

Bar Mitzvah Lessons

Collegian uses his knowledge of the Net to provide a meaningful gift for his brother.

Last month I received a call from a college student who had visited my web site and read every Jews in Cyberspace column published here in the last two years.

Jason Miller wasn't just a fan. The Michigan State senior was writing a paper on the Internet's impact on the Jewish community and wanted to pick my brain. Truth be told, Miller, of West Bloomfield, Mich., already knew plenty about the topic.

As we were concluding our conversation, he told me about the neat bar mitzvah gift he had given his kid brother a couple of years ago. Wanting to give Jacob something meaningful, he solicited good wishes, words of wisdom or advice by sending a message to more

than 80 Jewish listservs (e-mailed newsletters). In two months he received over 500 replies, most of which are still on his web site, www.msu.edu/user/mille228/bm-em-proj.htm.

Miller took the best of the lot and printed 200 bound books for the big day, Feb. 10, 1996. But alas, the gift was no longer such a big surprise: The Detroit Jewish News got wind of the project prior to the bar mitzvah and called for an interview.

Total strangers sent stories, poems, advice and recollections of their own bar or bat mitzvah experiences. There were e-mails from the director James Brooks, Grateful Dead producer John Perry Barlow and actor Ed Asner. A seventh-grade class at a Jewish day school in Maryland wrote in as an assignment. And, oh yes, President Clinton sent a card. "It blew his mind," the older brother recalls.

About 20 Holocaust survivors responded, including one who had spent his bar mitzvah in a concentration camp and another in Jerusalem who wrote "Make Aliyah!"

A Mazel Tov came from Darko Stancic in Sarajevo, who said: "The tragedy that happened to our grandfathers, and the tragedy that is happening to some of us today, must not make you stray from the path of love. It's the ONLY right way. I wish you to follow that way."

And there were a couple of, er, unconventional communiques. A guy named Finkelstein in Philadelphia advised against passing gas in an elevator; a gal named Jennifer in Bangkok told of a kid who got so nervous that he "barfed on the Torah."

"Somehow we've created this global, virtual Jewish community and it didn't take a rabbi," Miller says. "It just came about." Of the e-mails I read at Miller's web site,

my favorite was by Miriam Birnbaum from York University in Canada.

"Jacob, this is G-d speaking ... I just wanted to tell you that I am very proud of you," she wrote. "I hope you know that I love you as much as if you were the only thing in the universe ... I miss you and get worried if you don't give me a shout at least three times a day ... I'm always looking out for you Jacob. Look for me too."

I don't know if the kid has been giving the Almighty "a shout" on a regular basis. Chances are, though, that his older brother does. This fall Jason Miller will enroll in the rabbinical ordination program at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Hypertext: Good news for those out of listening range of Nachum Segal's radio show, "JM in the AM" (Jewish Moments in the Morning). The program, which is aired 6-9 a.m. weekdays over the iconoclastic WFMU (91.1 FM), can now be heard on the web during those same hours at www.jmintheam.org. Another good reason for Torah-observant Jews to connect to the Net, despite all the shmutz that's out there ... Stories, letters and photos of the great Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichim are at www.sholom-aleichim.org. □

JEWIS IN CYBERSPACE

Jon Kalish surfs the Net for *The Jewish Week*. Send tips, feedback, flames and anything but loshon hora to kalish@idt.net. All previous *Jews in Cyberspace* columns are at *Kalish on the Web!* (www.jcn18.com/newstand/kalish).



Mazeltov.com: The Miller family celebrated young Jacob's coming of age with 500 e-mail well-wishers.

