

RESEARCHING ORTHODOX JUDAISM ONLINE

Heidi Lerner

For people interested in researching the many strains of Orthodox Judaism in all their diversity, there is a variety of primary and secondary sources to consult online. Books and journals are available digitally. Websites emanating from institutions, organizations, and individuals document highly distinctive ideological and political perspectives. There is increasing use of the Internet by Orthodox and Haredi Jews for multiple religious, communal, personal, and educational purposes, despite some well-publicized opposition among the Haredim. Religious Jewish residents of the West Bank maintain websites that provide historical, theological, and institutional information. The following and by no means exhaustive list includes some of the Web-based resources and tools that reflect the wide range of Orthodox thought, activity, and practices.

Orthodox Judaism and the Media

For approximately two hundred years a wide range of journals devoted to Talmudic commentary, Jewish law, homiletics, and biblical exegesis have been published in Europe, the Americas, and Israel. By the middle of the nineteenth century, an Orthodox press emerged in Germany and continued up until the 1930s. It included such titles as *Der treue Zionswächter*, *Jeschurun*, *Jüdische Korrespondenz*, *Jüdische Presse*, *Der Morgen*, *Nachalath Zwei* and *Der Israelit*. The Compact Memory project, based at universities in Aachen, Frankfurt, and Cologne, Germany,

provides free, full-text access to these and other German Jewish periodicals (www.compactmemory.de).

HebrewBooks.org, a nonprofit organization founded “to preserve old American Hebrew books that are out of print and/or circulation,” has mounted on the Web approximately one hundred American Orthodox Jewish periodicals online that are out of print or circulation (www.hebrewbooks.org). Reflecting

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a recent trend in modern American Orthodox thought, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah issues *Meorot: A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discourse* online (www.yctorah.org/content/view/331/78).

Among the electronically available newspapers and journals that serve the Orthodox and Haredi communities in Israel, the daily *ha-Tsofeh* (www.hazofe.co.il) is affiliated with the National Religious Party. The weeklies *Mispacha* (www.mishpacha.com) and *Ba-Kehilah* (www.bakehila.com) pride themselves on being unaffiliated with any of the authorities within the Haredi establishment. Scholars interested in the changing demographics of Orthodox and Haredi society and its increasing involvement with the outside world will find a good deal

of raw material in these journals.

Also within Israel, the organization Ne’emanei Torah vaAvodah aims to preserve “the original values of traditional Zionism” and offers current and back issues of its influential journal *Deot* online (www.toravoda.org.il/deot.html). The *Arutz Sheva Israel National News* site (www.israelnationalnews.com) emanates from the religious Zionist community and offers news and analysis in several formats (text, visual, and audio) and also *shiurim* from leading rabbis in English and Hebrew.

There are a number of radio stations broadcasting on the

Internet that are directed to Orthodox audiences. *Kol Hai* is a licensed Haredi radio station in Israel (www.93fm.co.il). Other programs on the Internet aimed at the Orthodox communities are *Kol ha-Neshama*, *Kol ha-Emet*, and *Radio Breslev*.

Organizational Websites

The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (www.ou.org), often known as the OU, is one of the largest Jewish organizations in the United States. Its website provides links on community services, events, family life, holidays, a job board, and much more. The Rabbinical Council of America is closely aligned with many mainstream Orthodox institutions. Its website (www.rabbis.org) includes a link to the online version of *Tradition: A*

Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought, and a host of other resources. Daat (www.daat.ac.il) is a site devoted to medical ethics and halakah. Its site contains a number of position papers and also articles from the journal *Assia*. Yeshiva University has created YU Torah Online (www.yutorah.org), which provides online access to a wide range of internal textual, video, and audio publications.

Several organizations founded by and directed toward Orthodox Jewish women have websites, including Kolech—Religious Women’s Forum (www.kolech.org) and the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) (www.jofa.org).

