

Conference brings together virtual Jewish world in real-time

By Raphael Ahren

More than 200 Jewish bloggers, most of them immigrants from North America, attended the First International Jewish Bloggers Convention in Jerusalem this past Wednesday. Attendees seemed as much if not more interested in meeting fellow bloggers than in panel discussions dedicated to the agenda of taking Jewish blogging to the next level. "Everybody knew already how to get traffic, so there was nothing new," said German-born Miriam Woelke, publisher of several blogs about Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel.

"It's kind of nice to see faces of people that I only read online," David Abitbol, one of the panelists and founder of Jewlicious, told Haaretz. The anonymous author of Chardal, who moved from Los Angeles to Yad Binyamin last year, said that putting faces to names was indeed his

main reason for attending the conference. "I have conversations with these people all the time, but they are faceless people. It's nice to have a normal conversation."

While all blogs represented at the conference dealt in some way or another with life in Israel, the spectrum ranged from immigration through carrying guns in Israel to discussions of Jewish law, board games and interior design. Another 1,300 bloggers followed a live Web cast of the event on their computer screens.

The keynote event of the half-day conference, which was organized by the pro-immigration group Nefesh B'Nefesh, was a speech by former prime minister and current opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu, which touched on his campaign more than blogging. The Foreign Ministry also made a presentation on branding Israel in a better way.

Nefesh B'Nefesh's Danny

Oberman announced the launch of a new Web 2.0 project called My Aliyah Idea, where users are encouraged to post and discuss ways to increase and improve immigration to Israel. While some bloggers said they write for purely recreational and not for any political reasons, many attendees and panelists were exploring ways in which their efforts could help the Jewish state.

"The blogosphere gives everyone a voice and there's lots of great hasbara [public relations] we can do at a grassroots level," said Texas-born Benji Lovitt, a 33-year-old comedian and author of What War Zone???, a blog that takes a humorous look on everyday life in Israel. "My approach is to try to show that Israel is more than you see on CNN. It's actually not the scary, depressing place you think it might be but it's a place of vibrancy and fun and blogging is a way to spread the word about that."