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Faith-based Web sites help spread the word

Judaism site among millions of online religion resources that serve devout believers and curious newcomers

By MATTHEW HAY BROWN
SUN REPORTER

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ROCKVILLE // As he sat down recently to teach a new Pakistani colleague about Judaism, Ari Alexander logged on to MyJewishLearning.com.

It wasn't the first time Alexander, co-executive director of Children of Abraham in New York, turned to the Rockville-based Web site for help explaining his faith. Both in his work with the Muslim-Jewish organization and his private life, he has frequently recommended MyJewishLearning.com for its comprehensive and pluralistic presentation of Jewish religion, history and culture.

"It's the best resource on the Internet for learning about Judaism," Alexander said. "I'm happy to share it with Muslims who are having the first experience with Judaism, and I use it myself for my own ongoing education."

Being useful to a broad range of visitors - Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, Jew and non-Jew - is an important goal of MyJewishLearning.com, says Paul Roitman Bardack, chief executive officer of the two-year-old Web site.

Conceived by philanthropist Edgar M. Bronfman, the collection of articles, commentary, discussion boards and links is intended to address the needs of users at all levels of experience, without pushing a single point of view.

"I'm hoping [users] come away with a feeling of engagement, that their Jewish questions were answered respectfully and in a way that makes them want to ask more questions," Bardack said. "I don't want them to leave with the feeling they've been talked down to or proselytized."

MyJewishLearning.com is one of hundreds of thousands of Web sites devoted to Judaism to spring up over the past decade, and one of millions focusing on religion - ranging from simple bulletin boards for local churches, synagogues and mosques to online congregations that bring together users for virtual rituals, sermons and discussion.

The phenomenon holds ramifications for believers everywhere.

"A great deal of data seems to indicate that people that are isolated for whatever reason

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Paul Roitman Bardack
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find connection to religious information online to be a good source of satisfaction and can lead to the creation of religious communities over the Internet," said Donald Braxton, a religious studies professor at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa.

Deborah Vance, a professor of communication at [McDaniel College](#) in Westminster, sees the proliferation of faith-based Web sites as the latest example of religion taking advantage of new technology.

"People have been listening to television sermons and even radio sermons back to the beginning of broadcasting," she said. "The Internet is really carrying on where television couldn't go any further. Probably there's a vast improvement online, because you get the opportunity to interact."

At the same time, Braxton said, faith-based Web sites as a whole amount to "an online world religion course," opening new possibilities for interfaith dialogue and exploration.

"It is removing religious information from its isolation," he said. "It becomes easier for a practitioner from one religious tradition to learn about the practices of another. ... Certainly, there is a larger awareness of the cosmos of religious choices that they face."

Funded by several foundations and produced by editors in Rockville and New York with varied backgrounds in Judaism, MyJewishLearning.com aims to be a portal to the Jewish universe online.

Regular features include weekly readings from the Torah and accompanying commentary, an article of the week and additional stories.

The changing content is paired with a collection of more than 2,000 articles at four levels of complexity, discussion boards with hundreds of postings and links to thousands of Web sites.

The emphasis throughout is on plurality, with individual questions - on free will and determinism, for example, or the existence of evil and suffering - answered several different ways by several different authors, reflecting different strains of Jewish thought.

Bardack, president of the U.S. Distance Learning Association, declined to divulge the number of visits the site records per month.

Describing some who use the site, Morris Rodenstein, the help-desk representative, said he has heard from an Episcopal priest who had landed the part of the rabbi in a local production of Fiddler on the Roof, a tribal chief in Papua New Guinea interested in learning about Judaism and a 70-year-old Jewish rancher in Montana who is more than 200 miles from the nearest synagogue.

"This is a fantastic way to reach out to people," managing editor Lili Kalish Gersch said. "It's important that people are proud of their heritage and want to learn more about it."

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Bardack said the Web site's traffic grows during Passover, the High Holidays and the Hanukkah-Christmas season.

"A sizable portion of the audience is non-Jewish," he said. "You've got mixed families, where the non-Jewish spouse wants to learn, or someone is attending a Jewish observance, a bar mitzvah or sitting shiva, or Christians looking for a site to help them understand the Jewish antecedent to their Christian faith."

But the majority of visitors, he said, are Jews - some isolated from Jewish communities, others involved in synagogues - who are trying to learn more about their religion.

Rabbi Howard Gorin of Tikvat Israel, a conservative congregation in Rockville, has been communicating with Ebo tribesmen in Nigeria who believe they are descended from ancient Israelites.

"These people have no access to libraries, no trained teachers there, so they have a do-it-yourself mentality," he said. "They are not aware of post-biblical Judaism. They are using the site to get a much richer and fuller understanding."

Gorin also recommends the site to members of his congregation, friends and family - and uses it himself.

"I love the fact that it's not reflecting one dimension or trend of modern Judaism, but it includes voices from the most liberal - even experimental - to the most traditional," he said. "I love the fact that it teaches on all different levels."

"I've learned things that I never knew - advanced principles, additional interpretations. I might know four interpretations for a section of Scripture, and they'll have a fifth."

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▶ Paul Roitman Bardack is chief executive officer of MyJewishLearning.com, a Rockville-based Web site that features articles, commentary and discussion boards about Judaism. "A sizable portion of the audience is non-Jewish," he said.

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