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'Ask a rabbi' - on the Web: Online rabbis offer answers

By Talia S. Coutin

NEW YORK, Sept. 10 (JTA) - Rabbi Mordechai Becher had no idea that with the tap of a mouse and a trip in the veld, he could help transform one spiritual-seeking backpacker's life.

Becher was barbecuing meat under the perennial blue sky in the countryside north of Johannesburg when his friend spotted a group of college-age trekkers and waved at them to join in the feast.

One of the young men told the two rabbis that he was Jewish, but that his only connection to the faith was the sporadic questions he posed to a rabbi over the Internet.

Call it serendipity or divine providence, but on the other side of the cyberspace jungle, Becher had

been sitting in Israel, pondering answers to questions the young man would ask through Ohr Someach's "Ask the Rabbi" e-mail service.

"We were both freaked out," said Becher, who serves as one of three full-time rabbis for Gateways' "Ask the Rabbi" Web site.

"Divine providence brought them in proximity, but it was human will that brought them over," he said, a reference to the hospitality of his friend, the late Rabbi Gavriel Klatzko.

Several years after that encounter in South Africa, Becher proudly reports that the young backpacker has become religiously observant, and Becher recently attended his wedding.

The last few years have seen a spike in the number of "Ask the Rabbi" Web sites by Jewish organizations - mostly Orthodox, free and fueled by donations - providing rapid halachic, or Jewish law, advice to anyone with Internet access.

The services produce tangible results for hard-to-reach Jews, the "webbe rebbes" say.

Rabbi Yosef Carmel, dean of the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Israel, described how a young man from Istanbul who knew nothing about Judaism used the institute's "Ask the Rabbi" site to learn about his heritage.

That prompted him to marry a Jew, take on a religious lifestyle and make aliyah.

"This is the power of the Internet: It connects them to their roots," Carmel said.

Rabbis accepted to the highly selective seven-year program at Eretz Hemdah to earn what is considered the doctorate of smicha - called the "yadin yadin" - provide the manpower for the Web site.

If they aren't studying in the beit midrash, the rabbis are poring over questions like these, which later become part of a database: "Does halacha permit a Jewish woman to perform a brit milah?" and "There have been reports that a pig with split hooves that chews its cud has been found in Indonesia. Would such an animal be kosher?"

Asking questions always has been an intrinsic part of Judaism, but why can't the curious just drop by a synagogue and ask their local rabbi?

"Jews residentially are far more dispersed than they have been in the past," said Samuel Heilman, professor of Jewish studies and sociology in the City University of New York system.

Moreover, non-affiliated and younger Jews are most likely to encounter Judaism on the Internet, Heilman said.

The Union for Reform Judaism offers one of the few non-Orthodox "Ask the Rabbi" sites. The United



Rabbi Yosef Carmel, left, dean of the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Jerusalem, researches answers to questions fielded through the institute's 'Ask the Rabbi' site

Synagogue of Conservative Judaism does not have such a site.

Heilman explained the dearth of non-Orthodox sites as the nature of the different movements. "The Orthodox rabbinate is much more willing to tell people what to do," Heilman said.

Among Jews who eschew affiliation but aren't necessarily disinterested in religion - the fastest-growing sector of American Jewry, according to Heilman - the demand for speedy rabbinic guidance is skyrocketing.

Rabbi Yaakov Menkin, director of Project Genesis, a Jewish outreach organization that operates five different sites, launched JewishAnswers.org nine months ago after other sites couldn't handle the demand, he said.

Project Genesis' site features a blog format for the "young, savvy, blog-sophisticated generation," said Rabbi Mordechai Dixler, content manager for JewishAnswers.org.

Services are free, despite the cost to operate the services, which range from the bare-bones for volunteer-based sites to in the millions.

"The connection between money and mitzvot," or commandments, "is not good," Carmel said.

The anonymity factor is another reason why some may prefer to seek advice over the Internet.

"We aim to give people the opportunity to consult with a rabbi or deal with a philosophical problem...

without the intimidation that may be associated with a bricks-and-mortar location," said Rabbi Zalman

Shmotkin, director of Chabad.org. He added that users range from homeless people using the library to tourists trekking the world; the Talmudic scholar, the Israeli soldier, the curious gentile, the counter-culture editor and others.

"People take advantage of the Web's anonymity to impart experiences and ask for advice."

Chabad-Lubavitch, which has stood out in the Chasidic world for its embrace of modern technology, was among the pioneers of "Ask the Rabbi" sites. The late Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Kazen reached out to thousands of people on Fidonet, an online discussion network, as far back as 1988, Shmotkin said.

In 1994, Kazen launched the first version of Chabad's "Ask the Rabbi" Web site. Today's version, in which 40 rabbis and educators field questions via e-mail, has answered more than 500,000 questions since 2001, averaging about 200 a day, Shmotkin said.

Chabad operates two other sites with "Ask the Rabbi" services: Askmoses.com and TheJewishWoman.org, whose "Dear Rachel" area is run by women for women, said Sara Esther Crispe, editor of the site.

"The goal is to have women feel comfortable, like a group of their peers," Crispe said.

With cyberspace serving as a barrier between askers and answerers, how do organizations gauge the effectiveness of their services?

For Rabbi Chaim Cunin, director of Askmoses.com, the answer arrived in an unexpected way in the form of pikuach nefesh, or the saving of a life.

Askmoses.com, which differs from other "Ask the Rabbi" sites by offering a Java-based live-chat service "24/6", had just launched when Cunin received a call at 3:30 a.m. from a frantic rabbi who suspected the girl he was chatting with was about to commit suicide.

The rabbis convinced the girl to see a psychiatrist, saving her life.

"This is the perfect example of the rebbe's mission, which is to be there for any person in need, whether they're Jewish or not," Cunin said.

Uriel Laio, 23, said he appreciated Askmoses.com for furthering his knowledge of halachah, but sometimes wanted greater depth.

"It seems like too much of the time, the answer was, 'Ask your local rabbinical authority.' When they gave a direct answer, I would be satisfied with it," said Laio, a student at the University of California, Santa Cruz who created the Jewnification blog.

Without longitudinal studies, however, scholars like Heilman question whether such sites can actually increase levels of religiosity or affiliation. But he did acknowledge their potential.

"This technology can become a vehicle for recapturing" the unaffiliated, he said. "The community element of Jewish existence has found a way to recreate itself in virtual space, even if it can't in real space."
