



From the Los Angeles Times

# AskMoses.com isn't a direct line to God, but it's quicker than climbing Mount Sinai

Also: Jesuit leader Adolfo Nicolás visits California, the Library of Congress seeks Obama-themed sermons, and people weigh in on eternal life.  
By Duke Helfand and Joanna Lin

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Have you ever tried to define God? Or wondered whether it is ethical to eat meat? Or debated if pornography is a sin?

For a decade, [AskMoses.com](http://AskMoses.com) has been answering questions like these to a growing worldwide audience.

Rabbinic scholars from the Orthodox Jewish Chabad movement dispense the free advice online 24 hours a day, six days a week (they don't work on the Sabbath).

Last month, they announced a milestone: AskMoses has surpassed 1 million online chat sessions since it was launched by Chabad of California. The queries are fielded by rabbis and knowledgeable women in the United States, Argentina, Israel, Russia and elsewhere.

"The average person on the street does not have access to a rabbi," said Rabbi Yosef Loschak, AskMoses' "chief scholar," who is based in Santa Barbara. "Here is a way they can do that. If they have a question about Judaism, Moses is a pretty good source."

People of all stripes turn to the website, accounting for 350 to 400 live chats a day, Loschak said. A voluntary online survey has shown that 30% of AskMoses users are not Jewish. Among their questions: Why don't Jews believe in Jesus as the messiah? Answer: Jesus did not fulfill the promises of the messiah, as described by the prophets, of bringing world peace and global monotheism.

The website's library has cataloged answers to numerous questions about Jewish identity, philosophy, holidays, history and the Torah.

Loschak said the questions often reflect modern life. Questions popped up about the final scene of "Schindler's List," for example, in which Jews who were saved by Oskar Schindler place rocks on his grave in Israel. Why? Stones are a mark of respect to show that the grave was visited.

Questions often come from people facing crises. On one occasion, a pregnant teen wrote to ask whether she should get an abortion or tell her parents about her condition. The rabbi urged her to speak with her parents. Because the question was posed anonymously, though, he couldn't follow up.

As to the question about defining God, the answer, according to AskMoses: God cannot be defined. He is only known by the things he does.

And is pornography a sin? According to AskMoses, the answer is yes: It is "a corruption of the mind, as it forces us to think lustful and sinful thoughts."

## Jesuit leader visits

The leader of the worldwide Jesuit religious order is scheduled to deliver an address at 10 a.m. today at [Loyola Marymount University](http://Loyola Marymount University) about partnership in Jesuit ministries, as part of a 10-day trip through California.

Father Adolfo Nicolás, the superior general of the Society of Jesus, as the order is known, is visiting the state to help launch the centennial celebration of the California Province, one of 10 Jesuit provinces in the United States. He will meet this week with the 10 provincial leaders in Northern California.

Nicolás, who has served in his position for a little more than a year, has spent much of his career in Asia. His LMU address will be part of Mission Day, which celebrates the university's commitment to faith and justice.

"Coming from his many years in the Far East, Father Nicolás has a strong sense that our commitment to faith doing justice means working side by side with many who may not share our beliefs but who nonetheless share our goals for a more just and peaceful world, a more sustainable environment," Father Robert Caro, the university's vice president for mission and ministry, said in a university statement.

## Obama sermons

To document reaction to the inauguration of the country's first black president, the [American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress](http://American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress) is collecting recordings of sermons and orations delivered during what center Director Peggy Bulger called "a real shift" in American history.

Collections at the library include inaugural materials dating back to the inauguration of George Washington in 1789 as well as recordings of many 20th century sermons and orations.

However, this is the first time the library has solicited inauguration-related preaching from the pulpit, Bulger said.

Documenting President Obama's inauguration through sermons seems fitting, Bulger said, given that the ceremony came a day after Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

"Martin Luther King, as well as so many crusaders for civil rights, were preachers," she said. "They use a form of African American folk oratory that is so effective and so beautiful . . . almost folk poetry."

This is the third time the library has gathered recordings of people's immediate responses to an event. The first two events were the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

For its inauguration project, the center has already received 40 recordings from 15 states. Among these early submissions are sermons from synagogues, churches and a mosque in Montana.

To qualify for the project, orations must have been delivered between Jan. 16 and Jan. 25 and recorded in audio or video format at a place of worship or secular gathering.

Written texts of such sermons, as well as programs from events during which they were delivered, are also being collected. The submissions will be entered into the center's archive.

The center will accept submissions postmarked by Feb. 27. More information about the sermons and orations project is available at [www.loc.gov/folklife/inaugural/](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/inaugural/) or by calling (202) 707-5510.

## How to live forever

So how does one achieve eternal life -- through good deeds or beliefs?

Theologians have considered the question for centuries. Now a study released in December by the [Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life](http://Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life) shows that nearly equal numbers of Americans

say actions (such as being a good person) and beliefs (such as believing in Jesus) are the way to achieve eternal life.

Responses varied among various denominations (see chart), with white evangelicals more inclined to say that beliefs matter most. White Catholics credited actions more than other groups.

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