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## Jewish bloggers to gather in capital

By Raphael Ahren

Tags: Israel, Weblogs

While some influential bloggers scorned the First International Jewish Bloggers Convention in Jerusalem as one-sided and agenda-driven, the organizers maintain that not only will many attend the event physically, but hundreds more will join from in front of their computer screens.

"The response has been tremendous, already 200 people signed up to attend the conference," said Danny Oberman, vice president of Israel Operations for Nefesh B'Nefesh, which is organizing the event. He added that an additional 200 bloggers have signed up on the group's Web site to view the live webcast of the August 20 meet and to join conference discussions via an Internet chat room.

Under the motto "The Power of the JBlogosphere: Taking JBloggging to the Next Level," the half-day conference will feature two panel discussions with popular Jewish bloggers and a speech by Zavi Apfelbaum, Director of Brand Management in the Foreign Ministry. Nefesh B'Nefesh also invited the panelists - "several high-profile bloggers" - to follow a group of new immigrants from North America as they prepare for and embark on their big move. Each blogger was assigned a family or an individual, whose experiences will be documented on his or her blog. As part of the deal, the bloggers will join the Nefesh B'Nefesh charter flight from New York to Tel Aviv on August 18 and have also received free return tickets.

"We see the Jewish blogging world as an important part in the social discourse among the youth of North America and we want to be a part of it," Oberman told AngloFile this week. Most convention participants are from the U.S., Canada and Israel, with only a handful of bloggers from other locales registering so far.

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"The conference is an opportunity for people who are online friends through writing and reading blogs to meet in person for the first time," said Rabbi Gil Student, one of the panelists and editor of Hirhurim, a blog about religion.

"There are times when people are more comfortable arguing with and insulting people who are just words on a computer screen. When you meet someone in person you tend to judge them more favorably and treat them with more respect." Student added that the convention "is an opportunity for people to take time out of their busy schedules and stop and think about what they do, why they do it and how they can do it better."

But there are also critical voices. Lisa Goldman, a Canadian-born Israeli whose blog On the Face made waves in the international press in 2006 for her coverage of the Second Lebanon War, told AngloFile that she has no interest in the conference.

"I'm more interested in the complexities of Israeli life than in blogging about aliyah-related themes," she said, adding she would have preferred a conference for Israeli bloggers where Arabs could participate, also. Furthermore, she said the conference "seems to be politically slanted," with a preponderance of bloggers who represent right-wing or center-right views. "I prefer a holistic approach," Goldman said. "I don't like agenda blogging."

Shmarya Rosenberg, whose Failed Messiah blog is critical of Orthodox Judaism, also slammed the convention. "At first glance, the conference seems stacked in favor of Orthodox bloggers with right-wing political leanings," he told AngloFile. "I think what Nefesh B'Nefesh is doing is deceitful. A true Jewish bloggers' conference would be both open to all Jewish bloggers and far more balanced."

Although Failed Messiah was a finalist in the 2007 Jewish and Israeli Blog Awards and has been quoted in newspapers ranging from The Wall Street Journal to Haaretz and The Forward, Rosenberg was not contacted by Nefesh B'Nefesh about the conference.

Nefesh B'Nefesh denies any bias in its selection process. "The First International Jewish Bloggers Convention is open to the entire Jewish world," the group's director of communications, Yael Katsman, said yesterday. "All official bloggers are welcome and invited to join. We don't have a prerequisite - if you're Orthodox or not, if you are on the right or left-wing, it doesn't matter."

Katsman noted that a number of blogs whose authors are scheduled to participate in the panel discussions are "completely secular." The fact that all participants have to register is standard for international conferences and merely serves to ensure that only Jewish bloggers can participate, she added.

### Skewing right

David Bogner, one of the panelists and author of Treppenwitz, a blog about the "specialness" of everyday life in Israel, might agree that the conference lineup is ideologically skewed, but is not bothered by that. "Who wants to go listen to some carefully hand-picked panel discussion where there are exactly equal numbers of right-wing, left-wing, girls, boys, religious, secular Sephardi, Ashkenazi - there's no end to that kind of madness," he said. "I have the sense the organizers of the conference were going for pro-Israel, pro-aliyah bloggers who also get lots of traffic. Unfortunately, that demographic seems to skew somewhat right-wing religious - just as the actual aliyah statistics do." However Bogner, who moved from Connecticut, in the U.S., to Efrat, in the West Bank, in 2003, added that there are a number of "excellent secular and lefty

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bloggers" among the participants. "I'm sure they will more than make up for any disparity in numbers with their active participation."

The author of the Modern Orthodox religion blog Emes VeEmunah, Rabbi Harry Maryles, of Chicago, was offered a ticket to participate in the conference, but cannot attend due to a scheduling conflict. He, too, is aware that Nefesh B'Nefesh seeks to promote its agenda of encouraging immigration to Israel but thinks that it is fair to do that. Yet he does have a criticism: "One issue that may not be on the agenda that I would like to see discussed is how to increase our advertising revenue," he wrote in an e-mail to AngloFile. "I spend hours a day on my blog and have virtually no income from it. The money I make from the two Web ads I have barely pays for my monthly DSL [high-speed Internet connection] fees."

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