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## Rosner's Guest

Shmuel Rosner, Chief U.S. Correspondent

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Posted:

### Daniel Septimus

Daniel Septimus is the Editor in Chief of [MyJewishLearning.com](#), "a personal gateway to Jewish exploration." Septimus is a writer, educator, and book critic and was a founding editor of the site (bio web page [here](#)), which defines itself as "a trans-denominational website of Jewish information and education geared toward learners of all ages and educational backgrounds."

We will discuss Jewish education and the state of American Judaism. Readers can send questions to [rosnersdomain@haaretz.co.il](mailto:rosnersdomain@haaretz.co.il).

Dear Daniel,

**So, in this world of a more democratic Judaism, how will the editor in chief of MyJewishLearning be able to separate the insignificant from the meaningful, the worthy of the readers' time from the sheer nonsense? Education is always about hierarchy. If your job is to tell me what's important to learn - but you don't have any rules, or hierarchy to build on - how will you do it?**

Rosner

Dear Shmuel,

Democracies aren't free-for-alls. Just because everyone born in the United States can run for president doesn't mean they will. But whether they run for president or not, they bear some responsibility for the state of their country.

So saying that individual Jews should have a role in shaping their Judaism--and Judaism in general--isn't the same as saying that anything goes, that there are no rules, no standards.

Let's take an example of one successful attempt at democratizing Judaism: the independent minyan movement.

Much has been written about the phenomenon of (usually) young Jews in New York, Boston, San Francisco, etc, eschewing synagogues and creating their own Shabbat services. I have been to three of these minyanim in New York: Altshul, Hadar, Darchei Noam. What do they all have in common? None of them have rabbis. Or stated positively: They were all founded by passionate, educated laypeople. And because they had a more democratic genesis, those involved have higher levels of investment, and stronger senses of responsibility.

That's what I'm trying to encourage.

At MyJewishLearning, we try to provide accessible information from a broad array of perspectives on as many topics as we can. We allow our readers to choose what, when, and where they learn. We establish their universe of options, you're right. We decide what topics we choose to cover. We decide how

#### Today's Poll

#### What should Israel's Labor party do?

- Leave the government immediately
- Wait to the final war-report in August
- Stay with Olmert all the way
- Wait a couple of days to decide
- Decide after the Party's primaries

#### Domain's Guest



**Daniel Septimus**

The Editor of MyJewishLearning.com will discuss Jewish education and related topics. Readers can send questions.

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long our articles should be, how much editorializing they can include. We turn down articles that don't seem appropriate for our site.

But we also exist in an environment with checks and balances. Readers could critique us on our website or on other websites. In fact, we might not be the best website for everyone. And that's fine. It's important that there be multiple places online for people to explore Judaism and Jewishness. But ultimately, on MyJewishLearning, we don't tell people what to do, what to believe. We give them the resources and tools to decide those things on their own.

I'm not advocating any sort of revolution. I'm not throwing out the canon or looking to reject rabbinic leadership. I'm saying: Let's cultivate this democratic spirit that exists online and is emerging offline, as well. Let's harness new technologies that will support and encourage this movement. And let's see where it takes us.

Daniel

**Dear Daniel,**

**Your response was insightful and very convincing on a technical level - online Judaism will change "religious hierarchies and leadership structures." You failed to explain, however, why it is good, or necessary, to change those hierarchies. How will this make Judaism more appealing, or better, than it has been for centuries?**

**Best**

**Rosner**

Dear Shmuel,

I'm glad you asked the question in that way because, I think, the democratization of Judaism can make Judaism both more appealing and better.

Why will it be better? Because Judaism will be richer, deeper, and more meaningful if it is shaped by a diverse group of people. I have a lot of friends who are male rabbis, but there's no reason why they should be capable of forging Jewish life on their own. If Judaism is shaped by a multiplicity of voices, then it will resonate more broadly.

Why will the democratization of Judaism make it more appealing? Because choice and autonomy are the hallmarks of modern living.

If Judaism is to be more "appealing" for modern Jews, it must be self-made to a certain extent. Again, I don't want to overstate things. Tradition, religious authority, precedent: these are all important. But in a world in which identities are, to a certain extent made-to-order, it's important that Jews feel like they have a role to play in the shaping of their Jewish lives.

Daniel

**Dear Daniel,**

**In an article you wrote on MyJewishLearning you stated that it can "change the very fabric of the Jewish community." Please explain how a web site - as good and insightful as it might be - can do that?**

**Best**

**Rosner**

Dear Shmuel,

The article you're referring to looked back at some of the things we've accomplished with MyJewishLearning.com, while also examining the website's potential and the future of the Jewish internet, generally.