A number of organizations reach out to affiliated and unaffiliated Jews in the hopes that they will become more observant. Tzohar is an organization of Religious Zionist Israeli rabbis who aim to connect with secular Israelis and strengthen their religious life. Its website (www.tzohar.org.il) provides information on the organization’s activities and includes articles from *Tsohar*, a journal that provides a forum for discussion for the religious Zionist community in Israel. One of the site’s innovations is a system which allows people to ask Tsohar’s rabbis questions on any halakic subject, and to receive a thorough and clear reply by email. The website of Aish ha-Torah (www.aish.com), affiliated with the Lithuanian Haredi tradition, includes texts and audio files on a wide range of relevant topics, and an “Ask the Rabbi” function. Chabad.org, the main website (www.chabad.org) for Chabad-Lubavitch, contains more than 100,000 articles, ranging from history to science to basic Judaism to Hasidut. It also allows users to “Ask the Rabbi.” Also directed toward secular Jewish audiences is the Shofar website (www.shofar.net) under the leadership of Rabbi

Amnon Yitzchak. At the Keren Yishai website, Rav Mordechai Elon delivers a weekly *shiur* on *parashat hashavua* that is broadcast on the radio (<http://elon.org>).

The Machon Meir Institute of Jewish Studies, affiliated with the teachings of Rav Kook, maintains a website

(www.machonmeir.net) that offers a digital version of the weekly Torah commentary presented in its synagogue along *Beit Houston* with a trove of audio and digital files. Yeshivat Har Etzion, a *hesder* yeshiva, offers the Virtual Beit Midrash, which presents Web-based, yeshiva-style teaching on Torah and Judaism (www.vbm-torah.org).

Communication within Orthodox and Haredi Communities

The internal official and unofficial communications of different groups present a vivid picture of the inner dynamics of the various segments and streams within Orthodox Judaism. Issues of *Shabat be-shabato* from 1999 to present are available online at the Moreshet website (<http://moreshet.co.il>). From Chabad, a weekly publication entitled *Sikhat ha-shavu’a* can be found at the Tseire Chabad website (www.chabad.org.il/Magazines/Articles.asp?CategoryID=30). Also from Chabad and available online is *Sikhat ha-ge’ulah* (www.hageula.com/?CTopic=1). Machon Meir issues *Be-ahavah u’be-emunah* at its website (www.machonmeir.org.il/hebrew/main.asp?cat_id=11). The nationalist religious Sephardi

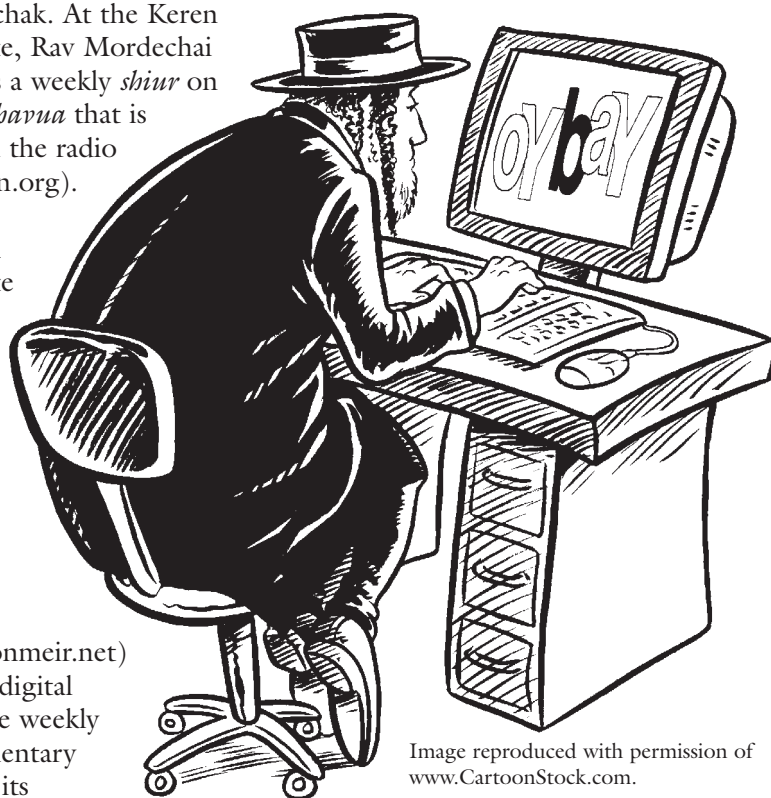


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community produces *Kol tsofayikh*, which contains the teachings of Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu (www.harav.org). The Kollel Iyun Hadaf offers online free resources for *daf yomi* learners around the world (www.dafyomi.co.il).

