

Being an Orthodox Jew in a secular world

By Eric Shackleton

The Canadian Press-TORONTO
(Mar 10, 2007)

The Internet has been a useful tool for Judy Shier Weisberg as she struggles to stay connected to her Orthodox Jewish faith in the midst of a busy life.

The author, teacher and ventriloquist says the Toronto-based torahinmotion.org website in particular has "given me a greater understanding of how Orthodox Jews are dealing with modernity."

Weisberg, who describes herself as a "conservadox" Jew -- not entirely Orthodox but not Conservative either -- is concerned about the increasing number of Jewish groups that are becoming more extreme as people grapple with issues like abortion and homosexuality.

But she's pleased to see questions of modern society dealt with in the weekly e-mailed newsletter she receives from Torah in Motion.

"It's wonderful to see a group of people (Torah in Motion) ... they believe ... in God's laws and yet they're living in the modern world," Weisberg says.

Rabbi Moshe Yeres, a teacher and vice-principal of Jewish Studies at a Toronto Jewish community high school, also turns to the Internet to keep up to date with how Jewish law and tradition are interfacing with modern times.

He receives a weekly e-mail from the Orthodox **Eretz Hemdah Institute** in Jerusalem and consults the group's website eretzhemdah.org, especially the Ask the Rabbi section. The newsletter contains articles about the Torah and Jewish law, says Yeres, who spent two weeks studying at the institute last summer.

"It's very good," he says. "It helps to focus myself on my job."

On Ask the Rabbi, people e-mail questions to the Eretz Hemdah Institute, where 35 rabbis involved in scholarly pursuits provide responses.

"Questions come up in terms of contracts, in terms of personal disagreements," says Yeres. "It's more like an alternative resolution rather than dealing with a court system."

Orthodox Jews who follow a literal interpretation of the Bible have questions on many issues related to getting along in modern secular societies, says Rabbi Jay Kelman, who helped found Torah in Motion.

"Our website has had 1.8 million hits in the last year," he says. "We have an e-mail list of over 2,000 people that extends to Hong Kong, South Africa, Israel and Australia."

At Ask the Rabbi, more than 12,000 questions have been answered from English speakers alone in the past half-dozen years. The site is also available in Hebrew.



Nathan Denette, the Canadian Press

Rabbi Jay Kelman helped found the website Torah in Motion, which explores Judaism and modern life.

Although the institute's main purpose is to train rabbis -- it has a seven year course that elevates rabbis to the highest level qualifying them to work in the Jewish court system as judges -- anyone can use Ask the Rabbi.

"Every Jew can come up on our website and ask any question," says Rabbi Yosef Carmel, who is dean of the institute.

"We are dealing especially with two fields -- monetary cases according to Jewish law and family life cases, all the details of this field in Jewish life," says Carmel, who visited Toronto in February.

One question the institute's panel of rabbis dealt with recently was why do Jews put stones on graves, says Carmel, who toured North America to encourage more rabbis to study at his institute.

"We made a research about it," he said.

The custom, which dates from the earliest period of Jewish history, "is a way to make a sign, here is a Jewish grave ... be careful and pay attention to it."

The question arose from the film "Schindler's List" where at the end Holocaust survivors line up to place pebbles on the gravestone of Oskar Schindler, the man who saved their lives in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Other questions the rabbis deal with include life-cycle functions, family relations, kosher food and business matters.

At Torah in Motion, says Kelman, "we're an adult education institute dealing with issues of Jews who are serious about their Judaism, serious about living in the modern world and want to be engaged in it."

His group, he says, is not so concerned about Jewish legal matters, but rather about how "observant and non-observant elements of the community, religious and non-religious elements, are getting along.

"We have these classes that are offered online, dealing with issues like homosexuality, drug abuse," he explains.

Being Orthodox, being deeply religious, creates many problems.

"That's exactly what we want to struggle with. We live in a society which is basically not a religious type of society.

"But there's much value in living in the modern world. It's afforded Judaism wonderful opportunities. Jews have it a lot better living in free, open, democratic societies that we never had in our history," he adds.

Nevertheless, "homosexuality is a prohibition in the Bible.

"Let's say there are many Orthodox Jews who have homosexual leanings. How do we relate to that and how much of that do we welcome into our community?"

"We had a whole program on Jews and homosexuality," says Kelman.

Torah in Motion also looks at issues such as personal autonomy, authority, mental health, medical ethics, the thought of major Jewish thinkers, Judaism and the meaning of Israel and Zionism.

Weisberg notes she is not observant of everything in Judaism.

"I observe the Sabbath," she says, "but I'm sure a lot of Orthodox people would question because I wear pants. I don't keep my head covered all the time."

But for Weisberg, Torah in Motion helps make it possible to, "still be a deeply observant Jew and not isolate yourself and exclude yourself."