



The view could outshine the golf at the Barclays. S-1

The Record

THE TRUSTED LOCAL SOURCE

set to go off to college, but are you ready? F-3



both France and Germany, as well as in Ireland, which has been among the hardest-hit by the global economic crisis. The figure was almost twice as strong as the 1.6 percent monthly increase that analysts were expecting.

Any recovery will begin from a far lower base, however, as activity was still much weaker than last year with new orders down 25.1 percent over 12 months. Experts had been braced for an even bigger fall of 28.6 percent.

■ **Variable annuity sales** in the U.S. fell for a fifth straight quarter as insurers, weakened by the stock market slump last year, scaled back offerings of the equity-linked retirement products.

Sales slipped 24 percent to \$31.9 billion in the three months ended June 30 from \$42.2 billion in the year-earlier period, trade group LIMRA International said in a statement. Bailed-out companies ING Groep NV, American International Group Inc. and Hartford Financial Services Group Inc. posted declines of more than 50 percent. MetLife Inc. sales rose 27 percent to \$4.5 billion, and the firm earned the top spot in the rankings.

U.S. life insurers suffered from rising costs tied to variable annuities as the stock market plunged last year, hurting results at MetLife, Prudential Financial Inc. and Hartford. Carriers are raising prices and cutting benefits to guard against losses in the event of another slowdown.

■ **The economy's rebound** will be stronger than most forecasters expect, Laszlo Birinyi said, citing the rally that pushed the Standard & Poor's 500 Index to the highest level since October.

"The markets are suggesting that the economy has turned the corner and is going to do a lot better than most people anticipate," said Birinyi, the founder of Westport, Conn.-based research and money-management firm Birinyi Associates Inc. "I'm still very optimistic."

Birinyi said on May 20 that the S&P 500 would climb to a record 1,700 in the next two or three years, a 65 percent gain from its current level. The index has rallied 14 percent since his forecast. The benchmark for U.S. stocks may rise 5.5 percent to 1,087 within the next three months "if it continues to progress at the rate it's been progressing."

Gefilte fish right to your doorstep



Bringing Kosher.com to the next level is the challenge for recently hired CEO Aaron Dobrinsky. Expanding the local, next-day network and increasing national sales for the Long Island-based firm are two of his primary goals.

By **RICHARD NEWMAN**
STAFF WRITER

A Bergen County entrepreneur who was the brains behind GoAmerica, a Hackensack-based wireless Internet service provider — which recently moved to California — has a new gig: selling kosher food online, and delivering it right to people's doorsteps.

Kosher.com in Cedarhurst, N.Y., an online supermarket of

Teaneck Internet exec looks to boost sales and service for online kosher food business

fering 15,000 items, has been around for years, running a few trucks from a Long Island warehouse to New York City residences and businesses, while also operating a modest national mail-order business, and relying mainly on word-of-mouth referrals. The company was sold

two years ago to private investors and earlier this year they hired GoAmerica founder Aaron Dobrinsky of Teaneck as chief executive officer to bring the enterprise to a higher level.

Dobrinsky says he was brought in to expand the local next-day delivery network, jazz

up the Web site, and develop insulating and ice-packing techniques to spur national sales of frozen and refrigerated kosher food — which is delivered via FedEx and other third-party carriers.

The company's new Web site launched on Monday, and deliv-



Aaron Dobrinsky

Age: 45
Residence: Teaneck

Title: Chief executive officer, Kosher.com

Past positions: president of DMI, a management and consulting firm; chief executive officer of RoomLink, a provider of wireless Internet services to hotels; founder and former chairman and chief executive officer of GoAmerica, a wireless Internet services provider that specialized in services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing; executive vice president of Mineral Trading Corp.

Education: degree in economics from Yeshiva University; attended New York University's business school

eries to northern New Jersey homes and businesses begin this month, starting in Fort Lee, Englewood, Teaneck, Bergenfield and New Milford, Dobrinsky said in a recent interview.

"They were doing an OK business, but they want to make it a great business," said Dobrinsky, who headed GoAmerica until 2003 and was working as a management consultant when he was tapped to run the enter-

See **KOSHER** Page B-3

NUMBERS CRUNCHER

1,266,810

Number of mortgage loans serviced in New Jersey in the second quarter of 2009

8.09

Percent of loans past due

8.25



Alpha Therapy Services P.A.

