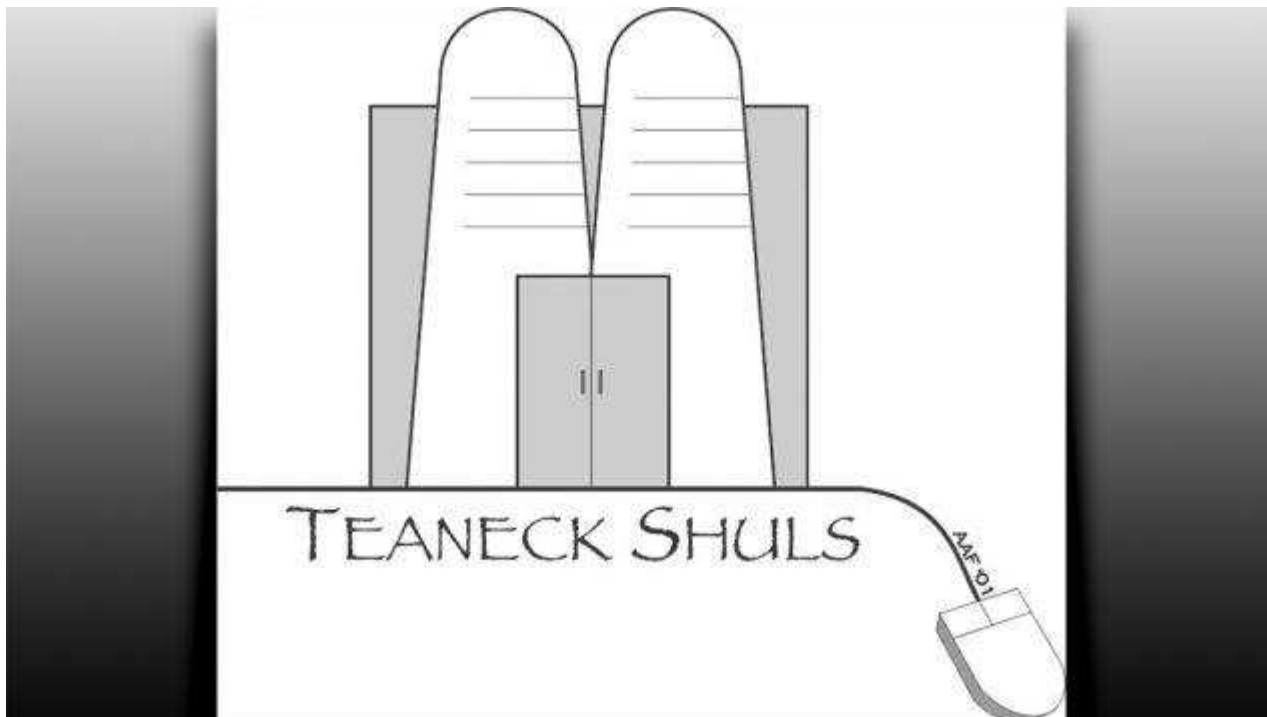


Return to sender

TeaneckShuls mailing list leaves Yahoo Groups for Groups.io

BY LARRY YUDELSON | February 1, 2018, 11:55 am |

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Ruthie Levi doesn't want this story to be about her.

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Ms. Levi is one of the four people who oversee the electronic mailing list called TeaneckShuls.

TeaneckShuls has more than 14,000 members and it sends out dozens of messages a day. As of Monday, it has sent a total of 414,846 messages

since it was launched in October 2000.

One of the moderators reviews

each one of the messages sent to the list, to make sure it adheres to policies designed to ensure that they are both useful and focused. The messages approved on a recent evening included requests — for a Mahjong set, for a freezer, for a recommendation for a handyman who repairs decks, for a ride to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and for teachers for a preschool in West Orange. There were also offers to sell — an iPhone, a drum set, and diapers all were available for the right price. And there was an announcement that a canvas sukkah and outdoor furniture all were available for the taking.

The moderators are not in it for the glory.

“If I could change something from when we started, we should have been anonymous moderators,” Ms. Levi said. “The name recognition is beyond crazy.”

The other three moderators are Bryan Alter, Kevie Feit, and Bernie Suskewicz.

Now, though, they seek a bit of publicity because of the biggest transition in the list’s 17-year history. As of last week, TeaneckShuls no longer is hosted by Yahoo Groups. Instead, it runs on Groups.io, an email service created by the original inventor of Yahoo Groups. And while behind-the-scenes magic ensured that the messages continue to flow, that all the subscribers migrated, that inboxes that once overflowed with messages from TeaneckShuls-noreply@yahoogroups.com now are being filled by messages from TeaneckShuls@groups.io, there still is the more difficult matter of changing human behavior.

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So, a week into the transition, there’s still the need to get the word out: Posts to the mailing list should be sent to teaneckshuls@groups.io.

