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PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

My March Of The Living

By Rabbi Jeffrey Saks

On January 27, as the world marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and rabbis, Jewish communal leaders, and European potentates descended on Auschwitz, I too found myself in Poland. However, unlike so many other visitors to "the old country," my trip had nothing to do with the importance of the Shoah. I went to visit my friend Joel.

Joel has been my student for over three years, attending two weekly Torah classes that I deliver. In countless one-on-one conversations we discuss all the things teachers and students, rabbis and *talmidim*, have been talking about in yeshivas for generations. But until last week we had never met – at least not in the "real" world. Joel is a student on WebYeshiva.org, an interactive learning portal that I founded together with a group of innovative Jewish educators. Along with our 6,000 other registered users around the world, Joel is able to log in to over 50 hours of classes a week in English, Hebrew, or Russian, and with his microphone and webcam, speak and be heard, see and be seen, by his teachers and fellow classmates, all of whom can follow the Jewish texts under study that are displayed on the screen.

Joel is a trained physician, talented musician and composer, and a brilliant student – whose lack of background has not prevented him from making significant accomplishments in his Torah study. Like so many other young Polish Jews, he started exploring his roots a few years ago, but after a few months of Torah study in Jerusalem, he was forced to return home due to family commitments, including caring for his elderly grandfather (a Holocaust survivor).

Now, tragically, Joel is quite ill. His battle with cancer has been courageous, and we've all been inspired to watch him via his webcam participating from his bed in multiple hours of *shiurim* a day, as WebYeshiva has

become an increasingly important part of his life in remote northern Poland.

When we launched WebYeshiva three years ago, we knew that many challenges would face us. Among them was this question: Could a virtual yeshiva, no matter how interactive the technology, allow for the human connection necessary for real growth in Torah study? After these first three years, we can say the answer is "yes." We are constantly heartened to discover the deep, meaningful relationships that have formed – between our teachers and students, and among our students themselves, most of whom have never met in the "real" world. This is, after all, the hallmark of what Jewish learning has always been about: *o chavruta o mituta*. – the friendship formed by Torah study vanquishing even death.

But I will admit that even these technologically generated successes have their limits, which is why I traveled with our *rosh yeshiva*, the pioneering educator Rabbi Chaim Brovender, to visit Joel in Swiecie, Poland. Our "virtual" community of teachers and students responded enthusiastically, donating funds to underwrite the trip, as well as providing for some of Joel's basic needs. We brought a suitcase of foodstuffs, and what he wanted most of all – Jewish books. We arranged for medical supplies and some necessary household goods and appliances. Poland's intrepid Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich accompanied us on our visit and was invaluable in helping make arrangements. (Rabbi Schudrich, one of our generation's *lamed-vav tzadikim*, impressed and inspired us with his unremitting kindnesses and love for his "congregation" – the entire Jewish population of Poland.)

It was very emotional to meet Joel in person, and also a little odd. He was shorter than I thought he would be, but also deeper. There are things you can ask someone, and things you can only understand when you sit together and embrace each other. Although we'd discussed it before online, we got to talking about his Jewish odyssey. I asked him what was it that prodded him to take the steps in religious and spiritual development. In his typically modest yet profound fashion his answer was something I have been thinking about since last week, and doubt I shall ever forget: "A person wants to know who he is."

Rabbi Jeffrey Saks is the founding director of ATID – The Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions in Jewish Education, the parent body of WebYeshiva.org.