

Inspiring Images *By Yitzchok Adlerstein*

Pope Gregory IX has been undone by the Internet.

This particular prince of the Church almost ended Torah study in France by ordering the burning of all copies of the Gemara.

In June, 1242, King Louis IX (the only European monarch either weak enough or stupid enough to obey the pontiff) had 24 wagonloads of precious, hand-copied volumes of the Gemara brought to a square (in front of what is now the Louvre), where they were burnt. Although Gregory couldn't wipe out Torah study entirely, he did—with the help of some further persecution by Louis (who later was canonized)—bring to a close the glorious epoch of the Tosafists in France.

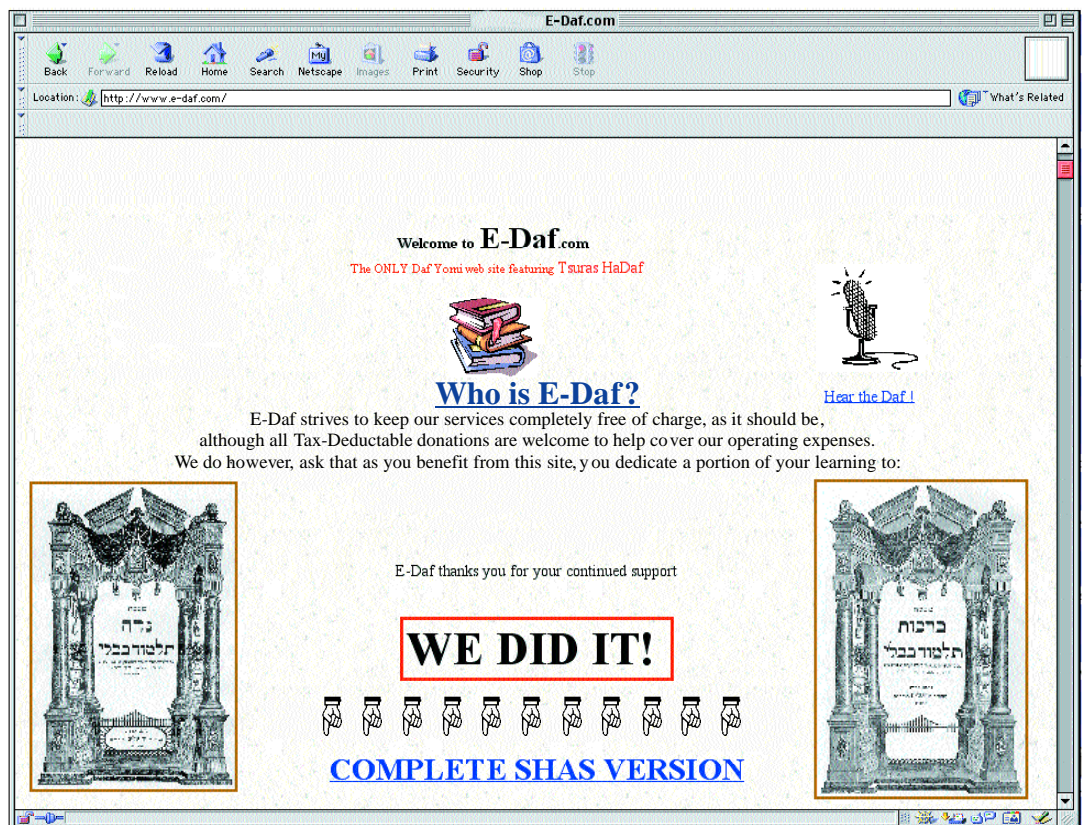
Gregory sought to limit the reach of *Shas*. Amazingly, the Internet now assures its universal availability.

The alert reader will argue that this is hardly new. The

Rabbi Adlerstein scans the horizon for computer ideas for the Torah home when he is not busy directing an educational outreach program for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, and serving on the editorial board of Jewish Action.

Talmud, along with thousands of other works, has been available on CD for years. These products—most of which were reviewed in this column—

but they do not reproduce the layout of the customary printed versions. Particularly when it comes to Gemara, most of us feel attached to the way the



made the Torah library transportable in one's coat pocket.

The product **e-daf**, however, does offer something new (www.e-daf.com). It brings the friendly and familiar look of the *Vilna Shas* to your computer. The digital works we use on CD are great for searching and retrieving citations,

text is arranged on the printed page, flanked by the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot.

