

Have a Tough Question? AskNCSY

By Shira Penn



One of the most popular features on the National NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) web site, www.ncsy.org, is AskNCSY. Of course, nobody knows just how popular it is because for years it operated on a strictly one-to-one basis.

AskNCSY was started by Rabbi Jack Abramowitz, director of national programs for NCSY and the author of NCSY's *Torah on One Foot* series of pamphlets, as a vehicle for teens to ask their questions.

Who's Asking?

AskNCSY's primary target audience is NCSYers, particularly public school students, though yeshivah high school students, college students, young professionals and parents also use the service, to varying degrees.

"I've asked other Jewish web sites my questions and was never satisfied with their answers," says Rachel, a public high school junior from California. "It was always something like, 'Go ask

your local rabbi.' Now if I had [a rabbi], I wouldn't need to ask someone online, would I?"

Many college students and young adults use the site because they know of NCSY as a place they can turn to for guidance about Jewish observance. "I directed my question to AskNCSY because of the personal nature of the question," says Mark, a twenty-year-old college student. "I didn't feel comfortable asking my own rabbi. Although my rabbi would have surely answered me sensitively and wisely, it would have been too awkward and embarrassing."

"Teens are all online," adds Rabbi Steven Burg, national director of NCSY. "If they have a question, the first place they're going to look is the Internet. There are a lot of 'Ask the Rabbi' sites out there, but how can a teenager—even one with a basic Jewish education—know which sites are consistent with real Torah values? They need a name they know, like NCSY, to stand behind the opinions stated."

What Are They Asking?

Women's issues, particularly *tzeni-*

ut (modesty) and *kol ishab* (the prohibition of men listening to women singing), are among the most popular topics. Some actual questions include:

Is going on an amusement park water ride considered swimming during the Nine Days?

Is it possible to do all 613 *mitzvot* in one's lifetime?

Should I stand up when my parents enter the room if they consider it odd?

How do we know that the people who spoke to God really had prophecy and weren't just schizophrenic?

Can the remains of a pet be interred in a Jewish cemetery?

Many questions, such as "Why doesn't God just get rid of the devil?" (another actual question), are based on popular culture and a faulty understanding of Judaism.

Rabbi Burg invokes a famous incident in which the Beit HaLevi was asked whether one could use milk to fulfill the mitzvah of drinking the *arba kosot* (four cups of wine at the Passover Seder). From this, the *tzaddik* inferred that the person asking the question not

Shira Penn is a writer living in New York.

only couldn't afford wine, but could not afford meat either. "One has to be able to read between the lines and see what a person is *really* asking," Rabbi Burg explains.

"The answers are meant to be tailored to the asker," says Rabbi Abramowitz. "One yeshivah girl I know asked a two-part question: 'What is the source for '*negiah*' [touching a person of the opposite sex], and what does the Torah say about it?' I'm usually pretty verbose, but in this case I replied: 'Vayikra 18:6, and not to do it.' Obviously, someone at more of a beginner's level would require more information, but here I thought that less was more."

Responses are usually received within a day, unless further rabbinic consultation is required. Some questions are totally unrelated to Judaism. "We've had questions about everything from pharmacy schools to lost library books," says Rabbi Abramowitz. "If I can help out, I try to, even if [the question is] from way out in left field."

Only one kind of question is off-limits. "We won't do your homework for you. If you ask me the 'didactic purpose' of The Book of Esther or to outline the exact dates of each event following *yetziat Mitzrayim*, you'll get a response, but it won't be the typed, double-spaced essay you were hoping to submit," says Rabbi Abramowitz.

Who's Answering?

Questions about *kashrut* may be forwarded to the Orthodox Union's Kashrut Department, and questions about specific NCSY programs may be redirected to the appropriate NCSY regional office, but almost all of the *halachah* (Jewish law) and *hashkafah* (Jewish thought) questions are researched and answered by Rabbi Abramowitz.

"I wish I could claim to know all the answers, but I certainly don't," says Rabbi Abramowitz. "Some of these teens really keep me on my toes. Thankfully, I have resources to go to. There are *sefarim*, my colleagues,

posekim.... I occasionally refer questions to mental health professionals."

Most of the questions are just that—questions—albeit they vary in complexity. More advanced questions are often shared with the OU's Webbe Rebbe (an online service that provides advice and direction in *halachah* and other matters of Jewish concern) or with Rabbi Mayer Waxman, the OU's director of synagogue services who fields similar questions. But it's a "two-way

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street," says Rabbi Waxman. "The OU web page has become a site to which people of all Jewish backgrounds—as well as many non-Jews—come to learn what Judaism says about x, y and z. Many of their questions are sent randomly 'to the OU.' The bulk of questions end up getting forwarded to AskNCSY. Its answers are resource-laden, yet concise—and often quite entertaining."

On the occasion that a real *she'eilah* (question of law) is asked, a *posek* (Jewish legal authority) is consulted. Rav Hershel Schachter, a *rosh yeshivah* at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary who serves as a *posek* for the OU, receives the majority of AskNCSY's *she'eilot*. Other questions may be directed to particular experts.

The fact that mental health professionals may be consulted in very rare instances does not mean that the teen's confidentiality is at risk. "If there's an issue, we ask a professional," emphasizes David Frankel, MSW, associate national director of NCSY. "But we respect confidentiality unless there's a risk to health

or safety, or a compelling legal reason not to. Safety is job one, but confidentiality is a very close second."

How Are They Answered?

The original idea for an e-mail service, rather than a web site, was twofold.

"Teens might be afraid that someone they know will read their question and figure out it was them," says Rabbi Abramowitz. "I didn't want anyone to not submit a question because of that. Also, not every topic is fit for public discussion.

"The unintended consequence was that some people were hesitant because they wanted to ask questions anonymously, and I knew them from their e-mail addresses, so they started writing to the NCSY message board. We recently added the option to post questions on a special AskNCSY message board. As we maintain a 'family' site, not every topic may be appropriate, but it's nice to have the choice."

"We absolutely need to expand the reach of this project," says Rabbi Burg. "Other sites are either not geared toward teens or don't have the backing of a known movement like NCSY. As helpful as it is to the kids who write, it could be so much more, but that will require some major funding. We are currently looking for partners to help fund such a venture."

Asked about his favorite AskNCSY question, Rabbi Abramowitz replies, "The one about the Jewish view of life on other planets was fun to research, but I guess my favorite would be whether a glob of dough stuck to the ceiling after a food fight would have to be removed before Pesach, since a dog couldn't reach it.

"Moderating AskNCSY is very enlightening," says Rabbi Abramowitz. "As Rabbi Chanina says [Taanit 7a], we learn the most from our students." **JA**

To support the expansion of AskNCSY or other NCSY projects, contact Rabbi David Felsenthal at rabbidave@ou.org or 212-613-8153.