

Bytes & PCs

Something for Everyone

By Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Computers were supposed to make our work simpler, right? If you really want to put a computer through its paces, it would seem, see how well it helps you complete life's most difficult tasks.

I'm not talking about designing a neutron bomb, or doing 3D CAD. Much more difficult, according to the Gemara, is successfully making a *shidduch*. Helping people find their intended partners for life, our Sages tell us, is harder than splitting the Red Sea, and has kept *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* busy since He created the world in the first place.

It's no secret that there are too many singles. For a people virtually defined by its trait of compassion (*Yevamos* 79A), the burden of loneliness and misery of so many people becomes a crisis for all of us. The personal and religious repercussions are awesome. Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald of NJOP once estimated that 50% of *baalei teshuvah* who don't find their soul-mates quickly enough drop their observance.

Both savants and singles concur that many more people would be marching towards the *chupah* if more of us would take active roles in pairing people we know.

It's not so easy, of course. We find it difficult to juggle the names of all the singles we know. We could use an organized system of keeping track of all the prospective matches, sort of a

contact-manager for singles we care about.

The professionals have their wishes, too. They are always looking for ways of enlarging the informational pool, of increasing networking with their counterparts in other parts of Jewish geography. They need a standardized way to share information while maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of their clients.

Enter a modest little program called **Match!**, offered as a public service by its developer, Dovid Silberberg. Match! is a custom-designed database to store and trade matchmaking information. It does much of the thinking for you, forcing you to fill in descriptive information about the singles you hope to help. At the same time, it will automatically strip identifying information from each record when you email it to someone else, replacing names with automatically-generated ID codes. You can send information to a friend on the opposite coast about the 30 people you believe to be the most eligible catches. The recipient will have all the information, in a format common to all who share the program — but not the names! If s/he has a great suggestion for one of them, the reference code can be used to alert you. Or s/he can keep your 30 records to add to his/her database, in the hope that an idea will gel later.

Match! is searchable. This means that if you are looking for particular criteria (e.g. females between 30-35, professional, outgoing, long-standing *baalot teshuvah*, tending towards Modern Orthodoxy), Match! will retrieve them from the data pool.

But how, for example, do you rate personality? Do you use a numerical continuum between shy and boisterous, and assign each person a number? Or do you match each person against a pre-assigned list of descriptors? Any way you choose will not do justice to the complexity of the richly-nuanced human being you are describing.

Using a computer exacerbates the problem. Computers, as we have long known, are notoriously stupid. They are good at doing laborious calculation; they don't really "think" as we know it, at least not at the moment. A database will retrieve information only if it has been inserted according to rather strict definitions. We are compelled to pigeonhole people, to rate them against touchstones that can seem unfair and arbitrary.

Reasonable people will differ on how to choose criteria for a matchmaking application — or reject the very notion of forcing such choices. They should pause to consider, though, how valuable a tool this program can be. The developer should be applauded for his courage in taking the first steps. Future refinements will certainly come from user feedback.

He addressed the uneasiness in two other ways. You can enter descriptive notes in memo fields which are not sent together with the rest of the record, but are visible for private reference. Some of the fields are customizable. In other words, you can choose any five factors that you feel are most important in describing people, and make up your own descriptors for each. Once a descriptor is entered for any record, it will automatically be

When Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein goes off-line, he directs the Jewish Studies Institute in Los Angeles, and is a member of the editorial board of Jewish Action.

available in a pull-down list for that factor's field. Of course, the more you customize, the harder it is to share information with others, since your recipient will not be able to search a given field unless its use is common to both of you.

Even if you never trade parts of your database, Match! will serve as an organizer and reminder. And you can't beat the price. The developer will let you have it for the cost of shipping. Contact him at davidsilberberg@juno.com.

CITATIONS ON SITE

So you just don't want to spend the money on one of those great software packages we rave about all the time. Or you don't need one regularly, but you could really use a few "downloadable" citations for a paper your child is writing. Or you are traveling, and need to retrieve a Rambam from the Net.

You will find exactly what you need at <http://www1.snunit.k12.il/kodesh/kodesh.html>. Hebrew University in Jerusalem maintains the SNUNIT site, which includes a public-access database of classical Torah texts. It will allow you to search and retrieve text from *Tanach*, both Talmuds, Tosefta, Mishnah, and Rambam's *Yad* and *Sefer Hamitzvot*.

Some of the collections are hyperlinked, i.e. if a passage in the Gemara cites a verse in *Tanach*, clicking on the citation will transport you to that verse in the *Tanach* collection. You can successfully cut and paste, even to an English-language word processor like Word. (You will see gibberish on the screen, which will turn back into Hebrew if you change it to a Hebrew font. It will paste in the proper direction.) Simple and advanced searches are possible.

