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DUIN: AskMoses.com fields Judaism queries

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Not long ago, I listened to Rabbi Daniel Lapin describing how synagogue is "an unpleasant experience" for many.

"To spend three hours of it saying prayers — I just cannot take it," the Seattle-area rabbi said. "Often the rabbi's speech is arcane and patronizing.

"The music is nonexistent. At Christmas, you get great music like 'Silent Night' from the Christians. From the Jews, you get 'Dreidel, Dreidel.'"

Mr. Lapin reaches out to multitudes of post-synagogue Jews by radio, while Chabad Lubavitch, an Orthodox movement in Judaism, does it via a Web site, AskMoses.com.

The site, which contains a huge database on everything from Israeli history to biblical sexual mores, offers live chats in English, Spanish, Russian, French and Hebrew.

I asked the site, "Where is Jesus in the Old Testament?"

The database rephrased my question to "Why don't Jews believe Jesus was the Messiah?" It then provided answers dissecting Isaiah 53 (a major messianic text) and stating messianic prophecies Jesus did not fulfill, such as ushering in world peace and gathering in the Jewish Diaspora.

Then I logged on to a live chat with the scholar-in-residence, Rabbi Yossi Turk, the bilingual chief rabbi of Cordoba, Argentina.

"Now that the sacrificial system is no longer in place in Jerusalem," I typed, "how do we know our sins are forgiven?"

He answered, "Our prayers replace the sacrifices."

I persisted. "But where in the Bible does it say the sacrificial system is abrogated?"

"I am currently chatting with five people, please be patient," he responded. He eventually wrote that since the temple no longer exists in Jerusalem, one is not obligated to sacrifice animals for one's sins.

Based in Los Angeles, AskMoses.com is a nonprofit with 45 male and female scholars from around the world. They sometimes receive questions too sensitive — about sex, drugs or abuse — to broach in person to a rabbi. The site also attracts secular Jews who feel alienated from the Jewish community due to distrust or indifference, a spokesman said.

Thirty percent of the visitors are non-Jews, and of those who are Jews, the vast majority never or rarely attend synagogue, Rabbi Simcha Backman, the project director, told me.

"The thirtysomething Jews have a hard time fitting into their parents' synagogue and they're asking 'What do I do?'" he said. "If we tell them to go to a synagogue, that is uncomfortable [and] we risk the chance of totally alienating them."

The problem of disenfranchised Jews is too huge for one Web site, he said, but "we can make the best of an unfortunate situation by helping them to bring Judaism into the home. Make sure that on Friday nights, you have the challah (bread) and the wine. And that Saturday is Shabbat; there is something special about it."

He trains his online scholars on how to answer hard questions, especially those from seekers whose lives clearly are violating biblical precepts.

"It is all in the delivery and how you say it," he said. "Often, I found the delivery is lacking and the rabbi is insensitive. With us — even if the person is unhappy with the answer — it is delivered in a sensitive way, they will accept it and there won't be rebellious reaction. We train our scholars to be sensitive because there is always a person behind a question."

• *Stairway to Heaven appears Sundays and Thursdays. Contact Julia Duin at jduin@washingtontimes.com.*