Owner: Angelo Stefanides

Idea: After 20 years in sports medicine at Chilton Memorial Hospital in Pompton Plains, during which he earned master's degrees in exercise physiology and physical therapy, Stefanides decided to open his own practice. He brought with him Edwin Wills, a colleague and mentor for 20 years at the hospital. Both had patients who followed them. Stefanides says his practice specializes in orthopedic conditions from injuries or post-surgery recovery that affect all the musculoskeletal systems except hands. There is plenty of competition, but Stefanides says his practice stands out because he

them through the emotional distress as well as the physical demands of getting better."

Launch: part time in March; full time in April

Employees: Stefanides, Wills and two part-time staff

Address: 465 Route 23 south, Pompton Plains

Funding: Stefanides said it took about \$150,000, which he financed half through personal savings and half from loans. Costs included about \$60,000 to \$65,000 in clinical equipment, \$12,000 in billing software, \$7,000 in computers and the rest went to initial payroll and to do

So far: Stefanides said he and Wills have exceeded their target of 100 patients a week by 20 percent to 30 percent on average. The pair visit local doctors' offices and hand out brochures. Challenges include assessing whether patients have conditions appropriate for them to treat and if not, finding specialists who can. Another is health care billing procedures and dealing with insurance companies. "You need to have a pretty broad knowledge base of what [carriers] need to know," says Stefanides, such as requirements for claims submissions, which services they will pay for, timing for filing claims and which services need pre-au-

ADMITTED KILLER OF BRICK TEEN WANTS NEW TRIAL

SEE PAGE 13



THE THIRD WHEEL IN QB BATTLE

Sanchez, left, gets headlines but Erik Ainge fights for spot

The Star-Ledger

TODAY: Sunny with a high near 87°. Forecast, Page 2

7 a.m. 2 p.m. 7 p.m.
66° 85° 83°

STATE EDITION
Tuesday, August 25, 2009

THE NEWSPAPER FOR NEW JERSEY

Last year: unav.

Online Kosher food store gets new chief

BY RICHARD NEWMAN FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Refrigerated kosher food — which is delivered via FedEx and other third-party carriers. The company's new website launched on yesterday, and deliveries to northern New Jersey homes and businesses begin this month, starting in Fort Lee, Englewood, Teaneck, Bergenfield and New Milford, Dobrinsky said in a recent interview.

"They were doing an OK business, but they want to make it a great business," said Dobrinsky, who headed GoAmerica until 2003 and was working as a management consultant when he was tapped to run the enterprise. "It was blown away by the opportunities going entirely unrealized in the kosher food market," he said.

Nearly 11 million Americans eat kosher food, either exclusively or on occasion, according to Menachem Lubinsky, president of Lubicon Marketing Consultant in Brooklyn. Ellie Rosenfeld, chief executive of Joseph Jacobs Advertising in Manhattan, a specialist in marketing to the Jewish consumer, says kosher food is a growing market and that Kosher.

Dobrinsky says he was brought in to expand the local next-day delivery network, jazz up the website, and develop insulating and ice-packing techniques to spur national sales of frozen and



KEVIN R. WEXLER/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Aaron Dobrinsky of Teaneck will be the man responsible for revamping Kosher.com.

To products, especially around the holidays, he said. Kosher.com's principal competition in the New York City area is the supermarket chains which have been expanding their offerings, he said. Costco in Hackensack, for example, has a kosher bakery, and Shop Rite in Paramus — a client of Rosenfeld's — has a kosher delicatessen.

Richard Neuman is a reporter for the Record.

GARDEN STATE BRIEFS

Consumers taking Glaxo's over-the-counter drug Alli or Roche's prescription Xenical

Pfizer sued to block \$68 billion buyout

"The hostile takeover statement might be a smart remark to make with an attorney

BASF CEO says takeover

... ..

