

Article

How Do Religious “Ask the Expert Sites” Shape Online Religious Authorities? From Clerics to Online Influencers

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Abstract: Over the past two decades, religious websites have gained immense popularity and have become dynamic platforms for sparking discourse, practice, and modes of leadership. The internet has allowed religious leaders to reach more believers than ever before and compete for online followership. How do religious leaders negotiate their authority through online information outlets? This study explores religious “Ask the Rabbi” websites specializing in religious Jewish knowledge. The corpus is composed of 50,799 Q&A public messages between rabbis and laypeople, asked and posted from 2005 to 2019. The findings point to a shift in the authority of religious Q&A websites from the initial authority endowed to the websites through the institutionally well-known rabbis who participated on the platform. Over time, however, these websites became public spheres of learning where little-known rabbis could establish their popularity. Textual analysis revealed that the writing style evolved from short answers with few cited sources to richly sourced essays. This may suggest that online religious Q&As have shifted from being viewed as a way to contact well-known rabbis to a legitimate forum for religious discourse and selecting spiritual guidance. The discussion centers on this socio-religious change in the information age where clerics harness the web to hone their craft, recruit their flock, and ultimately, constitute their authority.

Keywords: digital religion; religious authority; big data

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, religious websites have gained immense popularity and they have become dynamic platforms for sparking discourse, practice, and modes of leadership. New media communication channels are being utilized for the learning and expression of religious content, and in so doing, they are creating online venues for communal interactions among believers.

The emergence of religious, new media outlets and platforms for communal interaction has enabled believers to gain access to multiple information resources. This has elicited concern on the part of educational and religious leaders who fear the decline of traditional sources of knowledge distribution and socialization (Ferguson et al. 2021; Golan and Don 2022). A further concern stems from the apparent erosion of clearly defined religious leadership, since leaders today must compete with a multiplicity of theological and spiritual resources both online and offline that propose new directions in terms of belief and reach out to new publics. Although a number of studies have highlighted the secularization processes that tend to dilute participation in offline venues (churches and religious seminaries) (Jörg Stolz et al. 2016), others underscore the growing impact of new media outlets for learning, affirming, and expanding religious worldviews (Golan and Martini 2020). Despite the expansion of new media outlets that are set up and run by clerics, little is known about the ways that content is negotiated, how religious authority is established over online platforms and acknowledged by believers, or the ways in which religious knowledge is conveyed by these clerics. This study is designed to better understand how “ask the expert” sites shape online religious authority.

Specifically, this study focuses on the Jewish religious Zionist (RZ) community, which is prolific in its production and consumption of online responsa. This community embraces modernity and new media, while remaining highly involved in religious learning and practice. It examines the RZ community's use of "ask a rabbi" sites, in which laypeople ask rabbis questions, ranging from issues related to day-to-day religious observance to pivotal questions on major decisions in life.

This analysis of online authority in the RZ community can also shed light on analogous questions of general online authority, since it examines how experts build their online reputations, how user activity adapts to new information hubs over time, and the generational differences in the perception of online forums as a legitimate space for knowledge creation. It is shown that understanding how religious knowledge is accessed, created online, and whose voices are amplified or diminished, points to new forms of leadership, and reveals changes in worldview/religious epistemology and the adaptations undergone by religious authority in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

Online Responsa and Information Hubs

"Religious responsa" as a genre consist of the composition of questions and answers on legal, theological, and personal matters. This includes all issues where religious authorities are consulted either by peer authorities or by laypeople. For centuries, responsa have been a mode of communication allowing religious authorities to address pressing matters of the era, whether personal or communal. Responsa also enable these experts to extend their influence beyond their immediate circles.

In structural terms, responsa are a rhetorical form of conversation, framed as a dialogue between two parties that enable the construction of meaning-making (following Bakhtin's scholarly legacy of dialogue analysis, [Smith and Sparkes 2008](#)). Unlike codex law, responsa are ordered in a less formal and more eclectic manner. Their format often corresponds to a demand for knowledge from an expert. While the inquirers are not always identified, the recipients are fully acknowledged in most cases. Thus, responsa can be seen as a form of socialization as well as a way of recognizing a figure as an authority. By exploring responsa, the relationships between believers and their religious leadership, the self-perception of religious leaders, and their respective authority can be assessed (see [Lieberman 2017](#); [Elon 1993](#); [Soloveitchik 1990](#)) and, in line with the legacy of Orsi, in *Lived Religion* ([Hall 1997](#); [Orsi 2010](#)), the beliefs, practices, and everyday experiences of believers can better be grasped.

Authority in responsa differs across religions. In Catholicism, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is the only body that is officially legitimized to issue responsa. In contrast, Islam allows all Muftis or Ulmas to issue a Fatwa. While the extent of authority among religious clergy varies, the personal reasoning of individual religious authorities is independent of others.

In the Rabbinic literature, "*Sheelot ve Tshuvot*", or literally, "Questions and Answers", is the Hebrew term for responsa. Jewish responsa date back more than 1700 years and are found in a multitude of communities worldwide ([Elon 1993](#)). They are discursively classified by their school of thought ([Glick 2006](#)). The Jewish responsa literature comprises questions asked by the communities of the diaspora who lack a religious leader, and in cases where the local religious leader sought peer consultation ([Lieberman 2017](#)). These questions and answers have become part and parcel of the legal fabric of Jewish law and shape it to this day. An extensive body of research has examined religious responsa from a theological as well as a sociological perspective ([Soloveitchik 1990](#)).

In the 1990s, as interactive online tracts became popular, platforms emerged that facilitated questions between experts and laypeople. Concurrently, there was an explosion of websites providing access to religious information and authorities. Jewish websites supporting "online responsa" (e.g., [AskMoses.com](#) (accessed on 2 January 2023)¹) also proliferated in multiple countries and languages. Today, there is an ongoing debate as to

the relationship between “online responsa” and traditional responsa. [Brown \(2016\)](#) for example viewed “online responsa” as a departure from the traditional format of written responsa, and considered it as essentially distinct and arguably misleading in its framing as an (online) “response”. He claimed that online responsa may resemble oral conversations between regional rabbis and their congregants, but do not represent the Rabbinic genre of responsa literature.

On the other hand, a growing number of researchers consider online responsa to be a direct continuation of Rabbinical literature. Some have adopted a more cautious approach to identifying this distinction, such as Ruth Tsuria’s designation of “online Q&A” rather than “online responsa” ([Tsuria 2016](#); see also, [Steinitz 2011](#)), while others have disregarded this distinction to emphasize the common objective of catering to interested individuals on religious matters, albeit on a public forum ([Gottesman 2009](#); [Pitkowsky 2011](#)). Overall, in terms of its audience, the traditional responsa literature alternates between targeting elite Orthodox Rabbinical circles, which are seen as peer scholars, and educating the general lay public. While the scope of this study does not include a systematic comparison between the traditional properties of responsa literature and that of ‘online responsa’, some commonalities can be noted, all of which points to the key reasons for its popularity among religious Jews, while underscoring the characteristics and functions of responsa.

The traditional responsa literature is primarily written in an authoritative legal format, with the underlying assumption that it will be utilized for rabbinical rulings related to their congregations. These texts include references to venerated sources and extensive analyses, which ultimately lead to the ruling. Rulings are often referenced in sermons, in later responsa, or in rabbinical courts that are called upon to consider and adjudicate related situations. In a responsa dialogue, a conflict or tension is played out in the inquirers’ question and is mostly resolved through the rabbinical retort. This rhetoric thus constitutes a pedagogical form of learning. Thus, responsa can be seen as a format for leaders to publicly articulate, display, and disseminate their rulings, opinions, and viewpoints.

Studies on responsa throughout history have used them to discover the folkways, norms, and mores that govern Jewish life. This information has been primarily explored by examining the social context, underlying assumptions, and data embedded in the inquirers’ questions or the rabbis’ answers ([Soloveitchik 1990](#); [Elon 1993](#)). More recently, studies have adapted their theoretical lens to fit contemporary conceptual frameworks. Two approaches can be identified: The first explores how responsa themselves have changed as a function of the internet. The second examines the ways in which responsa serve as a negotiative platform for social and communal discourse.