For TeaneckShuls, the move to Groups.io is a bit of a return home. The list was launched on the eGroups platform in October 2000, shortly after Yahoo bought eGroups and before it was rebranded as Yahoo Groups. Mark Fletcher, the programmer who started eGroups in the first place (and who posts on Twitter and elsewhere under the less-than-kosher moniker of WingedPig) launched Groups.io in 2014.

The transition was years in the making. Those who follow the rise and fall of internet companies know the story of Yahoo's rise in the 1990s as a curated guide to everything worth viewing on the World Wide Web. But the 21st century brought many corporate acquisitions and restructurings, culminating in Verizon's purchase of Yahoo last year. Throughout this time, Yahoo's various internet services, including Yahoo Groups, languished.

For Ms. Levi and her fellow moderators, this was immensely frustrating.

"About two years ago, we noticed that Yahoo Groups was starting to deteriorate in terms of service and ability to deliver messages in a timely fashion," she said. "It was clear to us, though this was not evident to the end user member."

So the moderators — the "Mod Squad," as they call themselves — started researching alternatives to Yahoo. By December, they were ready to try out Groups.io. They shifted an announcement only list to which only 20 or so synagogue administrators posted and only about 1,000 readers received, to the new service. That worked well — though it was relatively easy to retrain such a small group to use a new email address.

"That will be a little more difficult for TeaneckShuls," Ms. Levi said.

The moderators had planned for the transition to take place this weekend — until a Yahoo outage last week led them to move up the timetable.

"We decided to let it fly," Ms. Levi said.

Now, Yahoo Groups is back up — which means the TeaneckShul moderators can see the errant posts sent to the old email address and reply with a request to repost to the new address.

"If the message is super important, we won't delay that," she said. "People are learning. We had about five messages to the old list today. The daily message load is 40 to 50."

Ms. Levi likes the new service.

"A lot of the cosmetic things appear nicer," she said. "The creator is hands on. He responds to our emails. We noticed some bugs. I wrote to Mark — and presto! he fixed them. His responsiveness is off the charts."

It doesn't hurt that TeaneckShuls is the largest group on his platform.

Unlike Yahoo Groups, the new platform charges a fee: \$100 a year for each list. Rather than collecting a penny from each subscriber, the moderators are paying for it themselves. Compared to the hundreds of hours they volunteer, the money isn't very much. And the new platform has time-saving features, like an easy way for the moderators to send out detailed form letters when they reject a post for violating the list guidelines.

Ms. Levi joined the Mod Squad back in 2000, not long after Nathan J. Lindenbaum and Chaim Shulman started the group.

"I had some criticism and I said at the same time, if you need help, I'm eager to help," she said. "Famous last words.

"The hardest part is the continuous nature of it. People expect you are going to post their request for a babysitter in FedEx time. Every time you sit down at your desk there are pending messages. If you're going to a movie for two hours and the other guys are on vacation, you feel the pressure. People expect their messages will be approved or rejected in real time."

Also unpleasant: Having to reject people. For every 60 posts that go out on a typical day, there might be another 15 or 20 that are rejected.

"There's push back and conversations and replies," she said.

"Rejections are not personal," she said, with an adamancy that makes you think that she's had to repeat that message far more than once. "We don't look at the name of the person we are rejecting. We aim to be fair.

"I too had a home for sale. I made sure to post it only every four weeks," as the rules mandate. "It's a long list of rules, because there are a lot of situations that come up. We can't possibly think of every scenario and codify it. There are judgment calls. At the end of the day it's only an email list."

The list is named Teaneck Shuls, but subscribers span the globe.

"The child of a friend of mine in Israel went to Camp Moshava, in Pennsylvania. He broke his glasses over Shabbat. My friend contacted me Sunday morning asking if I had a way to get a new pair of glasses from Israel to Moshava. Monday morning, the kid has his glasses in Moshava."

That said, the list has limited geographic scopes. “We’re not here to help every Jew everywhere,” she said. The core geography is Teaneck, Bergenfield, and New Milford. Those are the only towns whose residents are allowed to post real estate listings, and where the synagogues post their announcements.

If you’re looking for a housekeeper, on the other hand, you can post from anywhere in Bergen County.

“We don’t want there to be a hundred messages a day,” she said. “We want to be readable.” In fact, the list traffic has dropped steadily. In 2010, 32,156 messages went out. Last year, there were only 16,479. Ms. Levi attributes this to stronger moderation, and dropping occasional “business weeks” that allowed for the posting of commercial messages.

Among the nearly half a million messages, there are some that seem like miracles.

“We’ve done three kidney matches,” Ms. Levi said. “To be able to save a life through an email list? That’s unbelievable.

“What I’m most proud of are the crises. Hurricane Sandy? We rocked it. We were a vehicle for information people relied on. It was beautiful. We were telling them where they could get hot food, where they could get gas. We pride ourselves on never putting out rumors. We verify information during times of crises.”

Instructions on how to subscribe are at www.teaneckshuls.org.