WWW.NJCOM

61	56.07	9/2	22.62	3/9	0.21M	27.69	-0.29
62	52.71	9/2	10.50	9/19	0.40M	74.34	-0.74
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99	52.71	9/2	10.50	9/19	0.40M	74.34	-0.74
100	52.71	9/2	10.50	9/19	0.40M	74.34	-0.74

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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TUESDAY, AUGUST 29, 2006 - VOL. CCXLVIII NO. 50 - ***** \$1.00

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

TECHNOLOGY

INSIDE

Talking Tech

Is Online OK On the Sabbath?

The Web is overflowing with religious sites. An online rabbi in



Israel answers questions on Internet issues for Orthodox Jews. Page B3

Talking Tech / By Lee Gomes

Rabbinical Advice: How to Keep The Sabbath in a 24/7 Online World



For all its putative godlessness, the Internet abounds with religion; most major faiths have thousands of sites devoted to them. One run by the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Israel, www.erezhemdah.org, features an "Ask the Rabbi" service. We asked some questions about the Internet of Rabbi Yosef Carmel, dean of the institute and a rabbinic judge, educator and author.

* * *

What are some issues involving the Internet that an Orthodox Jew might be concerned with?

An Orthodox Jew who runs a business is supposed to close it on Saturday, the Sabbath. But what about a business on the Internet—a Web-site business? The answer is he doesn't need to close his Web business on Saturday, and for two reasons. First, he isn't doing anything, and thus he isn't violating the Sabbath according to Jewish law. And second, on the Internet, it is not Sabbath for everyone in every place.

Why can you keep your Web-site busi-

ness running, as long as you don't work at the computer, but still have to close a physical business?

One of the most important things in Jewish law regarding Saturday is the atmosphere of Sabbath. If you are opening on the street your market or your store, that disturbs the spiritual atmosphere. If your Web site is working, it doesn't disturb anything.

If you are an Orthodox Jew, you aren't supposed to open your computer on the Sabbath. But you can leave it running because you are not doing anything on it and thus not violating the atmosphere of the special day.

What if you know there is a big game on Saturday, and you leave the monitor on to check the scores as you pass by?

You have no permission to look at it. Because it's not the atmosphere you want for a Sabbath. You can ask the same question with a VCR, since you can set it to show a movie anytime you want.

Are there other special concerns with the Internet on the Sabbath?

Can a Jew in New York look at an Israeli Web site which was updated on Saturday, even if he is in New York and it is still Friday? No, because Jews must also not enjoy the work of another Jew on the Sabbath. So it is not permissible according to Jewish law to use an Israeli Web site that was updated on Saturday. If the Web site were somewhere else, and you knew for sure the workers were Jews, you would also have no permission to use it if it was updated on Saturday.

Do these answers represent the consensus of many rabbis?

Not many rabbis have dealt with these questions.

Are there things about their own holy days that other religions can learn from Judaism?

I don't think Judaism wants others in the world to observe their own holy days according to Jewish law. But Jews would like non-Jews to take the values of the Sabbath and adapt them. To try to be more spiritual. To try to make a break in your everyday running of things. To try to think how you can be a good person, and do good things for others.

Friday, December 1, 2006

When is it Shabbat in cyberspace? Just Ask the Rabbi

Thousands of people have turned to Eretz Hemdah's free online service for answers to religious questions, large and small

By Daphna Berman

If you were ever curious about when Shabbat takes place on the Internet, whether it is permissible to go to morning prayers only after you finish your daily jog, or why Jews place pebbles on tombstones, you might consider visiting a Web site that answers these and a raft of other Jewish-related questions.

"Ask the Rabbi" - an Internet service that promises detailed replies to all types of religious inquiries - has fielded over 11,000 questions since the project was launched five years ago.

Questions range from the bizarre ("Is it possible that there are Jews on other planets?") to the practical ("Is it permissible for a religious woman to be treated by a male gynecologist?") - but all, including the most mundane, get personalized responses.

"We give these questions serious attention," says Rabbi Yosef Carmel, dean of Eretz Hemdah, the learning institution that administers the site, www.erezhemdah.org.

"We don't just say yes or no. We provide detailed answers that always include the sources."

In the years since Ask the Rabbi first made its way to the Internet, the institute's staff has fielded thousands of questions, all in English. Through corners of the globe, through

Covering all the bases

By Daphna Berman

Here's a sample question and answer taken from Ask the Rabbi.

