

The Dark and the Bright Sides of Cheating

By Yitzchok Adlerstein

Anti-Cheat

It happens in all kinds of schools and sometimes borders on the epidemic. The pressure parents place upon their children to achieve high grades often surpasses the gentler persuasion of a still-developing adolescent *yetzer tov*. Students may therefore succumb to the temptation to cheat.

Schools have addressed the problem through a variety of measures, including teaching Torah sources and values about “borrowing” answers. (Besides the obvious issues of *sheker* and *geneivat da’at*—lying and deceiving—Rav Moshe Feinstein penned a responsum that proved that securing employment on the basis of credentials secured through cheating amounts to outright theft!) Schools have also beefed up security in test-taking locales and upped the punitive ante for students caught in the act.

Despite these measures, many schools have a serious cheating problem, and solutions are much in demand. To a great extent, cheating is

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opportunistic. Kids will give in to the urge when it is easy to take answers from others, even if they had not planned to do so when they walked into the exam room. Such cheating can be forestalled by simply denying the student the opportunity.

Laurin Lewis, an observant American *oleb*, has come up with an ingenious device to help control a student’s temptation to expand his or her visual field during examinations. **Anti-Cheat** (for PC; \$27 for a download at www.wordkitchen.com) takes a single exam and churns out as many different versions as you want, each with a cleverly coded answer key. Students can’t cheat, because the person in the next seat is working with a different exam!

Anti-Cheat works by randomizing both the order of questions (appropriate for short fill-in responses) and multiple-choice options within different questions. While teachers have always had the option of preparing different versions of an exam, very few already overburdened instructors find this a viable option. Anti-Cheat has the computer do most of the work and makes the multiple-version technique attractive.

There are some drawbacks, however. To help the program tell the difference between marginal information (headings, instructions, the questions them-

selves) and the multiple-choice responses to be randomized, Anti-Cheat requires the instructor to tag each item—separately—with various codes. The codes are not difficult to master (and the instruction manual is a delight in clarity), but the process is laborious. For longer tests, an already weary teacher may not wish to take the time. In most cases, though, the investment of time is not overwhelming, and the payoff is well worth it. (Lewis has shown his responsiveness to user feedback and has updated the original product, making it easier to use. My guess is that future updates will make Anti-Cheat even more efficient.)

Alternatively, teachers who frequently use short-answer and multiple-choice exams can create reusable templates with the tags in place and insert the new text in between. (Providing such templates might be a good idea for Anti-Cheat’s next update.) Additionally, Anti-Cheat (for the sake of programming simplicity) forces you to use WordPad, a Windows application most of us have forgotten about.

There is little question, though, that the program is a well-executed version of a wonderful idea. You can try it out through a free trial download at the web site. Anti-Cheat offers a great way

to cheat students out of a tempting experience that they do not need.

Vestos

Cheating often means finding a shortcut for the laborious process of discovering the right answer oneself. Curiously, there are times when Jewish tradition urges us to give cheating a fair hearing.

When Rav Yosef Karo released his *Shulchan Aruch* in the sixteenth century, the critical review was not entirely favorable. Some very important individuals, including Rav Shlomo Luria, objected to the very concept of a book of halachic conclusions. There was only one legitimate way to deal with halachic questions, they believed, and that was to go back to the Talmudic sources and deal with all arguments

from the ground up. Anything less was, in a way, cheating. Hundreds of years before, critics voiced similar objections to Rambam’s assertion that people could rely on his work for quicker access to the halachic conclusions of the Gemara. Their point was well taken, but history has given the nod to works that help the masses overcome deficits in their halachic expertise and arrive at the proper conclusions.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that a quiet little calendar program caused quite a stir in some places in the Torah community. **Vestos** was one of the first programs ever reviewed in this column, back in prehistoric times when DOS programs still walked the face of the earth. Vestos does a marvelous job tracking the substantial

information that observant families needed to make some very private determinations about the application of *taharat hamishpachah* (Jewish family purity) laws. Some hefty opposition surfaced because of the fear that people would grow lax about understanding the halachic principle and simply rely on computer-generated answers.

Like those who took aim at Rambam and the *Shulchan Aruch*, the argument has some merit but likely not enough to trump the value of a program that can help people avoid the likelihood of serious halachic errors. Getting the *halachah* right requires good memory—both for events dating back many months, and for opinions and applications that people may learn about when they take a *chatan* or *kallah* class but may not see implemented for many years. Vestos is both a handy place to store information reliably and to remind the user of the complexities of the law.

Changes from the old DOS format are emblematic of the halachic process itself. As times change, the interface may look different—and more convenient for current users—but the principles remain the same. Vestos still asks the user to input current data each month and to make choices between interpretations of the law when the *halachah* is not clear and unambiguous. Then it does the rest, computing and visually displaying the results. The program comes with default choices that will work until the user can determine which options should be used as the bottom-line law, which options should be disregarded altogether and which of them should be displayed as non-binding stringencies. For many people, Vestos will offer a challenge to learn more about less commonly known areas of *halachah* rather than a crutch to ignore its fine points.

Enormous halachic expertise went into the program. This is ably demonstrated by an impressive list of decisors who were consulted. The program is stable, reliable, easy to use and graphically pleasing. The price is unbeatable. It is available to download for free at www.torahsoftware.org. 

