

Cyber-Rabbi To the Rescue!

A few weeks ago, my good friend Sarah and I were sitting in her Perry Street apartment, watching *Brady Bunch* reruns on cable. At the commercial breaks, we chatted about her upcoming wedding, everything from the politics of choosing bridesmaids to the minutiae of color schemes to the all-important question that torments so many prospective brides and grooms of my generation: Who will perform the ceremony?

Sarah is Jewish and Sam, her fiancé, is Christian, so the question of which religious community to go to for an officiant has become the central drama of their wedding.

As the conversation lulled and I looked to the television, Sarah suddenly blurted out, "Sam and I might be married by a cyber-rabbi."

The announcement was rather surprising. Sarah is a family therapist and probably the least cyber-savvy person I know. She was the last of my friends to get an e-mail account, and she would rather spend a day canning vegetables or dusting her apartment than sinking into the neon bliss of *Wired* magazine or skipping down the information superhighway.

She is also the least religious Jew I know. She doesn't go to temple. She wasn't bat mitzvahed, and every year she throws a Christmas tree-trimming party, complete with chocolate-covered stocking stuffers and Secret Santas. At her family gatherings, there is a better chance of meeting a Buddhist monk in full saffron robes than a rabbi.

I'll never forget when one of Sarah's therapy patients, who she was convinced hated her, finally opened up when she discovered that Sarah was Jewish. But then, during the week of Rosh Hashanah, as the patient was leaving Sarah's office she turned and said, "Lo shona tova." Sarah later admitted that all she could offer back was an awkward smile.

"Now she not only thinks I'm a fraud as a therapist, but she thinks I'm a fraud as a Jew," she said.

So I was more than a little surprised when she told me she would be married by a rabbi, let alone one she had found on the Internet. As she turned off the TV and flipped on her computer, all I could imagine was a ceremony in which she and Sam were launched into marital bliss by a talking head in a yarmulke.

Now, I'm definitely not a Luddite. I may not think that technology is going to sail us into utopia, but I get it. I know that a cookie is Internet marketing software used to gather personal information on potential Web customers; I worry about too much government regulation of the Internet; and the most personal piece of paper mail I've received in months was one of those mass-produced, phony hand-addressed letters that companies use to trick you into opening their promotions. But it still struck me as odd that Sarah would choose to search the Internet for the person who would commit her and Sam for the rest of their lives. The decision seemed to point to something more profound than just the latest route to information.

"I wasn't actually looking for a rabbi in cyberspace," she admitted. "But while I was surfing for other wedding information, I happened to click on his Web site. His name is Rabbi Dave. He's post-denominational."

What did that mean—that he had moved beyond being a Jew?

Sarah pointed to her computer screen. A voice echoed Shalom, then a picture appeared of a smiling man with a shiny forehead and a caption reading Rabbi Dave.

"Doesn't he look warm?" she asked.

"Have you met him yet?" I asked.

"No, we've been playing telephone tag."

She picked up the receiver, dialed, then handed me the phone to listen:

"Hi, Sarah and Sam, this is Rabbi Dave. I want to congratulate you. You can call me back at this number. I hope I can be of some service on your special day."

He sounded friendly enough and surprisingly professional, as if he had done this a lot.

"He wants Sam and me to meet him at the Holiday Inn on 57th Street next week," she said.



I laughed out loud.

"And did he specify that you wear a certain brand of sneakers?" I asked.

Sarah didn't respond. In fact, she seemed somewhat defensive. "I don't have a religious community," she said. "My family doesn't have a rabbi. I didn't know where to turn except to the Internet."

I looked toward the screen and read Rabbi Dave's opening statement. "Let me begin by disappointing you and saying that post-denominational is not a movement, per se. In fact, it is the antithesis of a formal movement in Judaism; it is no movement. It is simply the realization that the division of Judaism into movements and labels does no real service to the Jewish people. It pigeonholes people within an often political and politicized grouping, defining the individual all too often in a way that he or she may not wish to be categorized."

I realized that the statement sort of described the way I feel about Judaism. Like Sarah, I identify myself as a Jew, but I wasn't given a religious education and therefore don't feel a part of any Jewish community. Last Rosh Hashanah, my mother called and asked, "Did you at least eat something Jewish?"

"No," I said. "I had sushi."

So I sympathized with Sarah's dilemma and what might have drawn her to Rabbi Dave's on-line congregation. After all, we live in a techno-worshipping culture. As the performance artist Laurie Anderson has said, the Internet and television have become the campfires around which we tell our stories.

And I think talk-show hosts have become the media priests to whom we confess. As the old ties of community dissolve into add-water-and-stir gated housing, home shopping networks and drive-through superstores, the Internet has become the place where old roots rejoin to grow new groups. Actually, I prefer to think of it as one big Jewish family, Web site upon Web site, screaming over one another to be heard. So I guess it's not completely absurd that Sarah might find a religious bond through a spontaneous mouse click.

But still, a rabbi who wants to meet at the Holiday Inn?

Sarah agreed this was a little odd.

"He keeps calling me," she said. "He doesn't even know me. He's beginning to sound like a salesman."

A few days later, Sarah called me to say Rabbi Dave was out. In fact, she and Sam had decided not to have a religious ceremony at all. They had found a woman who worked for a biotechnology company on the Internet who also performed wedding ceremonies.

"She started marrying people as a second job because she likes that this work involves being with people on the happiest day of their lives," Sarah said. "I decided that was enough for me."

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