

## Torah in the Internet Age *By Harvey Blitz*



**W**hen one discusses technology today, the center of attention is often the Internet and the challenges and opportunities it presents to the Orthodox community. The Internet threatens to bring sexually explicit, anti-Semitic and other objectionable material into Orthodox homes. Even if children do not deliberately log onto prurient web sites, spam brings e-mails from the gutter into unsuspecting homes. To mitigate this threat, improved filtering technology to keep out material that should not be in an Orthodox home is continually being developed, and the OU is looking into making the best of this technology available to our community.

But the challenges the Internet brings are more than matched by its opportunities. The Internet presents a myriad of ways for spreading Jewish knowledge

and *kedushah* throughout the world. In contrast to some Orthodox organizations, the OU embraces these opportunities and devotes much effort to the ongoing development of our web site, [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org). Features such as the online *Guide to Berachot* (blessings); the weekly *Shabbat Shalom* e-mail section, which brings the feeling of the approaching Shabbat to over 25,000 subscribers each Thursday evening; pre-holiday *shiurim*; *kashrut* alerts and a special "Learn Torah" section, make learning easily accessible for students on all levels.

Jews throughout the world have embraced these opportunities for enrichment. In April, with the approach of Passover, our web site received more than ten million hits for the first time. That month there were almost 350,000 separate visits to the web site. Even in the summer months we averaged 70,000 visits a week, and this number is likely to grow significantly with the approach of the Yamim Noraim.

One of the recent successes of our web site was OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb's live four-hour Tishah B'Av webcast of the Kinot (elegies) of the day. The webcast of Rabbi Weinreb's brilliant commentary succeeded in bringing the spirit of the day into the homes and offices of those who could not be in the synagogue, as well as into synagogues that chose to supplement their own services.

In response to the webcast, a correspondent from Manchester, England, wrote, "Please pass my thanks to Rabbi Weinreb for an interesting, moving, meaningful few hours. Thanks to you

and to all concerned for making this available on the Internet." And a young woman from Passaic, New Jersey, who was part of an audience the OU specifically had in mind when creating the program, wrote the following: "I have tremendous *hakarat hatov* (appreciation) for the OU and Rabbi Weinreb for today's Kinot on your web site. It was very inspiring, especially for a mother who cannot attend *shul*," she wrote.

The OU is planning to expand the web site and is considering establishing an online *beit midrash* program in which we could assemble and present *shiurim* from the world's leading *roshei yeshivah*, *rabbanim* and scholars. The program would bring Jewish knowledge and learning to every corner of the globe at any hour of the day, at the click of a mouse, thereby greatly enhancing the opportunities for adult Jewish education. We are in the early stages of consultation on the project, and are calling on the expertise of educators and technical specialists as we move ahead.

Today's technology has made the world a smaller place. In the past, despite being a national organization, the OU lacked the ability to conduct ongoing national programming available simultaneously to everyone. Now—with the Tishah B'Av program as the latest example—the OU can serve its constituency by presenting programs that are truly national—even international—in scope.

To the fullest extent permissible by *halachah*, the OU will avail itself of technology and its benefits, while keeping in mind the serious challenges it may, at times, present to our community. 