Research on changes in responsa have confirmed that the internet as a medium has impacted responsa discourse. [Gottesman \(2009\)](#) found that the traditionally authoritative language has taken on a less formal, and at times, antagonistic tone, as opposed to the traditionally respectful rhetoric. Internet online responsa are generally shorter and incorporate fewer citations than their traditional counterparts. This approach points to the ways in which the affordances and constraints of the internet affect how rabbis implement their rhetoric, legal methodology, and present their overall worldview. Scholarship that views online responsa from the second perspective has used online responsa to understand contemporary social trends and the *zeitgeist* among users and rabbis on the platform. In an analysis of questions about modern lifestyles and their relationship to the religious Zionist community (e.g., actresses performing in plays and homosexuality), [Malka \(2009\)](#) posited that online responsa strengthen moral and communal boundaries. Similarly, [Tsuria \(2016\)](#) showed that online responsa serve as a platform for sexual confessions. Drawing on Foucault, she discussed the online practice of self-regulation, and the ways in which online responsa are designed to invite confessionals, which cultivate regulation and sharpen moral boundaries.

Nevertheless, most scholars view responsa as a source of knowledge reflecting social history, practices, and forms of discourse. Questions as to how online responsa have

changed and matured over time have rarely been explored, particularly in relation to leadership and authority.

Here, we reasoned that online responsa may be viewed as a nexus for self-educating communities to acquire theological insights (see [Burbules 2006](#)). Online responsa can also be a tool for evaluating and interpreting religious lore and practice within an ever-expanding information environment. Finally, online responsa may be seen as a new performative format for religious leaders to popularize their religious interpretations, while enhancing their popularity among members of a religious community. To test these assumptions, this study centers on a specific religious community where online responsa have become increasingly prevalent; namely, the religious Zionist community in Israel.

3. Religious Authority

This study explores religious authority and its online manifestation. Religious authority can be viewed as a form of power relations that bear moral, ideological, and even legal structures.

[Weber \(1954\)](#) distinguished three types of “pure legitimate authority”, authority that is recognized as legitimate by both the ruler and the ruled. The first type described by Weber is that of rational—legal authority. That is, authority whose legitimacy stems from the laws of a system (such as a government). The second type of authority is traditional authority, authority derived from customs, habits, and social structures (such as monarchs). Finally, the third form of authority is charismatic authority, authority stemming from the charisma and personal influence of an individual.

Indeed, the Weberian legacy has nourished much of the literature on online religious authority. While some focus on the religious authority of top leaders, others emphasize the materiality and objects of religious authority. For example, [Gifford \(2010\)](#) discusses scripture and tradition as elements that deliver a religious experience and that ultimately constitute a form of authority that influences believers.

In this vein, [Campbell \(2007\)](#) offers four categories of authority that relate to the effects of the internet on religion. The first is the internet’s effect on clerical hierarchy (position of rabbis or priests). The second is its impact on religious organizations (synagogue, youth group, or church). The third is the effect on religious ideology (Bible as a divine book). Additionally, the fourth is the internet’s effect on religious texts (accepted teachings and interpretations of the bible). While religious authority depends on some divine source and the belief in it, [Campbell \(2010\)](#) has noted that research on online religious authority has focused on legal—social structure and hierarchy as the sources of traditional legitimate forms of authority.

Taking a different perspective, [Turner \(2007\)](#) posits that the internet functions on a different logic that defies Weberian thinking. Drawing on [Castells’ \(2002\)](#) renowned discussions of the network society, Turner views web-based systems as rejecting state authority. Alternatively, he highlights informational systems that decentralize power to actors located at decisive points in the sequence of continuous communicative activity ([Turner 2007](#), p. 123). Given this framework, which underscores a different flow and loci of power that emerges in networked society, Turner questions the nature of online authority. Thus, the “big questions” of religious authority’s nature and logic requires reconsideration. Hence, I suggest that online religious authority can be seen as an elusive form of informal or “soft power” that invites further investigation.

This study aims to explore the concept of religious responsa as a tool to evaluate the authority of a particular scholar in the eyes of laypeople. Religious responsa can be seen as a proxy for the religious and spiritual status of a rabbi. The volume of questions sent to a particular rabbi is indicative of the recognition of their expertise and standing in the community.

4. The Religious Zionist Community

The religious Zionist community is a subgroup within the Israeli Jewish mosaic. Rooted in the transformative social movements of the 19th century Eastern European Jewry, and often compared to the Modern Orthodox community in the United States, the community adheres to traditional Jewish laws (*halacha*). Alongside religious observance, they also embrace features of modernity, including its technological, political, and economic dimensions. Religious Zionists earn degrees in higher education, consume popular culture, are avid users of the internet, and are known for cultivating a nationalist (hawkish) ideology with regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and live in many of the West Bank settlements (Aran and Hassner 2013; Feige 2009). Serving in the Israeli army and polity are tenets of the community's collective identity.

The Mizrahi Movement was established at the beginning of the 20th century, largely as a response to the mainstream Zionist movement, which was advocating secular education. From its early days, it included modernist inclinations alongside Messianic underpinnings. In the aftermath of the Six Day War, the messianic idea of returning and rebuilding the promised land of Israel was intensified. This fueled the religious Zionist ideology led by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. This ideology sanctified the state and land of Israel, and spurred the settlement movement. In the mid-1990s, the religious Zionists' communal rhetoric integrated a more individualistic ideology. As this notion took root, the religious Zionist community split into distinct subgroups in terms of their religious devotion: "Chardal" (also known as "Dati Torani") and "Dati Lite" (also known as "Dati Liberali"), who differentiate themselves from the mainstream by their religious stringency and relation to modernity (Sheleg 2020; Fischer 2012; Engelberg 2011). In recent years, the manifestations of this subdivision can be seen in the lifestyles of community members as well as in their formal and informal educational institutions. According to the Miskar Institute of Statistics², the religious Zionist community accounts for 11% of Israeli Jewish society; 35% of the community affiliates with the mainstream strand, 27% identify as *Chardal*, and 23% identify as *Dati Lite*.

In spite of widespread apprehension toward new media, scholars have noted high rates of internet and mobile phone usage among community members, albeit through filtering services (Rosenthal and Ribak 2015). Golan and Don (2022) described the ways in which religious leaders view and ultimately legitimize the integration of new media into the community. He made a distinction between the more stringent *Chardal* community and the mainstream religious Zionists in terms of their internet use; however, both access and accept the use of new media. Researchers have noted the use of the internet by community members for educational purposes (e.g., Proyekt Hashut, 929.org.il, and sefaria.org.il, accessed on 6 November 2020) and for personal use (e.g., kipa.co.il and rotter.net, accessed on 2 January 2023), as well as the rise in websites that cater to religious Zionist variants (Campbell and Golan 2011; Tsuria 2016). As the internet gradually became a legitimized platform, the religious Zionist community harnessed it to facilitate communication between leaders and members. Accordingly, there has been a notable increase in the usage of online responsa as a popular form of religious learning (Cohen 2015). For instance, in 2015, 84.7% of religious Zionist community members over the age of 20 reported having access to a computer at home, and 95.8% reported having home access to the internet (Miskar Institute 2017).

This study chose the religious Zionist community as its data sample due to several factors. Firstly, the widespread use of the internet in this community provides a rich source of data on online religious activity. Secondly, the community's strict adherence to religious law and its decentralized authority model allows laypeople to seek guidance from any rabbi of their choosing, making online activity a useful proxy for evaluating the distribution of religious authority.

5. Conceptual Framework: From Learners' Online Q&As to Rabbinical Responsa

The internet has facilitated laypeople's access to experts and has enabled the development of venues for expert dialogue in which people can voice their opinions as well as seek knowledge. The specialization of these platforms is influenced by users who are interested in creating a corpus of knowledge touching on issues that are of primary concern to laypeople as opposed to experts.

