

Friday 14 October 2005, 11 Tishrei 5766

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Main Feature

Previous Articles

- JC Interview
 - Leader
 - Letters
 - Columnists
 - Alex Brummer
 - Geoffrey Alderman
 - Other Columnists
 - Diary
 - Obituaries
 - Books
- [Subscribe](#)
[Log Out](#)
[Your Details](#)

Search

Keyword to search

Headline
 Author
 Content
 Classified, S & P

Current Issue
 Back Issues

[Search](#)

How to search?

- Headlines**
- [Price of lulavim trebles in Israel](#)
 - [‘Games’ win Nobel for Israeli](#)
 - [Shuls report a huge turnout at Rosh Hashanah](#)
 - [President launches HET in Ireland](#)
 - [Hillel-ujah](#)
 - [Sacks opposes assisted death](#)
 - [Israeli company plays its cards right](#)
 - [‘New Iraq has no relations with Israel’](#)
 - [No rise in UK lulav prices](#)
 - [Get your wellies ready for a wet Succot](#)
 - [Israel in £1.5m travel campaign](#)
 - [Alyth gets a new rabbi](#)
 - [School blow](#)
 - [Electronic pledge cards raise £3.1m UJIA record](#)
 - [Blunkett boy at Jewish nursery](#)
 - [Lincoln reconciliation](#)
 - [Shockelling the boat](#)
 - [People of the stage](#)

Shockelling the boat

14/10/2005
By Miriam Shaviv
The internet offers a



new window into hitherto closed worlds, such as that of the Chasidim. Miriam Shaviv reports on an unlikely blog-buster from Stamford Hill

Although Chasidic teenagers today are better informed about sex than their parents were at the same age, they can hardly be said to be receiving sex education. Lessons learned on the playground and “furtive sessions on the internet are no substitute for training in how to reject and resist unwelcome advances... Young people [are] becoming confused as to their own sexuality because they might have had same-sex experiences in yeshivah or school.

“There is need for a comprehensive overhaul of what information reaches our youngsters and how. If the rabbis are not interested in doing this, maybe there is no option but to set up some websites that will give the information out to those that seek it. In any event, something has to be done and the sooner the better.” So writes a thirtysomething Chasidic resident of Stamford Hill — known only as “The ShaigetZ” — on his wildly influential online soapbox, [www.theshaigetZ.blogspot.com](#)

Resolutely anonymous — he doesn’t even reveal his sex, although he writes, and wants to be written about, in the masculine — the Shai-getz is one of a growing number of strictly Orthodox people in the US, Israel and Europe expressing doubts about their lifestyle and criticising their community on such diaries, known as “web logs” or, more simply, “blogs.”

These offer unprecedented, not to say subversive, insights into a sector of the Jewish population which has traditionally been under-represented in conventional media. The ShaigetZ, who has been blogging since Dec-ember 2003, was one of the first, and leads the way in the UK.

Posts on the blog appear once every two or three weeks and hundreds of visitors return each day to search for new material and read readers’ comments. The ShaigetZ estimates that 30 per cent of them are British and claims that “what I write is erav Shabbos reading for a lot more people than you might imagine. The internet is very popular in the Chasidische world; they like news but don’t want papers in the home.”

His witty, biting material attacks anything from rabbis’ suppression of sex scandals and incidents of paedophilia in the men’s mikveh, and the banning of such varied items as cellphones and certain wigs, to the convention that women in his community do not drive; obstacles to obtaining a get; and the large number of children in Chasidic families. An astute social diarist, he also posts extended observations about Chasidic life, ranging from behaviour at shivahs or on holiday to attitudes to physical exercise, food and interaction with the non-Jewish world.

He is, he emphasises, a committed religious Jew, and his purpose is not to get his peers to abandon their way of life, but rather to promote a more open, modern Chasidic society.

“There’s no way our society as it’s built now can survive — it will implode,” he says in a phone interview. “We’re eating more than we are earning, we are bringing up a generation of kids with no life or work skills. When you get Chasidic education alongside secular education, and when you get to a stage where you can be religious and still laugh at jokes about God, then we can hope to be around for many more years.”

