

Jewish education that clicks

Jerusalem rabbi promotes Jewish Interactive Studies Web site

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Rabbi Moshe Zauderer is a zealous organizer. His particular passion is sifting through and distilling complex information into understandable summaries and explanations. The intricacies of Torah and Talmud fit right into his fervent interest, he says.

These are some of the reasons Zauderer of Jerusalem gives for his establishment of an adult Jewish education Web site -- Jewish Interactive Studies (www.jewishstudies.org) -- that offers easy-to-follow, online courses, free of charge.

Zauderer was in the Washington, D.C., area last week, among other major metropolitan areas on the East Coast, meeting with staffs at boards of Jewish education and federations to try to establish partnerships between his educational Web site and Jewish community institutions. "I'd provide the educational content," and they would "provide the people," he explains.

Zauderer reaches out to Jewish adults with limited or no prior Jewish education, having once taught at the Ohr Somayach College of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, an Orthodox institute devoted to outreach to young Jewish adults lacking Jewish education.

"My joy in starting [the site] is in giving people access to classical Jewish texts or sources in as direct a manner as possible," he says. While he believes an in-person classroom or study session is the ideal learning environment, he says, "by using the convenience of the Internet, JIS is able to reach people who are either too busy or live too distant to attend live Jewish education classes."

Jonathan Shaffer, a lawyer who lives in Fairfax, has been taking JIS courses for the past year. He appreciates the "convenience" of Internet delivery. Shaffer "grew up in a Reform household" and has become increasingly observant, attending Chabad-Lubavitch's Ahavas Yisrael congregation in Northern Virginia.

Zauderer's online classes "focus on the classical sources, so it's more of an intellectual approach," Shaffer says. "It's more like what you're used to in college and graduate school" as opposed to other sites' condensed, elementary summaries on the basics of Judaism.

Since JIS' launch about three years ago, JIS has enrolled more than 1,750 people in its 12 courses, four to nine weeks each, on a variety of Jewish topics, including the Patriarchs and Jewish history. Approximately 54 percent of the students re-enroll. The bulk of students range from 25 to 59 years of age and live in the United States.

Zauderer, who grew up outside of Philadelphia in Merion Station, now lives in Neve Ya'akov, north of Jerusalem, with his wife and five daughters, ages 1 1/2 through 11 1/2. A graduate of Yeshiva University High School in New York City and Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, he is 37 years old.

Jewish Interactive Studies was launched with the financial support of Zauderer's father, Dr. Bert Zauderer, a Holocaust survivor who established a nonprofit foundation, Zichron Avos, to provide Jewish education to honor the memory of Holocaust victims. JIS operates on a shoestring budget, with Zauderer being the only full-time employee. A part-time Webmaster and editor manage the site's technical side.

The JIS site is a straight-forward site, free of animation or streaming video-virtual classrooms. That's intentional, Zauderer says. The gimmicks "would sidetrack" the site, he adds. "I've avoided the glitzy dot-com craze, which is heavy on the graphics, long on the downloads. This is a serious program. I want to give people the organized content."

The course calendar is organized into quarters, with three of the classes being offered at any one period.

He is not looking for huge "numbers of hits," on his Web site, but rather a solid number of people willing to "commit" to "serious" Jewish learning, by registering for a course. Patterned like a distance-learning class through a university, his courses are methodically organized by topic, such as the Bible, and then broken down into lessons, summaries and review sections. E-mail allows for dialogue between Zauderer and his students. Since the ungraded courses do not carry "credit," the reviews and assessments are optional.

"These are not quick one-liners or 'ask-the-rabbi' sections," says Zauderer, comparing his site to his view of the majority of Jewish educational Web addresses. "What I'm seeing out there are the 'Parsha of the week' type of function, with no registration -- click-in, click-out or short news byte" sections "where you can grab a piece or a nugget."

"Nuggets are great for snacks," he continues, "but for people without a Jewish education, you need to get a full-course" meal.

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