In the field of science education, free-choice environments have been examined in an attempt to provide insight about settings in which people learn in a self-directed, self-motivated, voluntary way, which is guided by individual needs and interests (Falk and Dierking 2002; Metzger 2007). Indeed, free-choice environments were called as a naturalistic environment that address young learners valuing their authentic views, opinions, and intrinsic impetus for learning (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 2000). Accordingly, research on online Q&As has shown differences in the intellectual interests of learners and proposed new understandings in regard to the consumption of online knowledge (Baram-Tsabari et al. 2006). In contrast to studies that have highlighted the voluntary choices made by learners in these information hubs, this study aims to understand how religious information is reactively forged by focusing on its point of creation, where questions are answered.

While scholars have paid acute attention to the rights of children and the youth to be voiced and their points of curiosity to be identified and respected, less attention has been granted to the voices of believers' and the ways that religious authorities respond to meet religious learners' questions. Moreover, exploring science education is based on universally oriented concepts and it invites queries and responses that apply to multiple communities on a relatively value-free basis. In contrast, religious queries are expected to be entrenched in areas of identity, faith, and regional codes of behavior. Under these circumstances, the study at hand aims to observe the ways that religious leaders generate their responses to meet their flock's expectations.

6. Responsa Websites: Online Q&As between Laypeople and Rabbis

Responsa websites allow users to post questions, either openly or anonymously, on personal or general issues for which they wish to receive religious guidance. The setting is open and autonomous, and many questions are posted publicly so that other users can access them (Steinitz 2011). This format is common to many areas of inquiry such as science (Baram-Tsabari et al. 2009; Swirski et al. 2018) and medicine (Maglie 2017). Anonymity and immediacy make for a platform that can host more private or intimate questions, as well as trivial questions that are embarrassing or cumbersome to ask a religious authority (Tsuria 2016; Steinitz 2011). For example, issues of divorce are relatively popular on these websites. Certain responsa websites devote a special page with links to FAQ on divorce.

These websites also allow new segments of the population to access religious consultations (Tsuria 2016). For example, secular people can ask a rabbi if they should fast on Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of repentance, knowing that they will continue to sin and that their repentance will not be genuine. On the other end of the faith spectrum, individuals from segregated ultra-orthodox communities and those without access to rabbis outside their own communities can query religious Zionist rabbis with more diverse perspectives. In an early and well-known online responsum³, a woman from a closed religious community asked a rabbi associated with the more open stream of the religious Zionist community about domestic violence. Her question was: "My husband beats me, maybe he is right?", and stated that she needed her husband's help with the children, which takes up his time that should be devoted to religious learning (in the Haredi community, some men devote their entire lives to religious learning). This upset him and caused him to beat her. The rabbi was known for his involvement in dealing with domestic violence, and gave practical advice including hot lines and professional contacts who could help. In this case, the internet empowered a woman to make a choice by enabling her to consult a rabbi outside her closed community based on his background and expertise in domestic violence. The publication of this interaction further empowered others to access this information, created

competition for religious authorities within her community who do not address the issue, and raised awareness of a problem that is typically handled privately.

When asking a question on these sites, a user can choose the rabbi they want to answer the question, or send it to the “website” without specifying who should answer it. The website provides background information on the rabbis, sometimes specifying the community or institution that they are affiliated with, highlighting an area of expertise, or noting the expected response time for emergency questions. This easy access to rabbis and the fact that all questions can be uploaded has created a unique corpus of questions and answers that was not publicly available previously. The anonymity of the inquirer, accessibility to a rabbi, and the dissemination of the question constitute a unique instance for understanding how religious authority is developed and cultivated online.

7. Method

This study examines the ways in which users, both rabbis and laypeople, construct religious authority online. A mixed method design is implemented, using the following:

Content analysis using a Bayesian classifier (Hillard et al. 2008).

Metadata analysis that focused on the nature of religious discourse, by analyzing multiple threads related to the structure of the online responsa (e.g., number of sources cited and length of answer), online presence (frequency of queries and responses to individual rabbis), and overt expressions of online authority.

Data source and data collection. This study is based on a dataset of 50,799 questions and answers from the responsa website yeshiva.org.il, accessed on 6 November 2020. This site has catered to the religious Zionist community since 2000, and is the most frequently visited site for online responsa within the community⁴, with almost one million monthly visits in 2019. The dataset begins in 2005 and ends in 2019. yeshiva.org.il (accessed on 6 November 2020) is associated with Beit El Yeshiva, a seminary for higher religious studies. The site serves as a Hebrew resource for Jewish learning, and provides classes, articles, basic religious information, and online responsa with multiple rabbis and rabbinical students from various institutions throughout Israel (over 90% of the traffic is from Israel). According to SimilarWeb and corroborated by the site administrator, 77% of the traffic stems from Google searches (Figure 1).

Data collection ceased in 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the nature of the questions and their scope have risen massively and pivoted toward addressing the virus and its religious ramifications. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the state of emergency, widespread socio-psychological tensions, and the erosion of participation in offline religious settings (synagogues and seminaries).

To collect the data, a web parser written in Python was developed by the first author to download the questions and answers. About 5000 Q&As were omitted from the dataset due to poorly structured data, or lack of metadata, such as the category of the question or the identity of the rabbi who answered it.

Note that the dataset only represents information that was published openly on the websites. Not all the questions that are submitted get posted publicly, since occasionally, the individual asking the question requests that it stay private, whereas at other times, the administrators may determine that the question is inappropriate for public dissemination, or the rabbi himself may decide to phone the individual rather than answer online. Administrators estimate that about one third of the questions asked on the site remain unpublished; however, they claim that the published portion of the questions are representative of those submitted. It should be noted that the dataset does not include unanswered questions. However, the administrators of the online responsa platform have reported that every question submitted was addressed in some capacity, even if the response was simply to inform the questioner that the matter was not within the purview of the rabbis.

The screenshot shows the website **YESHIVA** with navigation links: Beit Midrash, Ask the rabbi, Calendar, Wiki, Dedications. The main heading is **Electronic door lock** with a callout box labeled 'Title'. To the right, a view count of 4 is shown with a callout box labeled 'View Count'. Below the title is the profile of **Rabbi Yoel Lieberman** with a callout box labeled 'Rabbi' and the date 'Shevat 9, 5782' with a callout box labeled 'Date'. The page content includes a **Question** section with the text: 'Hii, Im renting a apartment in Norway (oslo). And the entrance door to my apartment has a electronic door lock. I have to use a magnetic key to get in to my apartment, and when Im opening my door from inside my apartment to go out it makes a small peeping sound. Am I allowed to open and go out of my apartment door on shabbats? I have no other way to leave the apartment, this makes things very complicated for me.' This is followed by an **Answer** section starting with 'ב"ה' and 'Shalom'. The answer text reads: 'Shalom. If we are talking about a battery powered mechanism which does not activate any other things, this minimizes the problem. Since, you have no choice for reasons of personal safety and prevention of theft to keep your door closed, you may use your magnetic key, in a way which is called in Hebrew "K'leachar Yad", meaning you do not hold the magnetic key the way you would normally hold it, but differently, perhaps between two knuckles, or using your non-dominant hand.'

Figure 1. Example of an online responsum from the www.yeshiva.co (accessed on 6 November 2020) English website.

Data Analysis

To make sense of the large dataset, we used a computer program to extract useful information that was not already listed in the dataset. First, we extracted the length of each question and answer. Then, we trained an algorithm to identify which questions included sources by comparing answers with and without sources. We were able to identify if an answer had a source with 97% accuracy by using this algorithm (see Appendix F for a methodological explanation). We also used metadata provided by the responsa website, such as the date of submission and identity of the author, to analyze the data and identify the recurring themes and patterns. This allowed us to understand changes over time and how users interacted with the website.