The internet, which allows private people to post stories the Charedi papers wouldn’t touch, is the perfect tool. Internet readership is widespread in the Charedi community, particularly among the under-30s. “If anything’s going to create change, this is it,” he says. “Leaders have to take into account that writers like me will put them on the spot.” Referring to an incident in 1992 when Stamford Hill rabbis denied they’d told a couple to complain to the police about a sexual assault, resulting in a mob descending on the family’s house, he says, “today, the whole thing would be written up by 100 guys.”

The defining criterion for a blog is that it should consist of dated entries, but a blog can be “about” anything — food, sex, sport, politics, parenting, hobbies. Many are also personal journals, and nearly all allow readers to leave comments. Today, there are millions of active blogs on the internet, some drawing a daily audience of up to half-a-million people. There are at least 750 blogs on Jewish subjects.

The ShaigetZ says he began blogging for fun: “my first entries weren’t even very good... I expected to see about 10 people had visited, and got the shock of my life when I saw how many people had been on. I just couldn’t drop it; the number of people and my ego wouldn’t allow me to.”

Anonymity is crucial in a society where discovery could severely embarrass his family and make matches for his children difficult, and he works hard to preserve it. No one, he says, has even come close to identifying him, though he often overhears speculation about the identity of the blog’s author. And when his friends discuss the notorious ShaigetZ, he says: “I join in because, otherwise, they’d suspect. The most shocking thing I’ve heard is that the guy who wrote it should be lynched.”

Nevertheless, he denies that the blog is a forum for him to air opinions he couldn’t otherwise express.

“There is a social network that chats about these things, just not as formally as on the blog.”

Some of his fan-mail comes from non-Jews, who might write to tell him they live in Stamford Hill and are surprised by how normal he sounds, or who are visiting London and want to know where to see real Chasidim “in action.”

On the other hand, he has become something of a magnet for people in his own community who are experiencing angst. “Many people — too many people — use me as an agony aunt,” he says.

The ShaigetZ gets many emails from people asking him about marital and sexual problems that they may not be comfortable discussing with their rabbi. He does give advice — with the qualification that it isn’t professional counselling — and has even, on occasion, taken questions to rabbis on behalf of readers, pretending they are his own.

“These people need help,” he says, “and otherwise wouldn’t ask for it.”

The ShaigetZ attributes the enormous effects his blog has created to mounting frustration within Stamford Hill over the spread of religious extremism in the community.

“There’s been a polarisation. Cha-sidim used to be closer to the mainstream than they are today,” he says. “Yesodey Hatorah is no longer the school of choice. Everyone is sending their kids to much more chasidische schools, and many people are looking at their kids’ education and getting disappointed. The ayatollahs from Israel are taking over, the middle ground is shifting towards fundamentalism, and lots of people feel things are spinning out of control.

“You can see groups of girls and boys who are really not keeping anything any more. For themselves, it’s a shock just adjusting to the fact they’re not keeping all they’ve been taught to keep. Some of us older people realise it’s because of what we’re doing and it’s disturbing to us.”

When he writes a post (item) critical of the system, he says, readership goes up (as it does with the key word, “sex”) — and so does comment on the street. He believes that, in addition to creating a forum for much-needed discussion, he has made a difference to people’s attitudes: “I know, for example, that women reading the blog might think twice before sending their [male] kids to the mikveh now — there’s lots of naivete in our community... Also, education standards are dropping and there’s a new generation that doesn’t care as much as they used to about the education their children get.

“Writing about this makes some mothers more aware that there are some Chasidim out there who believe their kids should have a better education, do more PE, do their GCSEs...”

Two years of blogging have affected the ShaigetZ’s own attitudes as well.

“Before the blog, these thoughts were just kicking around,” he says. “At the beginning, there was a lot more anger. Now it’s developed into more of a column because I’ve got the things that really bug me out of my system.”

So is The ShaigetZ running out of steam?

“If life should suddenly change and I didn’t have as much time to write it, I’d drop it,” he says. “In the meantime, I hope I’m making people think about how to change our society — and I’m enjoying shockelling the boat.”

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