

The Blog Knows

By Yitzchok Adlerstein

Unbroken Glass

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Thanks to the blog, pretty much everyone. Blog, if you are techno-jargon challenged, is short for web log, a sort of online diary. Blog owners post their musings and observations—and the feedback of their readers. Within seconds, the ordinary citizen's thoughts can reach across the globe.

Blogging can be trivial and narcissistic and even malicious. It can also be the ultimate instrument of empowerment, allowing Joe Anybody to bring about rapid social change by igniting the interest of a large number of people. The invention of the printing press breathed fire into every new idea. The blog may extend that power to each and every individual. Feel passionate about something? Start a blog. If there are others who share your passion, they will soon find you, and your influence will spread.

Within the Torah community, a number of blogs have gained international attention and notoriety. Written (in English, Yiddish and Hebrew) by individuals living in parts of the

Besides directing an educational outreach program for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, and serving on the editorial board of Jewish Action, Rabbi Adlerstein tries to study Gemara in any form.

Orthodox world they find confining, these blogs ease the plight of people who have much to say—and no one on the block they dare say it to. Some of the more famous bloggers (they stay anonymous, fearing the wrath of their neighbors) use their blogs to express both their basic love for their communities and their values—and their disdain for some of their community's practices. Sharing their thoughts with others offers healthy and creative catharsis. It puts them in contact with like-minded readers whom they would otherwise never have discovered, and offers feedback from subscribers thousands of miles away.

The blog is the realization of the whistle-blower's dream. With complete anonymity, you can expose whomever or whatever you want. There are dangers in this, to be sure. Blogs can be efficient muckrakers, forcing people and communities to deal with issues they would otherwise sweep under the carpet. They can also, of course, cast aspersions when none should be cast, or create doubts by raising questions without responsibly providing answers. The *lashon hara*-conscious reader will instantly appreciate the capacity for the word to damage—with speech now propagating at the speed of light.

Some blogs have trained the sights of the world at large on our community. Whatever you do or say is likely

to turn up in the public domain, even if you said it in Hebrew or Yiddish. Strangers may get to learn about the strengths of our world, but they will certainly find out about its weaknesses. Rav Yisrael Salanter taught, "Not everything that is thought should be said; not everything said should be written; not everything written should be printed." It would seem all the more so that not everything that is published should be digitally available for the inspection of the entire world. Until everyone else realizes this, however, we are all going to have to learn that it is impossible for certain things to be kept secret any longer.

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Blogs can be fun as well. **Unbrokenglass.com** (www.unbrokenglass.com) is a Jewish blog that is both fun and significant.

I was once a young innocent teenage girl, chillin' in Amsterdam's coffee-shops and going to raves in London. . . . life was good. Around age 18, I discovered G-d and Judaism, and turned my life around to become observant, much to

the amusement of all my hedonistic friends. Since then I've passed my time mainly by learning Torah, doing a degree, and going on some truly awful shidduchim.

Thus "She" (her screen name, or more accurately, her *nom de guerre*) begins her site, appropriately subtitled "the worst *shidduchim* you've ever had."

The results are sidesplitting—and heart wrenching. You cannot read these stories, and the comments of readers, without feeling for the plight of Jewish singles bearing the scars of the battle for relationships. You will understand the surreal world they are forced to live in, wince at their vulnerability and commiserate with their frustration and loneliness. And you will be afflicted with paroxysms of laughter.

"She" is married now, and debating what to do with the site. (How she found her *bashert* is quite a story, and available for on-site reading. Start with "Peter Pan" in the "She's Stories" section under November 20, 2002. Then go to September 16, 2003.abba1.) For the moment, the blog is still up and running. It is unlikely that anyone who replaces her will be as refreshingly casual and unaffected.

In the meantime, singles continue to contribute. The rest of us can continue to enjoy reading it, and hopefully take a cue from Moshe Rabbeinu afterwards. When Moshe grew up, he "went out to his brethren and saw their burdens" (Shemot 2:11). According to our Sages, he not only felt for his brethren, but also made a point of observing their travail from up close so that he would feel their pain more intensely. A few visits to Unbrokenglass.com might well inspire us to work a bit harder on behalf of the singles we know, with the goal of breaking lots more glass.

Judaic Classics Torah Treasures

Computer-based Torah libraries

packed a huge wallop by massing hundreds of volumes of Torah text on a single CD or two. Users installed the program, and then slipped the CDs in and out of the drive when needed.

Fans of these programs found them wonderfully helpful. If you could remember a few key words, you could easily retrieve texts whose exact location you had forgotten. You could search responsa literature by topic. You could cut and paste to include a paragraph in a presentation or a synagogue newsletter. The sky was no longer the limit. Sitting on a plane, you could access all of *Shas*, if you so desired.

Many people, though, were uneasy about the format. Talmud study especially just didn't feel right. A student gets attached to the familiar look of a page he has strained to understand, and the Torah libraries all used digitally stored text. The words were all there, but not in the way they appear in the *Vilna Shas*.

Davka (www.davka.com) now gives us the best of both worlds. With **Judaic Classics Torah Treasures**, the user can locate the text he is interested in through a digital version, in a manner similar to all the computer-based libraries. Once he finds it, though, he can link to the corresponding page in the familiar format of the Vilna edition of the Gemara.

Davka brought back the old by taking advantage of the new. Times have changed. Storage space on a huge hard drive is cheap. Davka decided to offer a product primarily designed to be completely installed and accessed on the user's hard drive, gambling that many users today have hard drives with multiples of tens of unused gigabytes. Instead of asking the user to pop in a CD, why not take advantage of the much faster access speed of the hard drive, and its recently enlarged capacity to store huge amounts of graphics? In this case, the graphics are in the form of a scanned version of the *Vilna Shas*, with the

commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot in their usual places around the text, complete from cover to cover.

Judaic Classics Torah Treasures comes with much more than *Shas*, offering many of the works that were part of previous incarnations of the Judaic Classics series, including Tanach, Rambam and a small number of commentaries on Chumash.

You may remember Judaic Classics, one of the first entries in the digital library sweepstakes. It lost some ground to its competitors, largely because its interface was less attractive than the others. The interface is still looking for improvement, but Davka has come up with something so big here that Torah Treasures can't be missed, especially at the very modest price of \$49.95.

Torah Treasures takes a why-didn't-I-think-of-that idea, and combines it with changes in the way we have been using our computers. The result is a clear winner for the Torah software consumer. **JA**