

Case History of a Jewish Website

by Jacob Richman

I am an Internet consultant living in Israel, having made *aliyah* from New York in 1984, and I develop my own educational websites. I created my first website in 1996, sixteen years after graduating from Brooklyn College with a degree in Computer Science.

Why do I mention the “sixteen years after” ?

Well, back in the late 1970’s when I was studying for my computer science degree, the public Internet, as we know it today, did not exist. Everything I learned about developing educational websites was based on personal experience and feedback from visitors to my websites. In this article I will try to give a perspective on how I get ideas for my sites and how I develop the ideas into useful educational resources.

I have over a dozen educational websites, but I will focus in on the development history of one popular Jewish site of mine. In August 2001, I launched a Jewish-oriented website called “The J Site - Jewish Education and Entertainment,” found at www.J.co.il.

Over the past five-and-a-half years, I have gotten hundreds of e-mails with feedback from users who visited and used the J site. The feedback was from a very wide ranging audience, including teachers, parents, students, organizations, and individuals, as well as religious, secular, and several want-to-be Jews.

Besides sending many “thank yous,” people let me know how they used my site (i.e., *Purim* clipart in *Mishloach Manot* baskets, Jewish wisdom quotes for a weekly newsletter) and often I get suggestions on additional features they would like to see implemented. Many times, I get repeated suggestions that may lead me to develop and add new items to the site and sometimes even develop a new section (i.e., The Jewish Clipart Database).

Here’s a short perspective on some of the resources I created for the site and why I developed them.

My Jewish Coloring Book

Back in 1996 when I launched my main website (www.jr.co.il), I created a “hotsites” section that lists sites that I recommend to friends, clients, and colleagues. The “hotsites” section/portal is popular and thousands of people visit the pages every month.

One of the very popular sections (according to my website statistics) in the children’s “hotsites” is a listing I created of online coloring books and coloring pages from all over the world (non-Jewish). I did many Internet searches to look for online coloring books/pages with Jewish themes. I found a few sites with some Jewish holiday coloring pages for printing, but nothing to draw online. One of the first programs that I developed for the J site was the “Jewish Coloring Book,” which has both online and offline coloring features. Feedback from parents was very good. This was a program that I developed because of a potential audience after observing the patterns of a different group.

My Hebrew Songbook

Over the years, many people have e-mailed me asking where they can find online the words to popular Hebrew songs.

After doing a search myself, I sometimes would find the song and direct the person to the appropriate website. If I found the song, the website would usually be an Israeli one and there would not be *nikud* (vowels) under the words. I decided that it was time to develop an online Hebrew Songbook that was user-friendly to those for whom Hebrew is not their native language.

Back in the 70s, I attended Massad residential camp in Pennsylvania. One of the items that was given out by the camp was a printed Hebrew songbook that someone probably had spent many hours developing and printing. It was about 5-10 pages long and had two columns of popular songs printed with *nikud*. That printed songbook became the basis of my online songbook.

I hired a freelancer to use a Hebrew word processor to enter dozens of popular Israeli songs (with *nikud*). I created images of each song and saved them as simple picture files. I then had a programmer create an online system with an easy-to-use interface. Today, *My Hebrew Songbook* has hundreds of songs available to view online or print.

The print option allows you to print two-column songbooks with as many songs as will fit on a page, just like the songbook I kept from my Massad camp days. Over the years,

An Internet consultant provides a rationale for why he developed certain educational websites and offers a few general rules for successful online resource sites.

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I added different types of songs/information to the system, including: Hebrew Tongue Twisters (with English translations), Hebrew prayers (including the often-asked-for *Birkat HaMazon* - Grace after Meals) and even show tunes (such as "Fiddler on the Roof" in Hebrew).

In Memory of

Once a year, many people visit the gravesite of a relative or friend who has passed away. Besides saying *Kaddish*, it is traditional to recite various *Tehillim* (*Psalms*), including a specific paragraph for each letter of the deceased person's name.

