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The Persian rabbi explains it all

By Sara Shereen Bakhshian, Contributing Writer

Haji Hayim sings and dances to a traditional song typically sung at b'nai mitzvah ceremonies, but he does so to a techno beat.

The cartoon character started grabbing the attention of the Iranian Jewish community in January 2006, when his video was distributed in e-mails as part of the official launch of Persianrabbi.com, the brainchild of 23-year-old product developer and community leader Eman Chayim Esmailzadeh.

Esmailzadeh, who graduated from UC Irvine in 2005 after studying business and mechanical engineering, created the site because he thought the definition of Persian Judaism was being lost and that there was a lack of quality media directed specifically to the community. He also wanted to spread the messages of the population's religious leaders outside the synagogue walls and online for everyone to see.

Today, approximately 200 unique users visit the site each day to read articles on different issues, visit forums and peruse community events, local synagogues and kosher restaurant listings. There's also a music studio and Farsi section.

The site attracts all ages, but the primary target is from high schoolers to 30-somethings. Visitors come from around the world, but most are from Los Angeles and New York, as well as Iran and Israel. To keep them interested, there are rants on the singles life, as well as relevant world news drawn from a variety of sources.

Esmailzadeh describes himself as a "traditional Torah-observing Jew," and he hopes Persianrabbi.com will be a gateway for Iranian Jews to connect with religious leaders and their Jewish identity.

"It's a little thing; it's not going to change the world," he said. "But at least for those that are interested in asking questions to rabbis ... they can always ask a question and have an answer."

Giving back to the community and generating awareness about ways to help are Esmailzadeh's goals. To that end, the leader has become involved in a variety of community projects: He is planning a subsidized "part Jewish learning part touring" trip for Sephardic college students to Israel with Jerusalem's Aish HaTorah. Esmailzadeh has delivered food parcels to Persian Jewish families in need on Shabbat through Eretz-SIAMAK Cultural Center. And he has become a big brother with Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles and is a member of their recruitment committee.

"[He has] helped bridge the gap between our agency ... and the Iranian Jewish community, and that is paramount in us ultimately serving more kids," said Mark Mandell, Jewish Big Brothers and Big Sisters director of community development, who added that Esmailzadeh helped bring the organization closer to the Iranian community through the Jewish Unity Network, Beverly Hills' Nessah Synagogue and Woodland Hills' Hebrew Discovery Center.

"You see a kid whose mom passed away from cancer, how can you not help," Esmailzadeh said. "You see a Persian Jewish family that doesn't have food for Shabbat, how can you not help when you know about that?"

For more information visit www.persianrabbi.com and www.jbbbsla.org