In the article, I also wanted to highlight the ways in which the internet is not merely instrumental. In other words, when we think about the internet and how it's changed our lives, we usually think about its practical implications, the ways it's made communication, information delivery, shopping, etc, easier and faster. But the significance of the internet -and the Jewish internet - is not merely pragmatic.

The structures and values of the internet mirror the structures and values of contemporary Western life. The internet is democratic to its core. In my article I quoted Mark Poster, a professor at the University of California at Irvine who put it this way: "The 'magic' of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants."

He wrote that in 1995. If it was true then, imagine how much more true it is today after the rise of blogs, MySpace, and Wikipedia.

Just last week the New York Times published an article about the decline of newspaper book reviews, which have been replaced, in part, by online criticism. In the last year, major American newspapers like the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution have scaled back their review sections. And bloggers have taken over. According to the New York Times, "some publishers and literary bloggers - not surprisingly - see it as an inevitable transition toward a new, more democratic literary landscape where anyone can comment on books."

What does this mean for Judaism and the Jewish community?

Well, if the internet is a force for democratization, and I believe it is, then the internet will help facilitate the democratization of Judaism.

This movement will be forged on multiple fronts. MyJewishLearning.com, for example, will help democratize Jewish learning-a process which began well before the internet was developed.

For most of Jewish history, Jewish knowledge was produced by men in the *beit midrash*. In the 20th century, women took up serious Jewish study and the university became an alternative venue for Jewish learning. In the 21st century, the internet will push this movement forward: Jewish learning will be accessible to anyone, anywhere.

By empowering laypeople, the internet will also help shape new religious hierarchies and leadership structures.

Consider the case of Yehuda Kolko, a Brooklyn rabbi, who had sexually abused students over the course of two decades. It wasn't until a blog connected former victims that events ensued that eventually led to Kolko's arrest. Here was a case of laypeople, connecting through technology and taking on corrupt leadership, but there will also be opportunities for religious populism that is not merely a reaction to a problematic status quo.

This threat to rabbinic authority has not gone unnoticed.

Prior to their annual convention back in November, Agudath Israel issued a press release mentioning a scheduled discussion about blogs.

"In recent years," Agudah leader Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zweibel said, "due to a variety of factors, the authority of daas Torah has been significantly undermined, even within our own chareidi circles. Most troubling has been the proliferation of Internet 'blogs' where misguided individuals feel free to spread every bit of rechilus and loshon hora about rabbonim and roshei yeshiva, all with the intended effect of undermining any semblance of Torah authority in our community."

I don't mean to be overly idealistic here. There is, indeed, the potential for

populism to run amok. There's plenty of idiocy - and yes - sometimes falsehoods online. Universal access to Jewish knowledge won't necessarily improve the quality of Jewish learning. It's important that we continue to cultivate quality leaders and teachers.

Still, I do believe the internet will play a vital role in democratizing Jewish life, and I do believe that this can "change the very fabric of the Jewish community" - and change it for the better. It may be cliché to invoke Marshall McLuhan's famous line "The medium is the message," but I'll do it anyway.

The internet is the medium of the day. Its message? Choice. Empowerment. Democracy. The Jewish internet will help create a Jewish community built upon these pillars.

## Responses

 [Send your response](#)

- |  |                          |          |
|--|--------------------------|----------|
| 1. <b>Changing the very fabric of the Jewish community</b> | 19:49   mTp              | 07/05/07 |
| 2. <b>Transdenominational? Give Me A Break!</b>            | 20:30   AJew in the US   | 07/05/07 |
| 3. <b>Don't Trust Google</b>                               | 21:13   Daniel Septimus  | 07/05/07 |
| 4. <b>In all due respect, Mr. Septimus is clueless</b>     | 22:39   Baal Teshuva     | 07/05/07 |
| 5. <b>My Google Search/Other Websites</b>                  | 23:13   AJew in the US   | 07/05/07 |
| 6. <b>To Daniel</b>  | 00:49   ReaderOfYourSite | 08/05/07 |
| 7. <b>daniel septimus</b>                                  | 00:59   renee septimus   | 08/05/07 |
| 8. <b>daniel septimus</b>                                  | 01:03   renee septimus   | 08/05/07 |
| 9. <b>Democratization of Judaism</b>                       | 06:42   The Golem        | 08/05/07 |
| 10. <b>Re: Baal Teshuva's post</b>                         | 16:11   Derech Eretz     | 08/05/07 |
| 11. <b>Derech Eretz's Post</b>                             | 17:19   Baal Teshuva     | 08/05/07 |

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