Question: As a sports fan, I was wondering whether Shimon Green, or any other Jewish baseball player, can play a game without violating Shabbat?

Answer: Mr. Green did not send this question, and we are not answering it as a practical question, which would touch, among other things, on the general question of going to work on Shabbat without direct violations of Shabbat. Rather, your question affords the sports fan the opportunity to apply some of the intricacies of the laws of Shabbat to an area of interest.

All professional stadiums are fully enclosed. Thus, carrying, hitting and throwing are permitted. In general, there may be restrictions on carrying even in enclosed areas without an error. However, that is only when carrying between areas owned by different people or groups. An entire stadium is owned by one person or group, so this is not a problem.

Often, hitters "dig in" with their cleats at the batter's box, making a small ditch to help them push off when swinging. This is a Torah-level violation of *choresh* (plowing), done directly and purposely to improve the ground for one's purpose (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 37:1).

Sliding on the base paths dirties a player's uniform. The gemara (Shabbat 157a) says that one who shakes out his clothes to remove dew (according to Tosafot) or dirt (according to Rashi)

violates a Torah prohibition. The gemara continues that this is only regarding new black clothes, which he is careful to keep clean. Therefore, it is at least preferable to do no more than lightly shaking off the top layer of dirt, leaving that which is partially imbedded in the fabric.

When playing the outfield, is there a problem of cutting or uprooting the grass? In general, one is allowed to walk on grass because even if he were to cut some blades, it is a *davar sh'eino mitkaven* (something that is not intended) (Shulchan Aruch, ibid. 336:3). However, the Mishna Berura (ad loc. 25) points out that if one runs on tall grass, it is a *p'sik reishia* (a certainty that one will inadvertently perform the prohibition), which is forbidden. Although stadiums have short grass, it is possible that with cleats, the matter is a *p'sik reishia*, and this respondent lacks the technical expertise to rule on the matter.

The Shulchan Aruch (ibid. 308:45) rules that balls are *mitkzev* (something that must not be moved on Shabbat) because they lack a serious use that would make them utensils. The Rama argues that balls are set aside for the purpose of playing, which he considers sufficient to make them not *mitkzev*. Therefore, balls are not *mitkzev* for Ashkenazim. Sephardim are divided on the matter.

In summary, by taking proper precautions one can solve most if not all of the technical halachic issues of playing baseball on Shabbat, while certain halachic and fundamental issues would remain (including some we have not mentioned). So, "play ball" - preferably, on another day.

the Internet, they teach Eretz Hemdah the Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies, which is located near the entrance to Jerusalem, in a narrow, somewhat dilapidated building that will soon be razed to make way for ultra-Orthodox apartment units.

The 35 rabbis enrolled in Eretz Hemdah's seven-year program are preparing for *yeshiva yeshiva*, an advanced form of rabbinic ordination recognized as being equivalent to an academic doctorate. Answering queries from abroad is not their main job, but every week the rabbis take time to answer the wide-ranging questions retrieved from the Ask the Rabbi inbox.

Each rabbi is personally responsible for researching the individual queries he is given and for providing well-grounded answers, complete with sources, if possible. Before they are sent back, the answers are approved by at least two other rabbis and translated into English.

Queries can take anywhere from 30 minutes to 50 hours to research and answer, but the service is free and answers are usually e-mailed within two weeks. Users don't have to identify themselves, which allows even the most personal questions to remain anonymous.

Eretz Hemdah is not the only Internet service of its type, but some of the others are more ultra-Orthodox in nature, including a popular Chabad site that allows users to chat online with a rabbi and get answers in real time. Eretz Hemdah, however, is more modern in its approach to religious law and those interested in the rabbinic sources will be pleased with the very detailed answers.

For the Ask the Rabbi staff, some of the queries are quite standard and involve straight-



Rabbi Moshe Ehrenreich, left, and Rabbi Yosef Carmel, the co-deans of Eretz Hemdah. "In just two clicks, you can get to wonderful places."

forward issues dealing with the laws of Kashrut, for example. But sometimes, the questions are more complicated.

Take, for example, the issue of Shabbat on the Internet. Though seemingly theoretical, for observant people who run a Web site or an online store, the issue could be potentially problematic since other Jewish people would be using and benefiting from the site during Shabbat.