Most of the data used in this research were provided directly by the responsa website. This information included the date of question submission, the author of the response, topic, and subtopic (designated by the site), and the monthly question view count. A view is counted every time a user enters the responsa page.

The metadata were used to differentiate the data by date, topic, and author. Cross-referencing numerous types of metadata such as author, category, publication date, and view-count revealed themes that recurred in the online responsa and the participants. This made it possible to identify temporal changes within specific classifications or across the entire spectrum of questions. This methodology also pointed to social activity on the responsa website; for example, when users asked the same question to different authorities, when the question was sent directly to a specific religious authority, when the site admin-

istrators determined who would answer a question, and when the rabbis themselves felt they were not qualified to respond.

8. Findings

This study examines how online religious authority is socialized and shaped by users. Online responsa serve as a window into the construction of religious authority. For rabbis, online responsa furnish a platform where they choose their online conduct and presentation. Laypeople are empowered since they can choose which rabbi should be the recipient of their question; by extension, this impacts which rabbis exercise their authority. To showcase how online responsa have shaped religious online authority, we start with a breakdown of the Q&A activity over time. This analysis focuses on changes in the behavior of the lay public, the rabbis, and the website itself.

Questions: What do users ask and research over time?

Our dataset started in 2005 and ended in mid-2019. During that time, the number of new questions submitted on the site peaked between 2008 and 2011, and then it began to plummet. Beginning in 2015, the site had fewer new queries posted publicly than it did at its inception. The reduction in queries posted contrasts with the growth in traffic attracted to the site. Over the past decade, the site’s traffic has grown significantly, as indicated by the green bars⁵. In 2005, the responsa garnered a total of 89,652 views, whereas by 2012, the viewership had grown by a factor of 1.7 to 159,340, and by 2018, it had tripled to 502,970 (Figure 2).

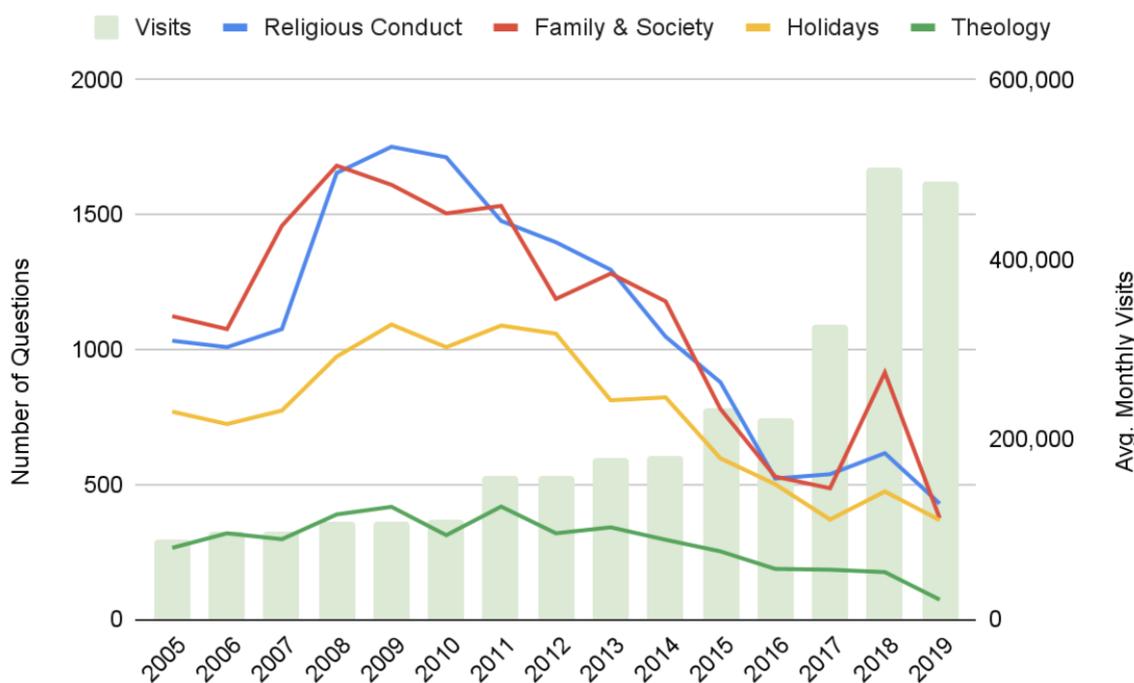


Figure 2. Total questions asked per year over average monthly site visits.

The site divides its questions into four major categories: theology, holidays, family and society, and religious conduct (Table 1). The decrease in questions occurred across all areas of inquiry on the site (Figure 2).

Table 1. Frequent categories for all questions asked on the site.

Title	Median Question Count/Year	Focus	Example
Theology	Median: 297 SD: 96.6	Question about God, belief, repentance, and being a ‘good person’.	Why has not the messiah come yet?
Holidays	Median: 774 SD: 254.3	Pragmatic religious queries in the context of Jewish holidays; for example, questions about how to clean the house for Passover.	Must a pregnant woman fast on Yom Kippur?
Religious Conduct	Median: 1048 SD: 445.3	Questions about specific religious practices such as dietary laws of keeping kosher or laws governing prayer.	Is coffee always kosher?
Family and Society	Median: 1179 SD: 421.7	Questions regarding how a religious person should act in public settings; for example, questions about religious observance in the army.	Can I send my son to a co-ed youth group?

The category of religious conduct not only had the most questions asked, but the practical questions were also viewed more frequently. For example, the top ten most visited questions on the site touched on practical matters of prayer time, blessings, and other forms of religious observance as opposed to theological questions (Table 2).

Table 2. Most popular questions by total view count between 2005 and 2019.

Submission Date	Total No. of Views	Question
19 May 2011	96,406	I need an abridged version of the blessing after eating bread, I am often in a hurry and do not have time to say the whole thing.
11 February 2005	90,090	I have a friend who does not say the blessing after bread because it is too long, is the short version accepted?
4 November 2008	65,585	What blessing do I say when I see a rainbow?
29 July 2008	55,402	I want to visit a grieving family, what should I say to them?
9 August 2011	49,610	Is it permitted to put on phylacteries on “Tisha B’av” (a fast day)?
15 December 2008	47,174	I heard an argument about this and I am not sure what is right, do you say goodbye to people by saying “go in peace” or “go with peace”?
10 July 2008	46,860	Until what time of day can a person pray?
26 October 2012	46,830	What blessing do you say for thunder and lightning?
10 January 2012	43,719	I dreamed my husband was bitten by a snake, it is really worrying! What should I do?
1 September 2008	42,929	I need to put up a mezuzah tomorrow and I do not know what blessing to say. Do I need a minyan?

8.1. Responses: How Did the Answers Change over Time?

As fewer questions were asked, there was a shift in the format of the answers that were published. Over time, a greater number of responses included sources. While at the beginning, only about 10% of the answers included sources, in recent years that number has increased to 50%. In addition, the responses became longer. Figure 3 depicts the median length of an answer over time. In 2005, the median length was approximately 300 characters, while in 2019, it was over 700. As discussed below, the change in length was correlated with a change in the identity and authority of the rabbis responding to the majority of the questions on the platform.