In Israel, it is customary for someone to organize a group to visit the gravesite and bring along at least ten booklets with the *Psalms*. The person leading the prayer will announce the pages corresponding to the appropriate letters.

After several visits to the grave of my father z"l, I decided to create an online system to select the letters and print the pages of the *Psalms*. As in the Hebrew Songbook, I created images of the *Psalms* with *nikud* that print in two columns. The system also has options to print the *Kaddish* in Hebrew with English translation and transliteration.

No one asked me to develop this system, but, based on my own experience, I thought it would be a useful program for those who would like to continue this tradition.

The Jewish Clipart Database

Of all the e-mail requests I received during the early years of website development, one of the most repeated requests was for pictures/images relating to Jewish holidays or Jewish themes. Now, there are many software packages for sale that offer thousands of Jewish clipart images, but my requests were from people who needed only one or two images for a particular event or newsletter and did not have the time or ready access to purchase a full package.

This was the impetus for my creating the Jewish Clipart Database. However, there were several problems to overcome. In addition to paying the programmer designing the system from my own very limited pocket, I needed Jewish Clipart. I contacted many graphic artists, asking them to donate at least six images (in three different sizes); in return, I would list their contact information in the database. About ten artists donated pictures. I decided to hire two of them to create many additional pictures so the database would be large and attractive. Once or twice a year I add at least a dozen new images, including additions to the holiday sections. Last year, based on user requests, I added Bible-themed clipart, including Genesis, Noah and the ark, and the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Word Search Game

Several years ago, I was at a *Hanukkah* party/fund raiser in Jerusalem, with one of the activities a contest to finding a group of *Hanukkah* words in a printout of jumbled letters. It was a short, fun activity, but it also reminded everyone of the words and events associated with that holiday. That activity led to my creating the Word Search Game. To keep it interesting, I created

a long list of topics with a large list of words for each.

Each time a person plays the game online (or prints it for offline use), the system randomly takes words from the database and places them differently on the grid. There is an easy level for young children and a more difficult (including backward and diagonal) level for the older players.

I decided that the programmer would use Flash to create the site. This allowed me to have a multi-lingual system (English, Hebrew, Russian) without worrying if the foreign letters would show up correctly on screens in New York, Moscow, or Jerusalem.

A Few Simple Rules

The above sections have given you a behind-the-scenes perspective on some of the development for the site. Each of the other games on the site (Jewish Trivia Quiz, Israeli Geography Game, Multi-lingual Hangman) also has its own history.

In closing, I have a few general rules that I believe are key to a successful online resource site:

1. "Keep It Simple, Sam" (KISS)
If you need a computer degree to figure out how to use the site, people will visit once but never again.
2. Cover the topic thoroughly
If you publicized that your website has great resources for *Hanukkah*, make an effort that there really are great resources for *Hanukkah* on your site. Two songs and one page about the miracle does not cut it (in my opinion).
3. Keep the bells and whistles to a minimum
Many people like to put cool things on the front page of the website to dazzle the visitors. If you expect the visitor to return often, some of the cool things may become a nuisance. If your website plays a song or music on the home page, you may want to consider placing a stop or silence button in an easy-to-find place on the page.
4. All pages on your site should load quickly
If your home page does not load within 20 seconds, there is a very good chance that your potential visitors will abandon the visit and go to another site.
5. Keep ads low-key
If you advertise products or services on your site, try to keep them low-key. Pop-up banners or "in your face" advertising has the potential to turn away visitors.
6. Listen to your visitors
Somewhere on your website you should provide contact information for feedback about the site. This can be a simple e-mail or, to protect you from spam, an e-mail form on your website. Read all feedback and respond to it. Consider the feedback and make changes to your site if repeated feedback points to specific problems or suggestions.

Feedback about this article and my other sites is always welcome. I also appreciated being e-mailed about new, good, Jewish resources that you find on the Internet. Though I have thousands of e-mails in my inbox, I try to respond to each within a few days. That's another good practice to follow. 