

## Online forum debates the big theological issues

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Written by Josh Green  
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TORONTO – There is yet another forum to debate and discuss major theological issues in Judaism – good and evil, heaven and hell, sex and relationships – one capable of accommodating infinitely more than two Jews and their three opinions.

Last Tuesday, the American-based Aleph Society launched TheGlobalDay.com's Big Questions Initiative, an online campaign meant to ignite across the religious spectrum an interest in spiritual knowledge. The enterprise is part of the run-up to the Global Day of Jewish Learning scheduled for Nov. 7.

Planned by the Aleph Society, which supports the worldwide efforts of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the day will celebrate the ceremonial completion of Rabbi Steinsaltz's edition of the Talmud. This monumental accomplishment, a 45-year undertaking begun in 1965 at age 27, has made the ancient source more accessible to people without a Torah background by translating the original Aramaic text and adding his own commentary.

Accessibility is certainly the scholar's goal as his comprehensive volumes already appear in English, French, Hebrew and Russian, with a Spanish version still in the works.

"We don't spread knowledge," said the Aleph Society's executive director, Margy-Ruth Davis, quoting Rabbi Steinsaltz. "We're giving the Jews back their patrimony."

The online component provides a similar benefit of convenience. Users are able to view the weekly topic, a brief message from Rabbi Steinsaltz on the subject and additional readings, including a five-year archive of summaries on the daily Talmud portion. The web site's visitors can also post their own comments. Thus, depending on the desired level of participation, users can spend "as little or as much (time) as you want," said Ilan Kaufthal, international chair of the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

The forum, however, does not claim to present an authoritative, exhaustive rabbinical answer to complex religious questions.

"There is no 'right' answer," said Kaufthal. "[It's about] uniting Jews in conversation regardless of what their views might be." Well, sort of. The discussion will be reviewed and any irrelevant or inappropriate posts will be erased.

With the endorsement of governing bodies, leaders and other institutions within the Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements, the campaign definitely cuts a broad swathe across the Jewish spectrum.

Rabbi Steinsaltz's prominence is the basis of the unified support, explains Kaufthal. "[He] is so highly regarded from the extreme right to the extreme left.... His stature and reputation is the single most important reason why they decided to come on."

Rabbi Steinsaltz, exalted by Time magazine in 1988 as a "once-in-a-millennium scholar," explains his quest for accessibility by saying that "the Talmud belongs to all Jews and not just a special sect or elite group.... We are awakening Jews to their shared heritage."

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