

• By DAVID SHAMAH

Israel is a hi-tech and Internet powerhouse. But it wasn't always this way. In fact, Brooklyn native Jacob Richman, 51, well remembers the days when he was Israel's "Mr. Internet" – the only guy in town who knew anything about what would soon become a mainstay of the Israeli economy.

"I was already playing around with the Internet in the late 1980s, so I was pretty familiar with what was available when I made aliya in 1994," he says. "Shortly afterwards, the first browsers started coming out and there was a buzz of excitement."

The buzz meant people wanted to learn, and Richman was well-placed to help.

"I was the only person in the country who knew Hebrew well enough to speak to Israeli audiences," he explains, "and English well enough to gather the information to communicate to them!" As a result, he was recruited to speak to audiences of professionals all around the country, from IBM technicians to doctors and pharmaceutical engineers at Teva.

Nowadays, of course, Israel has many Internet pros – but in an important sense, Richman is still "Mr. Internet." As the author of a series of educational Web sites that feature Jewish and Israeli content – as well as the writer of one of the most important newsletters for hi-tech professionals in the country – Richman has thousands of fans in Israel and around the world who learned a little about Judaism and Zionism from his <http://jr.co.il> sites, or who found a job as a result of a newsletter he prepares on computer jobs in Israel.

Calling himself "an Internet consultant who develops educational Web sites and conducts seminars on social media," Richman says he has done most of the

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CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME. Ma'aleh Adumim Mayor Benny Kashriel (left) recognizes Richman (second from left) last June for his Internet work on behalf of the community.

Mr. Internet (well, in Israel at least)

For many Israelis, Jacob Richman has been a personal portal onto the World Wide Web

work on his 30 or so sites, with a little help from Web coders and graphic artists. Besides the sites, Richman has posted some 7,000 photos of life in Israel, ranging from major events to the goings-on in his hometown of Ma'aleh Adumim.

Each holiday, Richman whips up a special Web site. This past Hanukka, for example, he put up a page with links to no fewer than 171 holiday-related videos. And just last week he introduced his latest site, "My Hebrew Programs," which provides applications ranging from a program for making Hebrew signs to another that prints out the appropriate prayers to recite when visiting a loved one's grave. Other notable Richman sites include "My Hebrew Songbook," with music and lyrics to over 200 classics; a "Jewish wisdom"

database, with over 3,000 proverbs and sayings; a Jewish clipart database; and a "hot site list," with links to over 1,500 Jewish and Israeli Web sites.

Chances are you've somehow used or benefited from a Richman site without even realizing it.

Richman's fan base stretches far beyond Israel. He gets letters from the US and Europe, and even from such far-flung places as Australia and Alaska. He's even got fans on the high seas.

"I recently got an e-mail from someone on an aircraft carrier, where they had only one room available for all religious services," he says. "A sailor wanted to know how best to decorate the room to give it the proper atmosphere when Jewish services were held there." Richman did a bit of research

and sent back practical suggestions that would work at sea.

Perhaps the project he's most proud of is his "Computer Jobs in Israel" newsletter, which he sends out every few weeks, listing the latest hi-tech openings. "I've gotten many letters of appreciation from people who found their jobs through that list," Richman says.

BORN AND RAISED in New York City – he attended Yeshiva high school and Brooklyn College – Richman took to Israel the moment he got off the plane. "I remember the day I made aliya and what a great feeling it was," he says. Fortunately, he wasn't alone; his parents, who had lived in Israel years earlier – his mother is from an old-line Jerusalem family and his father came

in 1922 – returned two years before.

And Richman, who is unmarried, has never looked back.

“The last time I was out of the country was when I was working for Intel,” says Richman. “They sent me on a business trip, which was fine, but I was very happy to get home. I know many Israelis have a ‘travel bug’ and love to roam the world, but I’m perfectly fine right here.”

What, no American shopping?

“No need – nowadays, we have everything here anyway. When I first came

Richman says he has done most of the work on his 30 or so sites, with a little help from Web coders and graphic artists

[after college] in 1984, things were a little tough materially, but today? There’s nothing you can’t get here.” And if it costs a bit more, he says, the extra expense is more than offset by the money you save on airfare.

That said, Richman wouldn’t mind a taste of New York now and then.

“The one thing I really do miss is browsing in a big Barnes and Noble,” he says. “I used to spend my lunch hour at the big one in midtown. Unfortunately there’s nothing even close to that size in Israel.”

True, he can browse all he wants on the Internet, but ironically for someone like Richman, the Internet just isn’t a good enough substitute.

And a good-sized English language bookstore would come in handy, Richman says.

“After all this time in Israel, I mostly read English still and my Hebrew accent is definitely not ‘Israeli.’ I also can’t get into some of the pop culture events, like the conclusion of the Israeli ‘Big Brother’ program, like the natives.”

But still, he knows he made the right choice.

“I remember going to my dad’s office – on the 82nd floor of the World Trade Center,” he relates. “Who knows what might have happened to us if we all hadn’t made aliya? Israel may have its problems, but for the Jewish people it’s definitely home.” ●

