"And teach them diligently": The development of Jewish teaching on the internet

Bernard Spolsky
Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Judaism has a long tradition of teaching: with the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, learning Torah became the key pillar of Jewish identity, established by teaching Hebrew literacy to all boys at the age of 6. This provided later access to professional roles, but also maintained loshn-koydesh (the Hebrew- Aramaic of the Talmud) for 2000 years. While Hebrew literacy was basic, regular teaching of adults took place in oral lessons in synagogues. In more recent times, this has been continued in synagogues and moved also to media. Before computers were common, when I traveled to the US and could no longer attend my daily Talmud class, I used the telephone for the daily lesson (daf yomi) in Talmud; there were telephone classes available in Yiddish, English and Hebrew. Once the internet developed, it was quickly adopted as a medium for presenting the daf yomi: having moved to a new part of Jerusalem, I can follow my former teacher’s classes on line: they are also available to a group of his students in South Africa. The Talmud class is sound only (MP3), but the rabbi also teaches several other classes a week on video. He is taking part in a much wider process. My wife’s rabbi repeats the classes she attends on-line, and is the founder of a yeshiva program offered on line, which also includes a technique for interaction. The advantages of internet teaching is the student’s freedom to select not just a teacher, a class and a language but also a convenient time for study. With the use of video as well as audio and the possibility of multiple scripts, the development also supports the continuation of post-vernacular culture in endangered Jewish varieties like Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish.

Keywords: Judaism teaching internet.