After considerable research, the rabbis determined that Shabbat exists on the Internet for a particular user only in the place that he or she uses the Internet. Their ruling - which Rabbi Carmel said was like "having to invent the wheel" because there were no available sources on the subject - meant that a person is allowed to operate an online store on Shabbat if he or she isn't actively doing something on the site.

The rabbis also recommended that someone in New York, for example, not check an Israeli Web site on Friday afternoon, since it would be Shabbat in the place where the site operates, even if it wasn't yet Shabbat in New York.

"Almost everything we have an answer for, except spiritual or kabbalistic questions, which we tell people aren't our specialty," says Carmel. When someone asked if it was true that there will be fire in hell that will consume sinners, the team of rabbis replied, they didn't know, since no one has reported back to them.

Carmel feels that people in the ultra-Orthodox camp who have shunned the Internet are missing out on a host of religious opportunities.

"There's lots of garbage out there, but there is also a lot of important information, which people could really use for their benefit," Carmel says.

"In just two clicks, you can get to sites that we don't want people to go to, but in just two clicks, you can also get to wonderful places, where you can learn Torah."

Q&A brings tradition online

By ABIGAIL LEICHMAN
STAFF WRITER

At the end of "Schindler's List," there's a scene where Holocaust survivors line up to place pebbles on the gravestone of Oskar Schindler, the man who'd saved their lives.

Many viewers wondered what that gesture meant, and their curiosity led them to Ask the Rabbi, an on-line service offered by Israel's Eretz Hemdah Institute.

Over the past six years, Ask the Rabbi has fielded some 11,000 e-mailed inquiries from across the world about every imaginable aspect of Jewish law and custom.

It should more accurately be called Ask the Rabbis, because up to 50 individual experts give their time to researching and providing answers to questions from Jews, non-Jews and even other rabbis.

"We have a wide spectrum of people asking," said Rabbi Yosef Carmel, 53, director of the institute. "Some don't have a [synagogue] closer than 150 miles from where they live. Others are learning in a yeshiva and have a specific issue to ask about. It's our pleasure to answer all questioners."

Carmel recently spoke at Teaneck's Congregation B'nai Yeshurun about one of many business-related issues the service has dealt with.

"Somebody got an offer to sell jewelry on a cruise. He's Jewish; the owner of the cruise [ship] is not Jewish and the shop worker is not Jewish. [Because Jews are not permitted to engage in commerce on their Sabbath], is it permissible for the shop to sell jewelry on Saturday? We gave him the formula to do it according to Halakha, Jewish law," said Carmel.

Several people who heard his presentation later sent their own business-related questions, Carmel said. Some were advised to ask their own rabbi.

"We are very careful not to give somebody the opportunity to take our answer to argue with their local rabbi," Carmel said. "If you belong to a synagogue, the rabbi is in charge. But many people don't have a rabbi. Others who do are asking us things they're embarrassed to ask their own rabbis."

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Englewood's Congregation Ahavath Torah has spent the past year on sabbatical studying in Israel at Eretz Hemdah, a 17-year-old

post-ordination program that trains rabbinic judges, educators and communal leaders.

"If my congregants have a question, obviously I prefer if they come to me," Goldin said. "How-

servant Jew living in Istanbul, where there are few Jews, Carmel related. "He asked us some questions and then his fiancée started to send questions, too."

Within two years, the couple married, moved to Israel for graduate school and committed to an observant Jewish life. "This is the power of the Internet if we use it for such things," said Carmel.

Is there such a thing as a question with no answer?

"The Torah is so wide and deep, you can find - if you try hard - an answer for almost every question," he said. "Most questions regard daily life: the Sabbath and festivals, customs surrounding death and mourning, how to keep kosher."

One person did ask whether Jews believe there is life on other planets. Research turned up a response to the same question from a medieval sage.

"He answered that there's no source for such a question. So that was our answer as well," Carmel said with a laugh.

For almost everything else, a detailed answer is on its way within 24 hours.

And why do Jews place pebbles on tombstones?

It's simply an ancient tradition that let others know someone has been there to visit the grave.