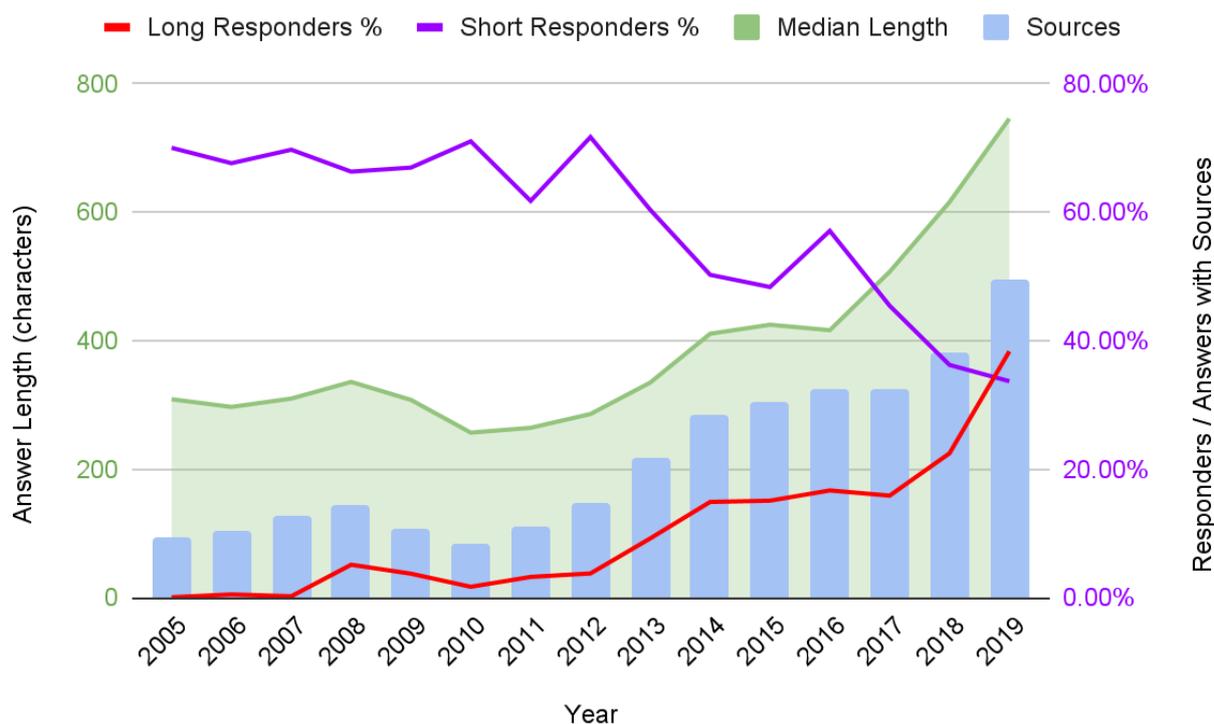


Figure 3. Comparison of length of responses and sourcing count with volume of rabbis who wrote long replies. The purple line represents the rabbis who are in the lower quartile in terms of the average length of their answers on the site (short responders). The red line depicts the rabbis who are in the top quartile of the average length (long responders). The green line shows the median length of the responses based on their character count. Finally, the blue bars show the percentage of responses that contain sources.

New rabbis on the platform were the driving force behind the shift to lengthier answers. This is shown in Figure 4. It depicts the date of the first answer that a rabbi gave on the site, which is used as an indication that they had begun their online activity. The date at which a rabbi joined the site emerged as a predictor of longer answers. Rabbis who had been on the site as of 2005–2009 responded an average of 126 words per answer, whereas rabbis who started as of 2011 later responded on average 412 words per answer.

Longer answers were more popular with visitors to the site. Answers with over 358 words (1 SD over the mean answer word length) attracted 43% of all daily views while accounting for only 8% (4385 answers in total) of the questions on the site. Shorter answers accounting for the remaining 92% of the answers (46,409 answers in total) attracted only 57% of the daily views on the site. The increase in number of questions answered by long responders, the decreasing number of questions answered by short responders, and the growing median question length and sources were associated. Longer answers tended to be more popular among users as well, with more visits per query than shorter answers.

Rabbis' average length of response by year of first response on the site

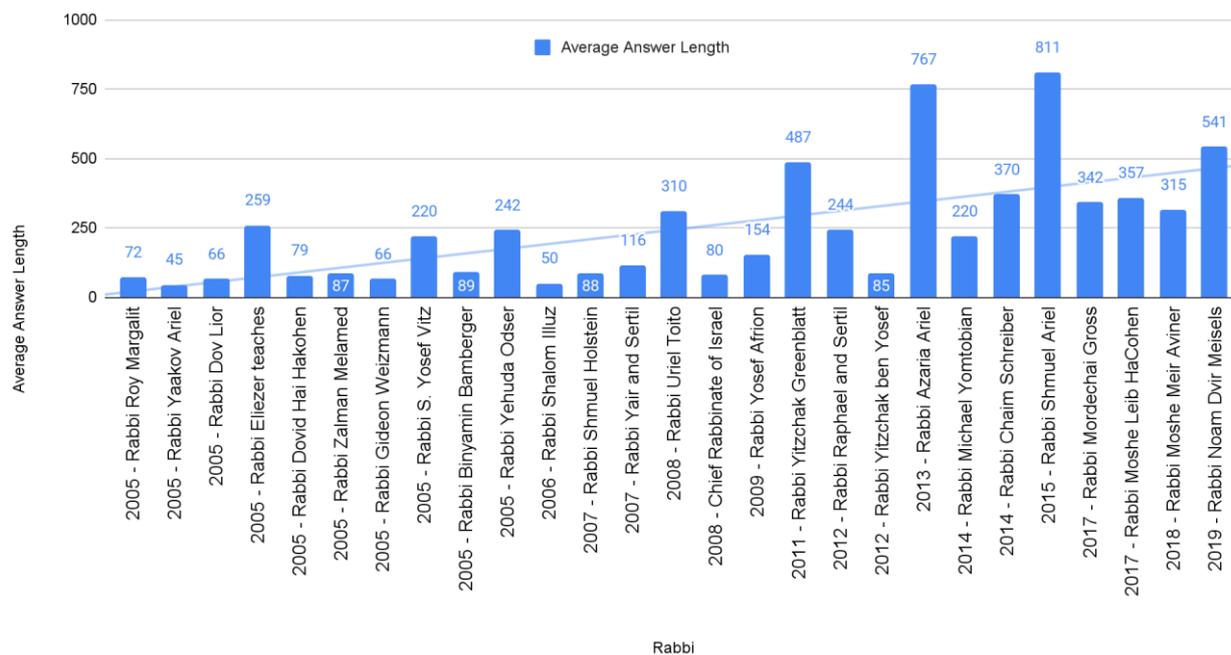


Figure 4. Average answer length of rabbis who answered over 200 questions. The newer rabbis on the platform provide answers that are more than three times the average of the earlier rabbis. See Appendix C for chart.

8.2. Rabbis—Who Replies?

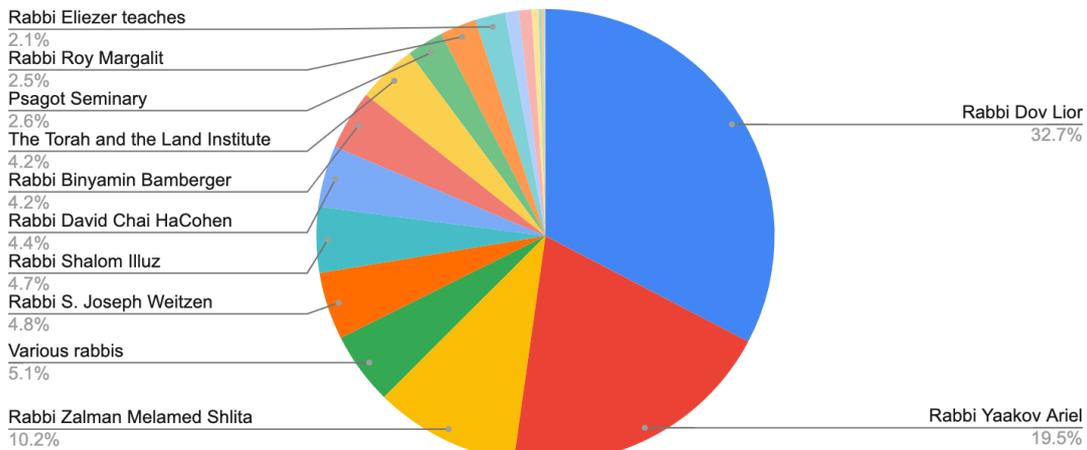
During the site’s first three years, three rabbis answered the vast majority of the questions, whom we will refer to as the “institutional rabbis”. Rabbi Dov Lior⁶ answered 32% of the questions on the site, Rabbi Yaakov Ariel⁷ responded to 19%, and Rabbi Zalman Melamed⁸ addressed 10% (see Appendix B). These rabbis are very prominent in the RZ community. They serve as heads of major organizations and institutions and are prolific writers. They represent hawkish views on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, thus combining political and religious leadership.

