

# Exegetical responsa websites in the religious-nationalist sector : changes and trends / Efraim Margalit

## Abstract

Questions and answers have been associated with our nation since the beginning of time. After the exodus from Egypt, Moses was faced with many dilemmas, such as the question of Zelophehad's daughters' inheritance or the issue of *Pessach Sheini*. Questions which were posed to the Jewish scholars during the period after the destruction of the Second Temple were documented in the Talmud, and the discussions surrounding them have become an integral part of that opus.

The Responsa literature, as a genre in itself, began in the period of the *geonim* (7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries) and is still popular to this day. Latter day *poskim* - Jewish law adjudicators – base their rulings on the words of the generations which preceded them, layer upon layer.

Thirteen hundred years of creative effort document the development of the *halacha* – Jewish law – over the generations, while also allowing for alternative viewpoints. Responsa literature deals with the practical world, and as such, documents Jewish life over generations all over the world. The questions reflect the issues that occupied the Jewish communities, their relationship to the environment, the languages they spoke, the names of the people and places in which they lived, as well as the crises and the tragedies, the days of glory and the low points of their communities. First and foremost, the Responsa expresses the *halachic* discourse, but it also illustrates the *psika* methodology and styles of ruling, and affords a glance at the complexity of the responders' world – the dilemmas, the doubts, the ambivalence and the ultimate decisions.

Jewish law Responsa sites were born in a generation of technological revolution, revolving around the internet and smartphones, enabling the continuous availability of and access to information, and cultural revolution, involving the transition to knowledge communities and social networks. The Jewish law Responsa sites, with an emphasis on those identified with the Orthodox Zionist sector, reflect or, according to some, have initiated, a revolution in religious discourse. Today, this revolution directly affects the Rabbi's position within the community, the independence of individuals in the community and women's relatively new position as questioners and responders.

Responsa websites have provided accessibility to *halachic* information, offering comprehensive retrieval capabilities. Furthermore, they furnish a platform for all, regardless of gender, age or background, to ask *halachic* questions and seek advice intimately and anonymously, quickly and directly. The effect of these abilities has, on the one hand, been defined as the greatest broadcaster of the *Torah* in our generation, as Rabbi Eliyahu (2008) defined them. But, on the other hand, these sites have created

new and more direct communication channels with the responders, generating a more democratic discussion and altering the position of the Rabbi by positioning him more as an advisor, rather than an adjudicator.

The era of Responsa sites in Israel began in 2001, with the establishment of three sites, almost simultaneously: Kipa, Moreshet and Yeshiva, the subjects of this study. These three sites are the central Responsa sites in Israel and reflect variations of Orthodox Zionist views.

The main goal was to learn about the sites, about those who post questions, the contents of inquiries, the responders and their responses.

This study is unique in that it is the first to examine the internet Responsa based on all the questions and answers in the main sites. We have downloaded and analyzed over 300,000 questions and answers from the three sites from 2001-2015, reflecting a decade and a half of activity.

The internet Responsa are different from the classic Responsa. In order to clarify: from the quantitative aspect, the number of questions/responses in classic Responsa literature is evaluated by Professor Glick to be around 650,000. "Bar-Ilan's Responsa Project" contains about 100,000 questions/responses. Internet Responsa are shorter and the total number of words is about 50,000,000, compared to 200,000,000 words in "Bar Ilan's Responsa Project".

Within the framework of this study we developed methodologies and tools, the first being the ability to quickly and simply analyze the semantic context of the sentences. Using this method, we were able to identify the questioner's gender and conclude whether the question was posted anonymously or not.

We integrated machine-learning capabilities in order to determine the subject matters of the questions, and heuristic capabilities in order to classify responses as either stringent or lenient.

The main conclusions of the study are varied. Firstly, internet Responsa seems to be at the end of its prime, after its peak in 2009-2011. We are witness to a continuous decline in the number of posted questions. Gender analysis of the posters shows that most of inquiries are made by males; although women still represent a high 44% of the inquirers, their number has decreased from a little over 50% in 2007 and has been declining ever since.

Regarding the subject matter of the questions, the most common topics relate to the Sabbath and holidays (22%), followed by daily issues (17%) and marital relations and family (13%). This is in contrast to the speculation, based on the literature review, that family issues and sexuality were the leading issues.

240 responders were identified, individuals and groups, from all of the Orthodox Zionist spectrum – liberal, central, Ultra-orthodox Zionists and even Ultra-orthodox. Most of the responses are provided by individuals: 4 responders answered about a third of the inquiries, and about half of the questions were answered by another 10 responders. At the top of the list was Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, who responded to 48,000

questions, which represent 15% of the total. Next we find Rabbi Abraham Yosef (9%) and Rabbi David Lau (4.5%).

We might have assumed that the internet Responsa sites would provide an ideal platform for woman responders; however, the women's Judaic ruling revolution did not manifest itself on this platform, and women constitute only a minority of the responders. Some women answer in their own name, while others post as part of a group, mainly "*Haverim Makshivim*" and "*Rabbanei beit Hillel*". The leading female responder is the Rebbitzin Shulamith Ben-Shaya, who responded to 164 questions.

Regarding the rulings, we examined the wording and the terms used in the "bottom line" to determine if they were lenient or stringent. We found that the general discussion leaned towards leniency (57%), in contrast to our supposition. Also, in contrast to the speculation, we found differences along the Orthodox spectrum and between ethnic groups to be minor.

A medium-positive connection was found between the number of responses by an individual to the leniency/stringency issue. In our opinion, perhaps those who respond more often are more attentive to their public and therefore lean more toward leniency.

Differences were found between the sites. The Kipa site represents more of the liberal and central Orthodox movements. Ultra-orthodox responders are rare here. Women are very active on this site, and at times women posted 62% of the questions. On the other hand, the Yeshiva site represents the conservative, Ultra-orthodox Zionist sector. It is smaller, most of the inquiries are posted by males and no liberal responders are to be found here. The most conservative aspect of this site is that, in contrast to the two other sites, there is no opportunity to react to the responder's answer. In contrast to our assumption, the Moreshet site's gender characteristics were found to be closer to that of the Yeshiva site. However, the responders represent the whole spectrum.

From an informetric standpoint, differences were found between the lengths of the questions posed by males and females, with the women's questions being somewhat longer, and rewarded with longer answers. Also, stringent responses tended to be longer than lenient responses.

When comparing classic and internet Responsa, both similarities and differences were found. The internet Responsa is aimed at the general public, whereas the classic is intended for *Torah* scholars. The internet Responsa is designed not only for inquiries regarding Jewish law, but serves as a consultation platform and as an educational arena as well. The discourse is more condensed and is less intensive. One of the criticisms of the internet Responsa sites is that it's somewhat lacking in explanations, which casts doubt on its viability for long term preservation.

To summarize, the internet Responsa reflects the revolution in the Orthodox discourse, a revolution that is still at large. We observe that the weight of the discourse will move from the Responsa sites to the social networks and the communal interaction within communities. The affect this will have on the Rabbi's position, on the centrality of the individual and on women's place.

**System No.**  
002471738