These programs will ask you to identify the file you wish to have converted, and the format that you would like to use. Using our demo, when you finish, you will have two files: Hillel.ram and Hillel.mp3. They will likely show different icons. To avoid confusion, delete the old .ram file.

We are almost there. One of the drawbacks of digital formats like MP3 is that it is difficult to resume exactly where you left off if you've powered down the player. Old-fashioned tapes did not have this problem. They physically froze wherever you hit the stop button, and picked up again when the player was turned back on. Digital formats, however, don't really have any bookmarks to use, other than the beginning of tracks. This means that if you press stop thirty-two minutes into a seventy-five minute *shiur*, you have no way of finding your place, other than starting over and guestimating where you wish to resume by using the fast- forward button. It can be very frustrating. The workaround is to artificially create new tracks—really files—by splitting the seventy-five-minute colossus into more manageable segments of five or six minutes each. Remember which segment you were listening to, and you will only have to fiddle with a few minutes worth of sound to find your place.

Splitters are programs that do just that. Mega MP3 Splitter (free download at **http://shareware.pcmag.com/product.php%5Bid%5D62447%5BSiteID%5Dpcmag**) works fine for me. The program senses the length of the selected file. Using a slider, you find the various "breakpoints" you would like to use, depressing a scissors icon to make your choice. You save when you've finished carving up the original, and Splitter generates a group of files numbered

sequentially, beginning in our case with Hillel 1. The files are arranged as "slices" of a pie, with all of the files equaling an entire pie. Once again, it is a good idea to delete the original large file and leave only the smaller ones.

You are now ready to transfer your files to your player. You can link the player to your computer with a USB cable, and open the program that came with the device. My iriver's Music Manager looks like Microsoft Internet Explorer, only with two parallel sets of panes—one for the computer, the other for the device. You simply find the files in the folder in which you've stored them, select them and drag them to the appropriate folder on your device. For very simple transfers, it may be feasible and simpler to ignore the packaged software and use Windows



Explorer, where your device will likely show up as a removable disk or USB device.

The versatility and compactness of the MP3 format gives you other alternatives as well. You can bypass the player altogether, and simply burn the files to a CD. This will work fine if you listen only in the car, but it won't help you while you are sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office. You can also share your files by e-mail. If the size of your files exceeds the limits imposed by your Internet service provider, go to **www.sendthisfile.com** for a reliable way to send oversized files.

### Where to Go

I start my weekly shopping at **The Yeshiva of Kishiniev School, www.yeshivakishiniev.org/audio-weekly.htm,** where I help myself to a short treatment of the *parashah* by Rabbi Moshe Eisemann, one of the deepest Torah figures of our times. If traffic is congested, this *shiur* won't last longer than a single trip to the office, so I'm still looking for more. The next stop

might be **OU Radio, www.ouradio.org,** which offers multiple "channels" of programming, including short and longer *shiurim*, presentations on parenting, Israel-related issues and more. Many of the offerings are downloadable after free registration. I could also go to one of several pay-per-learn collections (**www.aishaudio.com/homepage.php; www.torahmedia.com**) that gathers scores of popular presenters and provides downloads on a fee basis, generally for the equivalent of what the major music sites charge for a single track. **Yeshivat Har Etzion**'s free site, **www.vbm-torah.org/kmtt,** offers a great deal for people ready to confront challenging material. Its **KMTT (Ki Mitzion Teitze Torah)** "station" podcasts a *shiur* a day, which means that special software automatically downloads the item for you without you having to lift a finger to a mouse.

I lean most heavily, however, on one wonderful site, **YU Torah Online, www.yutorah.org.** Here you can select from a rich variety of some of the most gifted *magidei shiur* in America, both contemporary and of previous generations. (They've converted old tapes to a digital format.) Whether it is *halachah, machshavah, shiurim* on various tractates or supplementary material to the *daf,* YU Torah offers stunning variety and scope, with new material added frequently. It is great for long trips. (I suffer from an extremely low boredom threshold, which makes long drives actually dangerous for me. I had no trouble going on a five-hour trip between Los Angeles and Mammoth Mountain, kept awake by the depth of Rabbi Dr. J. David Bleich holding forth on arcane matters of *halachah.*)

With every passing digital day, we see more and more of what seem to be moving earphones in close association with semi-mesmerized humans, who seem detached from the world around them by music-inspired trances. It is fitting that the same little electronic device can transport us to more celestial destinations, listening to the real music of the spheres, the holiness of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's* Torah. 🅙