The catch? It's all in Hebrew — texts, instructions, search engine, the works. If that is not a barrier, you can use the site even if you do not yet own Hebrew screen fonts. A related page at the SNUNIT site

http://www.snunit.k12.il/heb_new.html collects virtually all the information you will need to make your computer Hebrew friendly.

PARSHAH TO GO

The quintessential Jewish telegram, they say, reads, "Start feeling guilty. Details to follow." If you are feeling guilty about parenting skills that could use some sharpening, try a weekly dose of Rabbi Shlomo Goldberg's *parshah shiur*, appropriately called **Al Pi Darko**. Each weekly offering develops sophisticated thought from the pages of the great *musar* [ethical character development] masters — and applies it to daily life.

Specifically, Rabbi Goldberg (headmaster of an educationally progressive and much-loved school in Los Angeles) relates each theme to an issue in parent-child relationships. Think of it as parental training, while getting Heavenly credit for Torah study.

Al Pi Darko is an email list. For a free subscription, send a message to request.alpidarko@ohreliyah.org with the word "subscribe" as the body of the message.

WEB MENTSH EXPLORES JEWISH VALUES

The average reader will not be able to tell that **Jewish World Review** (JWR) is one of the most exciting Internet tools to promote Torah Judaism. Actually, even the editor may not realize it, because its purpose seems to be something very different — and it achieves its goal famously. JWR gathers together some of the best syndicated columnists in America, people like Laura Schlessinger, Cal Thomas, Thomas Sowell, Mona Charen, Paul Greenberg, Ben Wattenberg, Jeff Jacoby, Linda Chavez and Larry Elder.

While open to commentary from all sides, the orientation of JWR is to appreciate morality, the family and other virtues of a bygone day. While some people see such an interest as hopelessly anachronistic, JWR's readers

keep coming back for more. JWR has won kudos from *The Dallas Morning News* (dubbing editor Binyomin Jolkowsky "web mentsh"), *The Forward*, *The Jewish Week*, Jimmy Breslin and Rush Limbaugh.

Along the way, JWR also provides an incredibly rich assortment of some of the best and brightest authors the Jewish community has, in both general and (*lehavdil*) Torah writing. The layout and design are flawless, and could serve as a model of what other Internet efforts should aspire to.

Judging from the comments of readers, JWR is responsible for a renewed interest in Judaism in many of its visitors, and a more positive view of Jews in many of its non-Jewish devotees. Find it at <http://www.jewishworldreview.com/>

HTML & MORE

Just as I was getting comfortable with the quality of the leading Hebrew-English word processors (see *Jewish Action*, Spring '98), I've gotten a sneak preview of the next generation of improvements by the big guys. **Microsoft's Office 2000** is well on its way to commercial release, and I've looked at a few of the new features, particularly in Word. You can be sure that the development teams of our home-grown multilingual processors will be spending time "borrowing" some of these improvements in future releases.

A year ago, I would never have believed that HTML (the special way in which documents are prepared for viewing on the Net) editing would ever be an issue for me. Since then, I have seen more and more friends take their catalog offerings, advertising and even sales to the Net. Many of us are learning to take the personal and corporate web page seriously.


I succumbed a few months ago to the temptation to publish my own newsletter, which I circulate through email, but need to park on the Net as well. I started to rummage through some of my published works for inclu-

sion in a web site. Several articles I wrote (all for *Jewish Action*, actually!) were richly laced with footnotes. This meant that my first attempt to get Word to convert a document to HTML (the special formatting that web documents must adhere to) was a terrible failure: Word changed the document all right, but ignored all the notes. They would have to be added painstakingly by hand, carefully reinserting footnote references in the main text.

I then tried the updated Word in Office 2000. One keystroke, and the old document was converted to the proper format, with all the footnotes intact! Indeed, the weighty manual that accompanies my reviewer's beta version emphasizes that Office 2000 stresses easy adaptation of materials for web use.

The most useful innovation for most of us is the way Word 2000 handles fonts. Most of us can't dig out from under the avalanche of styles available to us. So we try out a few, and toggle between a small number with which we are comfortable.

The new Word displays each font in the pull-down menu exactly as it is displayed. You can quickly scroll down the list, and find a new font to fit your mood and requirements. Davka Writer doesn't offer any font previewing at all; Dagesh and Qtext both offer previewing, albeit in a much more laborious manner. They will accurately display one font at a time, as you highlight it. Word displays all the items that are pulled down at one time, making it much more inviting to choose the unfamiliar. We look forward to our Hebrew-English processors following suit.

My newsletter? I'm glad you asked. **CROSSCURRENTS** is about the application of traditional Torah thought to the arena of current affairs. You can check out old issues at <http://www.cross-currents.com/> If you are interested in a free subscription, follow the procedure given in every issue. 

Jewish Action

ISRAEL Advertising

*If you are interested
in advertising in the Israel section
of Jewish Action,
please contact Lisa Rubin in Israel
at 011-972-2-994-2969
or Deborah Lieber in New York
at 212-613-8135.*