

Carpools, mitzvahs, and soup.com

Internet list helps community connect

HELEN WEISS PINCUS

TEANECK — The looming metro-area transit strike has added to the cachet of the TeaneckShuls Internet list. Many recent postings to this electronic message board for the area's Jewish community concern carpools to Manhattan and points east. But the two-year-old list's laurels as a super-efficient grapevine were already firmly in place.

Lack of human clerical help to stuff envelopes and make telephone calls convinced Chaim Shulman to start an electronic communications system for his synagogue, Cong. Beth Abraham in Bergenfield. Nathan J. Lindenbaum, impressed with how well the system worked, started a similar program for Cong. Keter Torah here.

"We started posting the same items and people who were on both lists complained about getting duplicates. Chaim came up with idea of creating a community-wide list. So we merged the two into TeaneckShuls and made the original inactive," Lindenbaum said in a telephone interview last week.

The merger was in September 2000 and other people in the Teaneck/Bergenfield Jewish community were invited to subscribe to the free Internet information system. Word of mouth, which the list has surpassed as a communications portal, spread the news and the group now has 1,800 subscribers.

The list "makes the shtetl a little smaller," said Ruthie Levi of this township, one of the gatekeepers of the Internet communications system. "I feel like I'm doing good all the time just sitting at my computer," she said in a telephone interview last week. "This brings our community together — I love the stories about people whose basements are flooded and then 10 people show up with dehumidifiers."

The list has generated two siblings — shulschat, for general discussions, and shulsIsrael for news about Israel, world Jewry, and anti-Semitism.

Shulman, Lindenbaum, and Levi screen the approximately 50 daily messages that members submit for posting. If a communication is deemed inappropriate, a comment is e-mailed to the sender.

"We want to prevent disparaging e-mails and eliminate hoaxes," Shulman said.

The triumvirate decided against posting the large volume of thank-you notes sent to the list.

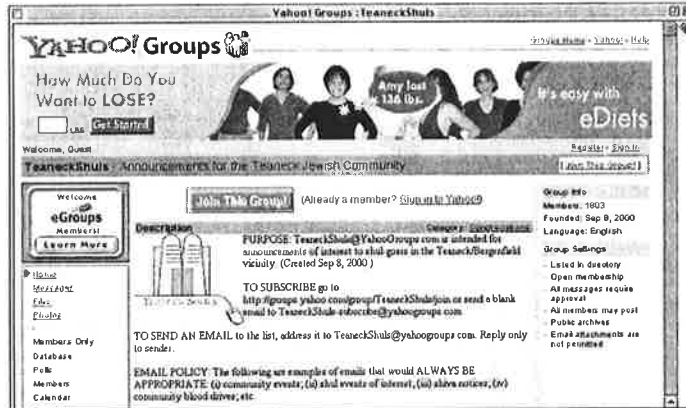
"Another purpose of moderation is to direct items to the correct list," Shulman said. "Action items for Israel go to the shuls list. The chat list is for discussing anything. There is some overlap." People can subscribe to all or choose a specific list.

A recent action item urged subscribers to write letters and e-mails to Columbia University protesting the university's possible hiring of anti-Semitic poet Tom Paulin.

Lindenbaum said that the list notifies residents about pro-Israel rallies, upcoming missions, and other ways to support Israel.

He cited a recent testament to the list's effectiveness: "The Israel carnival on Chol Hamoed Sukkot that raised 50K for terror victims and their families could not have happened without TeaneckShuls. From the advertisement of the first volunteer meeting, to the information updates to the change in location due to the weather on the day of the fair, TeaneckShuls was the mode of communication. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that we could have not been able to pull it off without you."

The rules are sent to all newcomers to



this brave new electronic world. The catalogue of how-to and where ends with a disclaimer. "The primary goal of the list is to be an effective tool in the building and maintenance of community. Although the above rules are far from perfect, and we don't claim perfection in administering the list, the rules are our best-intentioned attempt to keep as many people involved as possible. Judgment calls are involved and we do our best. We are open to suggestions and comments. Remember that we're volunteers."

Lindenbaum said that the list has become a potent "marketing and communal organization tool. We have been able to do powerful things for Israel."

At a recent shiva, Lindenbaum said, there was difficulty getting a mincha minyan at 4:15 p.m. A notice was posted on the shuls list and the next day 30 people showed up for mincha.

