New digital platform brings together Jewish voices from across spectrum

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By Daniel J. Roth
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NEW YORK – A group of young online innovators is attempting to expand how members of the Jewish community are communicating their ideas to one another in the digital age.

What started off as a Jewish version of the TED Talks phenomenon has morphed into a category all its own: ELI Talks, which seeks to cultivate inspired Jewish ideas and transmit them to the wider world.

“Through digital media, and conversations on and offline, ELI is curating a canon of new Jewish thought,” Mary Rubenstein, Executive Director of the forum, told The Jerusalem Post on Monday.

The platform, Rubenstien believes, could be seen as akin to a modern incarnation of the Gemara, the rabbinic commentary and analysis of the Mishna, or first written redaction of the Oral Torah, which constitutes the second half of the Talmud.
“This living Gemara, deeply rooted in text and tradition, mirrors, energizes and enriches the entire spectrum of Jewish observance while acting as a beacon of discourse and civility in today’s world,” she said.

“Our own tradition offers us a wealth of wisdom on how to think about ideas, how to put ideas presented over vast spaces and times in conversation with one another, and how to learn from our texts, yes, but also how we as Jews can learn from the stories of our fellow Jews’ wrestling with their diverse interpretations of our tradition.”

To be sure, the online series offers anyone with an internet connection the opportunity to stumble on a “Queer Jewish feminist educator and an ultra-Orthodox therapist,” both figuring out how their stories intersect with their Judaism today “in a way that inspires mutual respect.”

“By bringing together thousands of years of Jewish tradition and the latest in digital technology, ELI Talks provides a platform for Jewish voices from across the spectrum to share their stories and teach lessons they’re uniquely positioned to teach,” Rubenstein said.

PARTICIPANTS HAVE praised the organization’s approach to facilitating the lectures, from providing professional guidance to helping speakers flesh out the concepts most central to their professions and passions.

Jerusalem resident and writer Alden Solovy described the opportunity to perform on the ELI Talks stage as an amazing challenge that left him with a deeper understanding of his personal relationship with Judaism.

“It has the infectious quality of enthusiasm, infused with a core message that is focused on the broader online audience,” Solovy said, adding that the “skilled, professional coaching and the passion that the ELI Talks team” provided helped him tremendously through the process.

Educator Deborah Cosgrove of New York City said it was an “honor to work with ELI Talks and to share my idea with the world.

“In distilling my talk to its core inspiration, I found out what really drives me as an educator, the personal lens through which I see the world. In addition, working with deeply thoughtful Jewish professionals who want to broadcast Jewish ideas and cultivate Jewish speakers and thinkers really moved me. I find ELI the perfect match of new technology and ancient Talmudic discussion.

"In many ways, ELI is one of the best insurances for a Jewish future.”

Lauren Tuchman, a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who is blind, spoke on Judaism’s role in accepting individuals with disabilities. She told the Post, “I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in their speakers' fellowship, to fine-tune my talk and to have the opportunity to work with a professional speaking coach to ground it in Jewish text and tradition.”
Gali Cooks, executive director of the Leading Edge NGO, gave a speech last year on the intersection of Jewish values and modern society. She said that ELI Talks “is on the vanguard of Jewish thought leadership...[where] they source individuals across the community and give them the platform and mantle to share their wisdom and insights.

“These ideas put through the ELI process are powerful... They really are Jewish ideas worth spreading,” she said.

ELI Talks says that its main mission is to work with organizations and individuals to build young Jewish voices and broadcast their insights that provides quality, low-cost adult Jewish education while “continuing to build the platform to capture and exchange inspired Jewish ideas.”

And what began as an “incubation project of the AVI CHAI Foundation and See3 Communications” nearly five years ago, has expanded into an independent venture with more than 170 recorded talks on its site.

Moreover, the organization recently announced that it has opened its applications for its Spring 2018 Speaker Fellowship, for which 15 individuals will be chosen to participate in ELI Talks’ intensive speaker program, culminating in the delivery of their talk to a live audience this summer.

To watch ELI Talks, go to [www.elitalks.org](http://www.elitalks.org).