As Dr. Kimmy Caplan of Bar-Ilan University has observed, an explosion of circulating audio-based and video-based sermons has taken place in Haredi society during the past twenty years. These are mostly issued on cassettes and CDs. Inevitably, despite rabbinic injunctions against the use of the Internet, the mode of dissemination of these materials has been almost entirely Web-based. Even now there are websites that have downloadable sermons. The words of Rabbi Shalom Arush, spiritual leader of the Sephardic followers of Bratslav Hasidism can be found on the Web (<http://behappy.web-site.co.il>). Another site that offers audio and downloadable sermons belongs to R. Daniel Zer (<http://rabenu.co.il>). The Maran website (<http://maran1.com>) includes video and audio sermons from Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

If critically used, the Internet can serve as a kind of barometer of popular sentiment. Tamar Rotem described in *Haaretz* (December 25, 2002) how Haredi users communicate with each other on B'Hadrei Haredim, a popular forum on the Hyde Park website. The Modiya website includes links to several directories of Haredi forums (<http://modiya.nyu.edu/handle/1964/1003>). The JOFA site has a list of blogs that are relevant to Orthodox Jewish feminists (www.jofa.org/about.php/resources/blogs).

Much research has been done on the Gush Emunim movement, but as Avishai Margalit has pointed out in the *New York Review of Books*, "Most of what is written on the ideologically motivated settlers deals with the founding generation." Hagit Ofra of Peace Now says that a look at the use of the Internet by the second generation of West Bank settlers could be the "basis for a whole research [project] . . . since there is a lot of use of the Internet by those groups." Sites such as the ones from Beit El Yeshiva (www.yeshiva.org.il), the Birkat Yosef Hesder Yeshiva at Elon Moreh (www.yeshivat-elon-moreh.com), and the Hebron Jewish community (www.hebron.co.il) contain a range of *shiurim* and articles, and community information. Sharei Schechem (<http://shechem.org/neindex.html>) functions as an introduction to the settlements that are being erected in the Shomron. The Yesha Rabbinical Council (Va'ad Rabane Yesha, www.rabbaneiyesha.com), headed by Rabbis Dov Lior and Elyakim Levanon, maintain a small website as well.

Conclusion

The transient nature of these online sources and the difficulties in finding them are ongoing areas of concern that researchers and scholars need to address. There

have been many third-party attempts to organize them on portals, individuals' collections of links, scholars' Web pages, etc. However, these do not provide systematic indexing or archiving, or any guarantee of longevity.

The research value of these materials to the study of Orthodox Judaism is quite considerable. Scholars have acknowledged the importance of institutional collections of physical ephemera, notably the National Library of Israel (the new official name of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem); the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary's broadside, poster, and "pashkevlim" (public wall posters used for communication in Haredi society) collections; and Harvard College Library Judaica Division's collection of audio and videotaped sermons. The increasing concentration of such materials on the Web will necessitate new efforts at preservation.

Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, up until now no institution has taken up the task of systematically collecting these "born digital" materials. The National Library of Israel has the mandate to preserve Israeli websites. Services such as the Internet Archive's Archive-It (www.archive-it.org) exist to help organizations find a way to archive valuable Web content. The importance of curatorial and scholarly

intervention in determining their sustainability and their research value is obvious. A coordinated effort to preserve, catalogue, and index these materials is urgently needed.

Heidi Lerner is the Hebraica/Judaica cataloguer at Stanford University Libraries.

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