"I love that aspect of the list," Lindenbaum said. "Most people didn't know the aveil [the mourner]; they just came because they heard there was a need."

All his family's carpools were arranged through the list, Lindenbaum said.

"A woman wrote in once — she was making soup and had put too much pepper in; she wanted to know what to do. She received a couple of answers right away."

The soup saver? "Of the 15-20 people who replied, most said to put in a potato. One person recommended putting in a brisket, which sounded DELICIOUS, but a potato was more cost effective. It definitely took out most of the over-peppery taste," wrote Aliza Fischman. "It worked!"

The e-mails' range is illustrated by tag lines culled from just two weeks' entries — Rutgers student doing research on the Cuban Jewish community, Orlando time-share available, send pizza to the IDF, chesed opportunity for lawyers and law students, how to get home [via public transportation] on snowy days, a roshi chodesh shiur, seeking a notary who knows Hebrew, charity parlor meeting, Anyone going to be at LaGuardia airport today? Holland has NO! banned kosher slaughter, Looking for old Sprint cell phone.

People are always giving things away. Recently two folding tables and a pine dresser were available at a listed address for anyone who would cart them away. Other items that have been listed for the taking — cars (not in great condition), unopened packages of tights, dishes, and clothing. Rides to anywhere — although Brooklyn, Boston, Baltimore, and Lakewood seem to be the most popular destinations — are offered and sought. Announcements for car-

pools, backyard camps, babysitters, and housekeepers abound. But the list's real heart is in the stories.

"When I posted a notice that I was looking for help getting rid of termites, people I didn't even know asked me whether or not the problem had been taken care of. When I was looking for a ride to the Bruce Springsteen concert, the whole neighborhood knew I was a Bruce Springsteen fan.

Never post anything you don't want people to know about," Levi warned with a laugh.

Shulman shared some of the e-mails he had received about the list. Esther Chaitovsky wrote, "My cousin from Lakewood had called for a friend, about 30, who had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. She had asked me about a certain doctor in this area. I did not know the doctor but I put out a query on TeaneckShuls. Within the hour I had over a dozen responses regarding this doctor and others, as well as information about Sharsheret [an advocacy and referral organization for young women with breast cancer]. By the next day there were over 20 responses. My cousin was amazed! May we continue to use the ma'la [science] in a Torah fashion."

A few months ago, a list subscriber forgot his cell phone at a client's Manhattan office. A posted notice asking if anyone could bring it home, elicited "at least 30 responses from people who were willing to pick it up and drop it off at my house," he wrote Shulman.

Simone Wruble first logged on to ask for help in furnishing the home of an Israeli family who had arrived here before their worldly goods.

"Within minutes," she wrote, "I had a slew of responses and we were able to fur-

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List helps Israeli florist blossom

RICHARD KOVLER

Following is a letter from an Israeli businesswoman helped by the TeaneckShuls list.

Just before Pesach I was going to have to close down my flower and plant shop in the San Simor/Behavia area of Jerusalem.

For five years I had owned a quite successful business and employed four flower arrangers in the store and two other people to work outside maintaining gardens.

However, due to the terrible security situation with attacks and murders happening every day, the economy was (and still is) in a terrible state, with no tourists and local customers frightened to go out of their own homes. Every day yet more businesses were going bust ... putting more people out of work.

Many of us held on, hoping things would get better, but they did not (and still have not), and every month we were getting more into debt.

Before Pesach things were in particular very bad. I told my workers that we could not hold on any more; there were no orders of flowers for Pesach. I did not know if I would be able to pay wages in full before the chag.

Then a miracle happened. Five days before chag I was called at 8 p.m. by an American lady to urgently repair a burst water pipe in the irrigation system of her roof garden which was leaking water into her downstairs neighbor's apartment. She seemed desperate, so I went even though it was late. I repaired the water system for her. The lady was very grateful and asked how she could repay me. Jokingly I asked her to send me customers to buy flowers for yom tov and save my business.

She replied that maybe she could. She gave me the shul's e-mail address and told me to write.

That night, to the sound of ambulances rushing to yet another terrorist attack, I

wrote an e-mail asking if anybody would like to cheer up their family or friends in Israel by sending them flowers. The next morning I had close to 30 orders from the Teaneck community, sending flowers all over Israel. Over the next few days other people e-mailed or telephoned me with more orders. I had enough orders before Pesach to keep my business going, pay my workers, and also to cheer up a lot of people in Israel who received flowers from family and friends in the States.