In the final three years of the dataset, the number of rabbis on the platform doubled from 19 to 38. The ratio of responses to rabbis was distributed more equally than it was in the early years of the platform. Aside from the leading Rabbi Yitzchak Ben Yosef, who answered about 15% of the questions, most rabbis responded to 2% to 5% of the questions on the site (see Appendix C) (Figure 5).

Rabbi Yaakov Ariel maintained his lead in terms of the relative volume of responses, whereas the other leading rabbis answered significantly fewer questions over time. Rabbi Dov Lior only responded to 2.87% of the questions in the final three years of the dataset, as opposed to 32.71% in the initial years. Rabbi Zalman Melamed only answered 2 questions over the course of three years, whereas he answered 1036 at the beginning.

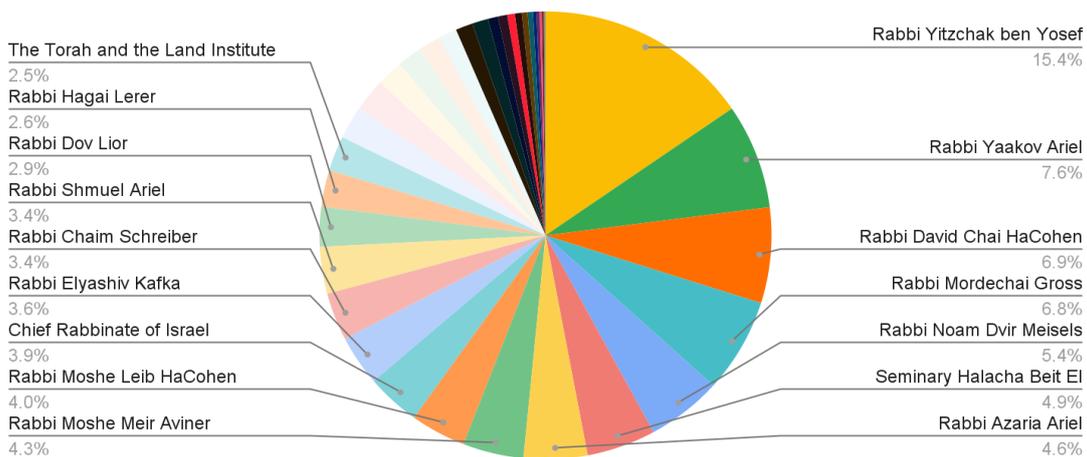
At the same time, new rabbis, most of whom are not heads of institutions or known ideological leaders (in politics or in communal affairs), started to respond to the majority of the queries. The three aforementioned institutionally recognized rabbis started answering questions online when they were in their 70s whereas the new cohort of rabbis range in age from their mid-20s to early 40s (based on the site administrators report). This group started responding to questions online at a relatively early stage in their careers as clergy, without the institutional backing of the older generation, which may have prompted them to approach online responsa in a different manner.

Distribution of Answers by rabbis 2005-2007



(a)

Distribution of Answers by rabbis 2017-2019



(b)

Figure 5. (a): Distribution of responses by rabbis between 2005–2007. Most were given by three institutionally known rabbis. (b): Distribution of responses by rabbis between 2017–2019. Responses were provided by a variety of rabbis.

8.3. Rabbis—Who Decides Who Should Answer?

Our meta dataset provided information not only regarding the rabbi who ultimately answered the question, but also concerning who decided that the question would be sent to that particular rabbi. Throughout most of the site’s history, the site administrators determined about 60% of the recipients on average, and about 40% of the users requested a specific person (see breakdown in Appendix D).

In later years, the recipients were selected more often by the users than by the administrators; however, the administrators still played a significant role. To understand how the administrators affected the presence of different rabbis on the site, we compared the volume of questions sent to the three institutional rabbis with the other rabbis on the site. In the bottom graph, the red lines represent the decisions that the administrators made as to which rabbi would answer a question, and the purple represents users’ requests. The broken line represents questions sent to well-known rabbis, and the straight lines represent questions sent to other rabbis on the platform (see Table A4 in Appendix E) (Figure 6).

Distribution of Question Traffic by User and Admin Decision

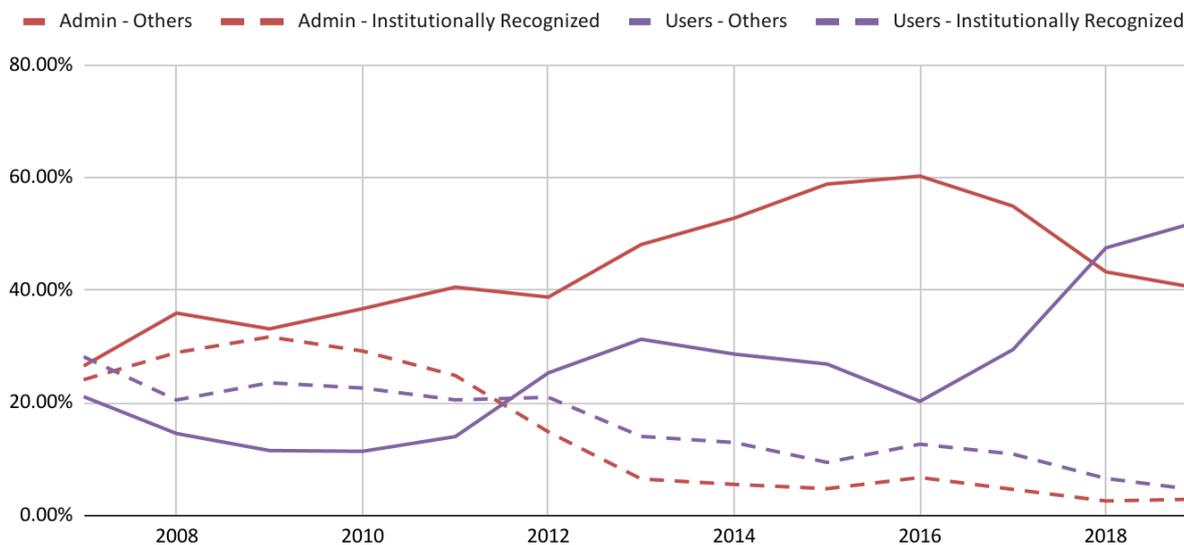


Figure 6. Distribution of questions that users and administrators asked to be referred to a recognized rabbi versus a less well-known rabbi.

The findings show that from the very beginning of the site's activity, the administrators favored non-institutional rabbis over the more well-known ones, whereas users preferred the well-known rabbis. Over time, users addressed their questions to other rabbis on the site and as a result, the presence of the institutionally known rabbis declined.

9. Discussion

The aim of this study is to better understand the ways in which online religious authority is constructed, socialized, and expressed online. The findings indicate that online responsa have changed in both their form and content over the last two decades and demonstrate a shift in the key actors in terms of the construction of authority within the RZ community. Specifically, over time, the rabbis' responses became lengthier and they cited more sources. In tandem, new rabbis became active on the platform as the senior ones contributed less. In 2005, a small number of well-established rabbis answered the majority of the questions in a brief manner. In the subsequent years, the questions were more equally distributed among multiple rabbis, most of whom were younger and not as well-established. These rabbis furnished lengthier answers and sourced their responses. The findings also show that the users and administrators allocated questions to rabbis differently. Administrators always sent more questions to lesser-known rabbis, while users preferred sending their questions to established rabbis in the earlier years of the website, but shifted their preference to lesser-known rabbis in subsequent years.

