

# Strong Medicine That Works



**W**hile some people were trying to make a killing in the nineties dot-com explosion, Jacob Gubits was quietly trying to kill the Internet. Not all of it, mind you. Just the parts that don't belong in observant homes. While dot-coms fizzled unceremoniously, Gubits' Koshernet operation has taken off.

No topic we've dealt with in Bytes & PCs over the years has attracted as much attention as Internet filters. By now, no reader of *Jewish Action* who does not live under an unwired rock needs to be told of the dangers of unrestricted access to the Internet, including the Web, video downloads, spam, social networking sites and instant messaging—for teens and for adults. At best, the Internet used the wrong way is a body-blow to the sense of *kedushah*, of holiness, that we try so hard to bring to our homes. At worst, it has broken up marriages, led to badly mismatched relationships, created new forms of addiction, robbed children of their innocence and contributed to the dumbing down of our children through the dilution of language skills and the disappearance of study time.

Simply put, Koshernet's **Kleenweb** is the first filter about which I am enthusiastic, and with which I now pro-

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tect my own home. My complaints about other products I've tried toggled between two concerns: They either did a very incomplete job by Torah standards or they hampered the operation of the computer, sometimes through software incompatibility, and sometimes by slowing down the system. After a few months of using Kleenweb, I have not seen a single sign of incompatibility or speed degradation. And while no protocol short of pulling the plug can do a perfect job blocking what ought to be blocked, Kleenweb comes remarkably close.

Gubits was a tinkerer, growing up in Bnei Brak. He was good enough to invent devices that could check the authenticity of dollar bills and of diamonds. He opened a small factory to manufacture them; it still provides income for his father.

Gubits spent time in various *yeshivot* and learned in the Breslov *kollel*, managing to squeeze in a few technology courses as well. A personal matter brought him to the United States some twenty-five years ago. Mostly self-taught, he got involved with computer systems from the ground up. At one point, he managed the entire computer operation of 47<sup>th</sup> Street Photo, the New York-based electronics retailer, before they called such people IT directors. He designed a successful web site for the company at a time when there were fewer than five thousand of such sites.

Gubits understood the potential of the Internet long before others, but

sensed the negative aspects that would follow as well. His spiritual training told him that he should apply the talents and knowledge Hashem had granted him to make a difference, not just to make a buck. In November 1997, Koshernet was born.

It was a primitive operation at first, servicing only dial-up connections, which most of us identify with Cro-Magnon Man. Today, his New York office employs eight full-time personnel, with fifty to sixty tech people working in Canada. Unlike most popular software packages, the locus of action is Kleenweb's equipment, not your own computer. Compatibility issues don't arise because Kleenweb stays far away from your software. It acts as a gatekeeper between the transmitting server and your computer; its equipment is good enough that you do not experience any time lag.

Kleenweb's filtering protocol differs from all the others because Orthodox Jewish standards and concerns are different from those of even conservative elements in general society. Kleenweb starts with the same lists as other filters, and builds on them with a take-no-prisoners attitude. It clamps a lid on image searches that cannot be switched off. It can and does prevent downloading of many images that advertisers embed in sites. E-mail is scanned by its own spam filter.

Kleenweb works well because it is overly zealous. The user picks from a number of different levels of severity, essentially ranging in style from a

strict schoolmarm to Atilla the Hun. Technically, this means a white list (which allows access only to sites that have been pre-selected) at the strictest end of the continuum, and a modifiable black list (which blocks the “bad” sites) at the more lenient end. Different users and computers can be set to different levels.

It is brutal to blogs. When I first signed up, I could not access my own blog, Cross-Currents.com. I am still not sure whether it was my content or literary ability that it disrespected.

Kleenweb compensates for its tough-cop policy with its support staff. When you are locked out of a site, a message will pop up, advising you of the reason. At the most liberal setting, you can allow access to a specific site manually. If the site is one that Kleenweb feels is inappropriate for everyone, the program will not allow the change. You can contest the categorizing if you still believe the site is innocuous, by simply sending a message back to the support people. In my extremely heavy use of the Internet owing to job-related research, this is a frequent occurrence. I have always received permission back in a timely manner. For special needs, you can reach live personnel who can tweak your account individually. I needed access to the visuals that accompany Wikipedia; Kleenweb comes configured to turn them off. One phone call turned them on globally for me.

Some eyebrows will have been raised by this description of draconian intervention. Without question, Kleenweb is tough medicine, meant to control a tough disease. The sheer popularity of the service (in a community of people who are known to shop for the best deal) is testimony to how many people are convinced of the seriousness of unrestrained, or inadequately restrained, Internet access. Kleenweb is a service that will appeal only to those willing to submit to some limitation of their Internet habits.

Unlike some other computer-based programs, Kleenweb bills the same way it works—at the connection level. You pay the same \$12.95 a month no matter how many computers you are using. Business travelers will appreciate the fact that they will be protected, regardless of where they are. However they connect while on the road, once Kleenweb is installed on a computer, all Internet data is routed through its server where it does its koshering behind the scenes.

Unlike other programs, there is no manual override for the chief account manager—or for his or her child who figures out the password. Nor can you easily delete the entire service. Only the central office can do that, after information is verified by phone.

Kleenweb has spilled over beyond the original East Coast communities it targeted. Subscribers dot the globe, and are found in countries including Australia, Russia and Israel, where a Hebrew interface was recently introduced. (Israeli customers are about evenly split, says Gubits, between *Chareidim* and Religious Zionists.) By the end of 2008, Gubits hopes to install smarter image recognition technology that will be able to make less sweeping, more discerning judgments about pictures.

Gubits’ two children grew up without the Internet, despite—or perhaps because of—their father’s deep involvement with it. His grandchildren, however, now growing up

in a world increasingly held together by the Internet, do have access in their Passaic, New Jersey homes. It is largely through the work of their grandfather that they can enjoy the fruits of connectivity without its downside.

### Who’s on First in the Middle East?

One set of images that Kleenweb has no trouble with form a useful tool to the historically challenged.

If you’ve ever walked through the exhibit at David’s Citadel in Jerusalem, trying desperately to remember when the Seljuks lived relative to the Mamaluks, a ninety-second dose of relief is a mouse click away at [www.mapsofwar.com/images/EMPIRE17.swf](http://www.mapsofwar.com/images/EMPIRE17.swf). In that space of time, you will see shifting maps showing who conquered the Holy Land at different times throughout five millennia, and how far their conquest took them. The site quickly does your history homework for you, and at the same time drives home the message that all that remains of a lengthy succession of world powers is a few maps on a web site—with the sole exception of Klal Yisrael.

This column marks the end of my tenure at Bytes & PCs. Some ten years ago, I agreed to write a column on an interim basis, until a more suitable columnist was found. During that time, computer use in the Torah home moved from novelty to commonplace. I am happy to have had a part in occasionally showing how computer use could play a role in our *avodat Hashem*. It is time for me to log off, and get back to other forms of writing for *Jewish Action*. My thanks to my loyal readership. ■

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