Since then there has been a steady stream of orders from America and I can now send flowers and other gifts on behalf of overseas customers anywhere in Israel. Because of this I have managed to keep my store going, saved the jobs of my workers, and managed to pass on a lot of business to other stores around Israel. I have made contact with other communities in America, and with donations from well wishers in the States, have helped set up a gemach (fund) for other stores in need of help to keep on going.

I am involved with sending gifts to victims of Arab terror and to underprivileged children here from children in America who also want to be pen pals with them. I have collected over \$5,000, which was passed on to Miriam Adani to buy hot meals, underclothes, and toiletries for soldiers on the front lines.

None of the above would have been possible without the initial overwhelming and generous response of the Teaneck community, who gave me enough business to keep me going when everything seemed hopeless.

Lastly I have gained new friends through e-mail and have had the pleasure of meeting several of them when they have come to visit friends and family here.

Best wishes,
Richard Kovler
Richard's Flower Shop
Jerusalem

List FROM PAGE 8

nish their home as well as [the home of] another Israeli shaliach. I was overwhelmed by the generosity of the community and, needless to say, the family felt great about their choice to move here. Since then ... I have spoken to many wonderful people in our amazing kehilla [community] involved in tzedakah and Israel!"

A woman living in Israel came back to the United States to find help for her frail elderly mother in Great Neck, Long Island. The search proved fruitless until a friend put a notice on the list.

Terry Novetsky wrote, "My father, who has recently been confined to a wheelchair, came to visit from Michigan. We searched for quite a while, but were unable to find a store that rented ramps" to make the house accessible. "I put a request on TeaneckShuls at 2 p.m. We received 20 responses the first day, and responses continued for over two weeks. We appreciated deeply the chesed of those whose ramps we have used and those who volunteered their ramps."

Novetsky added, "I have repeated this story to encourage other communities to create a similar group. [It is] precisely these type of matters — not worthy of shul announcements or posting fliers ... [that] a community Internet chat group can service in a manner previously inconceivable in its breadth... Each shiva notice, kashrus question, or request for a ride is quickly routed from those in need to those willing to provide for that need. (Of course, there are many requests that lack a 'weighty' nature, but that's really what the scroll down key was designed for.)"

A representative of TefilatChana.org, a message board community for Jewish women experiencing infertility or pregnancy loss, wrote that the group was able to "add an adoption expert, a fertility specialist, and many members to [its] site. Even the simple ability to let women know about the site without having to target them directly was truly valuable. Tefilat Chana is committed to maintaining the privacy of its members and listserves like TeaneckShuls have made that possible."

"A lot of what people ask about or say is narishkeit," said Lindenbaum, "but it's all community in action: people looking for recipes, rides, people who don't want to open up a phone book — a community with all its warts and all its beauty."

Three recent postings culled from the listings:

"Does anyone have any ideas of how to remove the residue left by those sticky hands/eyeballs kids get in goody bags from a painted wall?"

"My son left his knapsack at home this morning, if anyone is going to Kushner in Livingston please call me."

"I would like to borrow an adult size gorilla costume (large or extra large) for a party. If you have one, please e-mail me."

To subscribe, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/teaneckshuls>.



COMMUNITY

Scholar, former Muslim on the Protocols, Paterson



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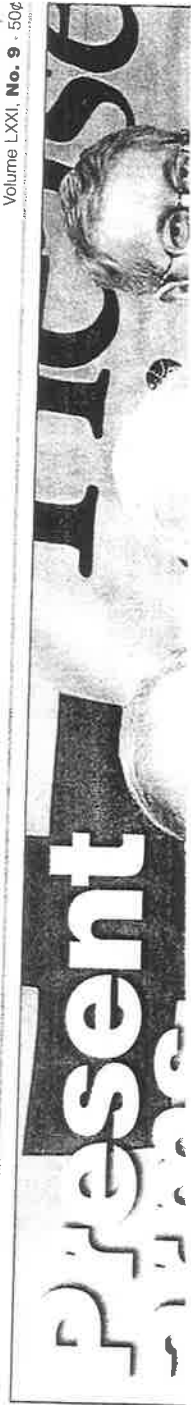


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