10. Fluctuations in Site Authority

While institutional authority is often considered a stable source of influence within religious communities (Weber 1954), the findings here point to the fluid nature of Q&A websites as a source of learning and clout. The site constantly fluctuated in its operations from a responsive and interactive source of religious engagement to a repository of easily accessed information. Over the 14 years of analyzed data, fewer questions were asked on the site, even though the traffic increased. Most probably, users looked up previously answered questions and did not need to ask the same question themselves. This transformed the Q&A site into a repository of knowledge, rather than an interactive engagement with rabbinical figures.

Another contributing factor to the decrease in questions is the presence of competing sources of engagement and informational hubs in the form of the Q&A religious WhatsApp

groups. The website yeshiva.org.il (accessed on 6 November 2020) launched a WhatsApp group network providing even faster responses to users' religious questions. This resulted in fewer questions posted to rabbis on the websites and furthered the instability of the sources of authority who are influenced by the dynamic nature of online technologies.

11. Emergent Authority

Rabbi Dov Lior, Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, and Rabbi Zalman Melamed are significant figures in the RZ community. Each of them are the head of a well-known religious institution, they have followers who attend their lectures, and they have published books and articles that are popular and often displayed in RZ homes. These were the three key figures who answered questions on the site in its earlier years.

It is important to note that responses, especially online responses, are inherently reactive from the rabbis' perspective. They respond to queries that are sent to them, so that the presence of a particular rabbi on the platform is a function of how many people decide to ask that particular rabbi. There are other factors at play as well, which are in the hands of the moderators who decide when a "general question" will be referred to a particular rabbi, and in the hands of the rabbis, who decide if the answer should be published.

The shift away from rabbis who are well-known to a broader list of rabbis, some of whom are younger and do not have a prestigious background, raises questions of authority and trust. Why did the users trust the platform in its initial years, and what is the driving force behind their trust in more recent years? In a study focusing on lay learners in the RZ community, many interviewees mentioned the website yeshiva.org.il (accessed on 6 November 2020) by name, saying it was a trustworthy site that they were familiar with and that they knew that site only let reliable rabbis on the platform (Berger and Golan 2023). It would appear that the popularity of the site was originally due to its access to well-known rabbis, as the site had no real authority in its own right. As time went on, the site began to gain authority, and more people started sending questions to "the website" and not necessarily to a specific rabbi. In recent years, the balance of power has changed, so that many of the rabbis writing on the platform are not heads of institutions or well-known but accrue their religious authority from the website itself.

The transformation in the distribution of authority seen in the religious Zionist community is not a singular occurrence but a reflection of the wider changes in how authority is obtained and shared in the digital age. The medical community offers another example where authority has shifted from the individual contributors of medical articles on Wikipedia to the editorial norms and scrutiny applied to the editing process over time, effectively granting authority to the platform itself (Shafee et al. 2017). The internet has enabled new forms of authority to emerge, where individuals or institutions can acquire authority based on their online presence and reputation rather than their traditional institutional affiliations or credentials. This shift toward a more decentralized and democratized authority has allowed for a greater diversity of voices and opinions to be heard and has enabled individuals to gain authority based on their expertise rather than their institutional affiliations.

A contributing factor to the trend of sending questions to second-tier rabbis rather than institutionally recognized ones is the practice of the website's administrators selecting, which a rabbi would receive each question throughout the site's history. The administrators always preferred to send questions to lesser-known rabbis. There are multiple reasons for this decision, which require further research. They may consider the question simplistic, or perhaps they know that well-established rabbis are inundated with many questions and other responsibilities while younger rabbis are more available.

Some scholars have underscored the significance of religious webmasters as power brokers who award authority (Golan and Campbell 2015). Thus, further research should investigate the positioning of these Q&A administrators as invisible authority agents. The findings here point to the emergence of new power authorities as younger rabbis took on a stronger presence on the platform. This in turn contributed to the building of their virtual

rabbinic authority through their website work. This enabled mobility for young Rabbis struggling for status in a pious and highly literate community with a competitive market for religious clerics and allowed them to hone their charismatic appeal.

The responsa literature is one of the core building blocks of the Jewish canon. It is a central medium through which Jewish law adapts to new situations and avoids stagnation. When a traditional responsum was written, it was published for other rabbis, who could then draw analogies from the logic and sources presented in the ruling so that future generations could build upon it. Ultimately, this system relied on well-established rabbis, which over time, solidified their status as primary sources of authority. The introduction of online responsa seems to have changed its role and allowed for a more direct, interactive engagement with key rabbis on the one hand, and become a platform for the emergence of new sources of authority (albeit administrators and young Rabbis) on the other.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Competitive Positioning Map ⁱ

- daat.ac.il
- hidabroot.org
- kipa.co.il
- yhb.org.il
- chabad.org.il
- yeshiva.org.il

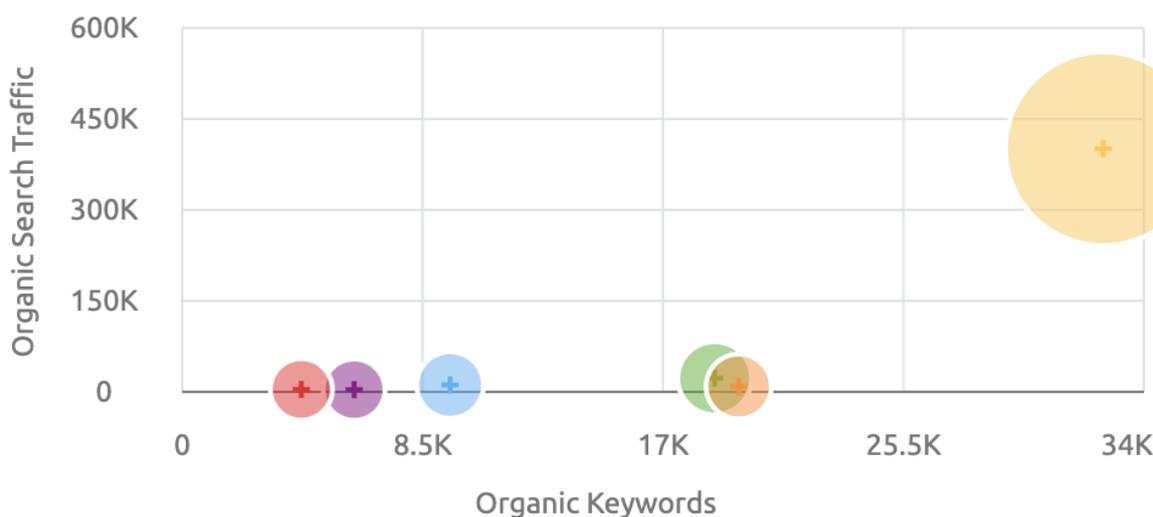


Figure A1. Semrush Tools Report on the Competitive Position of [Yeshiva.org.il](https://yeshiva.org.il) (accessed on 6 November 2020) Compared to Other Sites in Israel.

Appendix B

Table A1. Rabbis Who Answered Questions in the Early Years of the Website. The Website Gives the Title “the Great” to Rabbis Who Are Institutionally Recognized and Well-Known. The three rabbis who dominated the website’s answers in the earlier years of its activity are in bold.

2005–2007		
Rabbi’s Name	Questions Answered	Percentage of Questions Answered
The Great Rabbi Dov Lior	3312	32.71%
The Great Rabbi Yaakov Ariel	1975	19.50%
The Great Rabbi Zalman Melamed Shlita	1036	10.23%
Various rabbis	520	5.14%
Rabbi S. Joseph Weitzen	486	4.80%
Rabbi Shalom Illuz	475	4.69%
Rabbi David Chai HaCohen	442	4.37%
Rabbi Binyamin Bamberger	430	4.25%
The Torah and the Land Institute	426	4.21%
Psagot Seminary	263	2.60%
Rabbi Roy Margalit	258	2.55%
Rabbi Eliezer teaches	216	2.13%
Rabbi Yehuda Odser	97	0.96%
Rabbi Shmuel Holstein	90	0.89%
Rabbi Yair and Sertil	49	0.48%
Rabbi Gideon Weizmann	24	0.24%
Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron	16	0.16%
Beit El Seminary	10	0.10%
Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu	1	0.01%

Appendix C

Table A2. Rabbis Who Answered Questions in the Later Years of the Website. The Website Gives the Title “the Great” to Rabbis Who Are Institutionally Recognized and Well Known. The three rabbis who dominated the website’s answers in the earlier years of its activity are in bold.