We now can access the familiar text anywhere we can hook up a computer and a phone line. Rabbi Dovid Kraus of Flatbush (who is a professional computer program developer

when he isn't guiding his flock) observed that Torah study was difficult in many offices, due to employees not being allowed to install their own software on company computers. The solution, he reasoned, was to make *Shas* available on the Internet, which so many employees have easy access to. He enlisted one of his congenial and fellow computer-laborer, Josh Itzkowitz, who literally cut a *Shas* free of its binding, and meticulously scanned it, page by page, on to the e-daf website. He recently completed the task.

This site certainly unseats the old pope and his diabolical plan to limit access to Torah study. It makes *Shas* available to you while you are sitting in your hotel room in Hong Kong, or waiting 20 minutes for a client to turn up in Beijing. It means that a teacher can show a group of students a large version of a *daf Gemara* on a big-screen display, or a parent can review class work with a child on a large home monitor. In a few years, when all of us are carrying portable Internet appliances, we will literally be able to study a page of Gemara anyplace on the planet.

On the home page, you will find a menu listing pages surrounding the current locus of *Daf Yomi* activity. A link takes you to a menu that offers you the rest of *Shas*. The service is entirely free, although contributions to defray costs are welcome. Next time you have a 15-minute break at the office, consider substituting some Gemara for the usual computer game. Think of Pope Gregory when you do.

Due Recogniton

Think: most-important-innovation-since-sliced-white-bread, and apply it to Hebrew/English word processing. What you have is the new add-on to Dagesh Pro—its newly released **Optical Character Recognition (OCR) Package**.

Dagesh OCR is a tool you will quickly learn to love. All e-mail users

trade documents that have been inputted as text. In other words, at some point, someone had to type in the text, letter by letter.

What about text which hasn't been inputted—magazine articles, paragraphs from a book you wish to share, portions of a faxed message? Until OCR, there was no option, other than taking a "picture" of the original using a scanner, and sending it along as a (very large!) graphics file. And there was no efficient way to grab only a few lines, or to actually modify the content or appearance of the text.

OCR changes that. It starts with the "picture" you scan in, but then examines each letter, and enters it for you as text. Better commercial programs, such as OmniPage Pro, preserve layout, formatting, etc., and claim accuracy rates of better than 99 percent, up considerably from the 95 percent of a few years ago. (A typist could probably do better. But in dealing with many pages of text, it may be more efficient to make corrections in an OCR-generated file, rather than having it retyped from scratch.)

Until recently, no Hebrew OCR was available to the consumer. The best product, Ligature, was aimed at the commercial market and cost a whopping \$1400. TES, the largest distributor of Judaic software, cut a deal with Ligature to offer the Dagesh OCR add-in to its popular Dagesh Pro, and offers it at \$399 as a stand-alone, or \$499 bundled with Dagesh Pro. (Having addressed almost all of the complaints about previous editions, Dagesh Pro is everything you could ask for in a multilingual word processor. It handles about every non-Asian language and alphabet you can think of, and comes close to matching the fine-tuning of the much more expensive Microsoft Word. It usually goes for between \$149-\$189.)

OCR is an extremely complex process. The program must deal with differences in the shapes and sizes of letters owing to different fonts. It must take into account embedded pictures, symbols, and text flowing between dif-

ferent columns and in tables.

Practically, this means that the user needs to spend a bit of time learning the program, and tweaking it to suit his or her individual scanner. Applying OCR to Hebrew is even more complex! Yet, on my very first try with a page of clean, modern text, the program read the page nearly perfectly, and allowed me to paste lines of Hebrew text into a larger document.

Emboldened, I tried some Rashi text, and learned that it does not yet recognize Rashi, although its Font Trainer allows you to quickly teach it to recognize a particular Rashi font which you may have continuing recourse to.

Why not build Rashi recognition into the Dagesh OCR? After all, probably half of the classic Torah works still come in some sort of Rashi orthography. TES responded that the variety of Rashi fonts, coupled with the poor quality of paper that the older *sefarim* were printed on (poor paper will produce letters which are blurred, rather than the sharp image that the OCR prefers), made it impracticable. They have a point!

Writing this column in the waning days of the *shemitah* year, I slipped a copy of the RCA *prozbul* into the scanner. Dagesh OCR read the document perfectly, except for two characters I had to change, and some underlining I had to supply. I was then able to "personalize" the document by changing to a font and size of my choosing, and adding the city and names of the rabbinic judges who would serve on the court—all at a fraction of the time it would have taken me to type in the entire text.

There is no question that Dagesh OCR represents a quantum jump for the home and office user of Hebrew text. Dagesh OCR is a must-have addition for rabbis, teachers, and offices that occasionally use documents containing some Hebrew. It will bring the full power of your computer to a world of material that was previously closed to it. **JA**