E-mail: leichman@northjersey.com



Rabbi Yosef Carmel researching answers to Ask the Rabbi e-mails at the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Israel.

ever, if they are going to go on the Internet, this is where I'd like them to ask their questions."

Ask the Rabbi began as a project of the Orthodox Union, a Manhattan-based organization that services member congregations and oversees the world's largest kosher supervision service.

"They thought people would ask them about food products," said Carmel. But the questions were actually wide-ranging and the OU rabbis didn't have the staff to research and answer them.

"So they called us and asked us to be partners with them," said Carmel.

Questions may be submitted via links at both ou.org and eretz-hemdah.org.

"All our rabbis served in the Israel Defense Forces, so they know the world," said Carmel, himself a rabbinic judge, educator and author.

"Many have university degrees and are pursuing Ph.D.s. Each gives at least half a day every week to ... this project. Rabbis should not be above the people. They are servants of the people and we try to give good service."

While at Eretz Hemdah, Goldin was also involved in researching several questions received on Ask the Rabbi.

"I had a taste of what they do and it's just marvelous," he said.

In addition to Jews looking for practical guidance, Ask the Rabbi gets inquiries from university professors and from non-Jews "all over the world who want to understand Jewish life," said Carmel. "We like to help them appreciate Torah as well."

One questioner was a non-ob-

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THURSDAY

July 6, 2006

Bergen County Edition

THE JERUSALEM POST

Volume LXXIII, Number 22281

FOUNDED IN 1932

NIS 8.00 (EILAT NIS 6.90)

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COMMENT & FEATURES

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2006 THE JERUSALEM POST

'Webbe rebbes' address their flocks in cyberspace

Burgeoning Internet sites are helping to capture unaffiliated Jews and strengthen marginal ones

• By TALIA S. COUTIN

NEW YORK – 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 Olir 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.

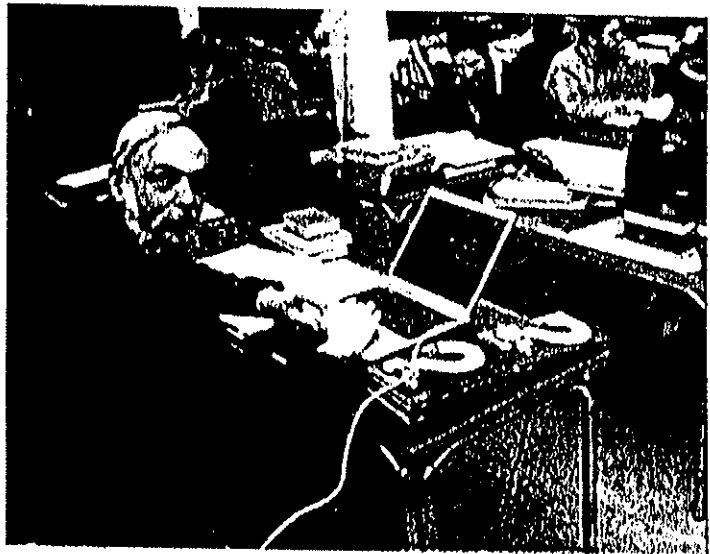
Rabbi Yosef Carmel, dean of the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Israel, described how a young man from Istanbul who knew nothing about Judaism used the Institute's "Ask the Rabbi" site to learn about his heritage.

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

Rabbis and educators answer hundreds of usually anonymous e-mailed questions daily



RABBI YOSEF Carmel, left, dean of the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Jerusalem, researches responses to questions fielded through the institute's 'Ask the Rabbi' site. (JIA)

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 Hellman, 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, Hellman said.

THE UNION FOR Reform Judaism offers one of the few non-Orthodox "Ask the Rabbi" sites. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism does not have such a site.

Hellman 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," Hellman said.

Among Jews who eschew affiliation but aren't necessarily disinterested in religion — the fastest-growing sector of American Jewry, according to Hellman — 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 answers, 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 *pikuah 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 Lalo, 23, said he appreciated Askmoses.com for furthering his knowledge of Halacha, 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 Lalo, a student at the University of California, Santa Cruz who created the Jewnikatlon blog.

Without longitudinal studies, however, scholars like Hellman 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."