2017–2019		
Name	Number of Questions	Percentage of Total
Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yosef	816	15.42%
The Great Rabbi Yaakov Ariel	400	7.56%
Rabbi David Chai HaCohen	365	6.90%
Rabbi Mordechai Gross	360	6.80%
Rabbi Noam Dvir Meisels	285	5.39%
Seminary Halacha Beit El	261	4.93%
Rabbi Azaria Ariel	241	4.55%
Rabbi Moshe Meir Aviner	230	4.35%
Rabbi Moshe Leib HaCohen Halberstadt	210	3.97%
Chief Rabbinate of Israel	204	3.86%
Rabbi Elyashiv Kafka	192	3.63%
Rabbi Chaim Schreiber	182	3.44%
Rabbi Shmuel Ariel	179	3.38%
The Great Rabbi Dov Lior	152	2.87%
Rabbi Hagai Lerer	140	2.65%
The Torah and the Land Institute	133	2.51%
Rabbi S. Joseph Weitzen	126	2.38%
Rabbi Michael Yomtobian	124	2.34%

Table A2. Cont.

2017–2019		
Name	Number of Questions	Percentage of Total
Rabbi Raphael Vesertil	101	1.91%
Various rabbis	92	1.74%
Rabbi Binyamin Bamberger	85	1.61%
Rabbi Yehuda Odser	70	1.32%
Rabbi Yitzchak Greenblatt	65	1.23%
Rabbi Neria Gotel	61	1.15%
Beit El Seminary	38	0.72%
Rabbi Yair and Sertil	35	0.66%
Rabbi Benyahu Shraga	29	0.55%
Rabbi Elyakim Lebanon	26	0.49%
Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira	22	0.42%
Psagot Seminary	20	0.38%
Rabbi Yaakov Cohen	13	0.25%
Rabbi Yosef Afrion	12	0.23%
Rabbi Gideon Weizmann	8	0.15%
Family Purity Seminary	7	0.13%
Rabbi Eliezer Melamed	3	0.06%
The Great Rabbi Zalman Melamed Shlita	2	0.04%
Rabbi Roy Margalit	1	0.02%
Rabbi Uriel Toito	1	0.02%

Appendix D

Table A3. Average Length of Responses by Rabbis Who Answered over 200 Questions. The Newer Rabbis on the Platform Provided Responses That Are More than Three Times the Average Length Found for the Earlier Rabbis. The three rabbis who dominated the website's answers in the earlier years of its activity are in bold.

Rabbi	Average Answer Length	Date of First Answer	Total Answers
Rabbi Roy Margalit	72	12 January 2005	293
Rabbi Yaakov Ariel	45	13 January 2005	7359
Rabbi Dov Lior	66	15 January 2005	10,651
Rabbi Eliezer teaches	259	17 January 2005	301
Rabbi Dovid Hai Hakohen	79	18 January 2005	3014
Rabbi Zalman Melamed	87	19 January 2005	2193
Rabbi Gideon Weizmann	66	13 February 2005	212
Rabbi S. Yosef Vitz	220	31 May 2005	3159
Rabbi Binyamin Bamberger	89	12 September 2005	2809
Rabbi Yehuda Odser	242	21 September 2005	467
Rabbi Shalom Illuz	50	5 June 2006	1546
Rabbi Shmuel Holstein	88	2 September 2007	574
Rabbi Yair and Sertil	116	2 September 2007	792
Rabbi Uriel Toito	310	3 July 2008	410
Chief Rabbinate of Israel	80	28 December 2008	1411
Rabbi Yosef Afrion	154	12 February 2009	749
Rabbi Yitzchak Greenblatt	487	11 January 2011	757
Rabbi Raphael and Sertil	244	18 March 2012	657
Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yosef	85	18 April 2012	3219
Rabbi Azaria Ariel	767	14 January 2013	1017
Rabbi Michael Yomtobian	220	23 February 2014	267
Rabbi Chaim Schreiber	370	18 June 2014	554
Rabbi Shmuel Ariel	811	19 July 2015	363
Rabbi Mordechai Gross	342	24 August 2017	360
Rabbi Moshe Leib HaCohen Halberstadt	357	31 December 2017	210
Rabbi Moshe Meir Aviner	315	5 March 2018	230
Rabbi Noam Dvir Meisels	541	30 January 2019	285

Appendix E

Table A4. Breakdown by Year of Questions Where Users Specified Who Should Answer, and Questions Assigned by an Admin.

Year	Users	Admins	Year Total with Notes	Users %	Admins %
2007	1296	1332	2628	49.32%	50.68%
2008	1684	3114	4798	35.10%	64.90%
2009	1749	3231	4980	35.12%	64.88%
2010	1579	3058	4637	34.05%	65.95%
2011	1607	3042	4649	34.57%	65.43%
2012	1891	2190	4081	46.34%	53.66%
2013	1723	2075	3798	45.37%	54.63%
2014	1361	1907	3268	41.65%	58.35%
2015	912	1597	2509	36.35%	63.65%
2016	624	1269	1893	32.96%	67.04%
2017	625	922	1547	40.40%	59.60%
2018	1231	1043	2274	54.13%	45.87%
2019	756	577	1333	56.71%	43.29%

Appendix F. Identifying Citations in Answers

The algorithm did not identify every quote of a source, as the following do not follow this formula but are valid quotations of sources:

- (א, אהלות ו)
- ם הלכות טומאת מת פרק כד הלכה א"ברמב

In the first example a source is quoted without quotations in the following format: book, chapter, and sub-chapter. In the second example, there are quotations but no parentheses. The algorithm could be tweaked further to identify these types of quotes by adding a valid book list and format rules, for example, see the following:

- <book name> <text under 4 characters>, <text under 4 characters>.
- <book name> [within 6 words: פרק<text under 4 characters>הלכה<text under 4 characters>].

However, after experimenting with these additional heuristics, the algorithm's performance decreased, resulting in more false positives. This is largely due to the fact that most questions with sources have multiple sources, leading to at least two sources according to the formula above.

Notes

- ¹ As discussed in the LA Times (3 February 2009), see <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/feb/02/local/me-beliefs2> (accessed on 30 September 2018).
- ² <https://www.miskar.co.il/he/articles/דתיים-לאומיים> (accessed on 30 September 2018).
- ³ <http://shut.moreshet.co.il/print.asp?id=4589&kod=&modul=15&codeClient=57> (accessed on 30 September 2018).
- ⁴ Based on a comparative organic search of traffic data from semrush.com and SimilarWeb (Appendix A).
- ⁵ Traffic data were retrieved from [semrush.com](https://www.semrush.com) (accessed on 30 September 2018).
- ⁶ Rabbi Dov Lior is an Israeli Orthodox rabbi who served as the Chief Rabbi of Hebron and Kiryat Arba in the southern West Bank until late 2014. He also leads the Kiryat Arba Hesder Yeshiva and chairs the "Council of Rabbis of Judea and Samaria".
- ⁷ Rabbi Yaakov Ariel is the chief rabbi of the city of Ramat Gan and one of the leading rabbis of the religious Zionist movement. Ariel led the Yamit seminary in the Sinai Peninsula until 1982 and is currently the head of the Ramat Gan Yeshiva.
- ⁸ Rabbi Zalman Baruch Melamed is an Israeli Orthodox rabbi and leads the Beit El yeshiva. He founded the religiously inclined Arutz Sheva radio station and served as neighborhood rabbi in Beit El until 2013.

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