

The Philadelphia Inquirer
September 23, 2006

New cable channel says 'Shalom'

**Shalom TV hopes a focus on Jewish culture as well
as religion will draw a wide audience.**

By Kristin E. Holmes, Inquirer Staff Writer

The door opens to Mr. Bookstein's Store, and the children's world inside seems to answer the following question: What if Mister Rogers' Neighborhood were Jewish?

Shifra, Dara and the fuzzy puppet Fella sing about high holiday traditions and culture. The songs encourage children to learn Hebrew, with lyrics about words that begin with the letter shin. It's all part of a new cable network: Shalom TV.

Late last month, the pioneering Jewish television network was launched on Comcast in the Southeastern Pennsylvania/Philadelphia and Northern Delaware area, and on Blue Ridge Communications in the Poconos Mountains region.

"We want to present a panorama of Jewish life," said Rabbi Mark S. Golub, the network's founder. That means Shalom TV is culturally oriented and not focused strictly on religion. The network is designed to appeal to a broad Jewish community, from "Jews who are a part of affiliated Jewish life, to those who are not but have a sense of Jewish life and family," Golub said.

Programming aimed at attracting the nation's six million Jews includes 50 hours of talk shows, movies, children's programming, religious study, news and current events.

There are shows from New York's famed 92d Street Y lecture series, programs on Israeli rock musicians, Talmud and Torah study, and movies such as *As If Nothing Happened*, which tells the story of an Israeli family waiting to find out if a loved one has been injured in a bomb attack.

The network is available to 2.2 million area viewers.

"I think it's about time," said Ilana Krop Wilensik, executive director of the Philadelphia branch of the American Jewish Committee. "I wish it were available to people who have basic cable, and not just to people who subscribe to a premium channel."

Shalom TV is a video-on-demand premium channel available to subscribers who pay \$7.99 a month if they have access through Comcast and \$7.95 through Blue Ridge Communications. Unlike 24-hour linear networks such as MTV, which shows programming according to a specific daily schedule, video-on-demand allows customers to choose programming to view whenever they want.

The selection of that format was part of Shalom TV's arduous path to existence, one that has its roots in Golub's student life as manager of a college radio station.

Golub supervised programming at WKCR-FM (89.9) when he was at Columbia University and hosted an interview program. He went on to found a company that developed Jewish education media and created the program *L'Chayim*, which features Golub interviewing newsmakers on issues related to the Jewish community.

"Many adult Jews were left with a childish impression of what Judaism is all about, because they stop studying after the bar and bat mitzvah," Golub said. "I wanted to explain the genius of the Jewish tradition in ways that would excite them."

Next, Golub developed the Russian Television Network of America, which produced programming aimed at the Russian Jewish community. That venture, which now includes 10 Russian-language networks, gave Golub the staff and experience to start Shalom TV.

The network was privately funded, said Golub, who declined to specify a start-up budget. Shalom TV produces original programming such as the children's show Mr. Bookstein's Store, and works in partnership with other organizations, including film societies, to provide additional programming. The network also offered coverage of the Philadelphia rally held in support of Israel at JFK Plaza in July.

But even with programming in hand, finding a distributor was difficult. Shalom TV executives Bradford N. Hammer and David Brugnone worked a year without a salary. The network even changed its business model from a linear one to video-on-demand to appeal to cable companies who want to preserve bandwidth space, said Hammer, the network's chief operating officer, who helped develop the Pennsylvania Cable Network. Video-on-demand is also viewed as the "wave of the future," Golub said.

"This is the most culturally specific programming that we have," said Mark E. Masenheimer, general manager of Blue Ridge Communications. "We call niche target groups 'sticky,'" Masenheimer said. That means that customers are more likely to keep the cable system in their homes if the provider offers programming that can't be obtained elsewhere.

"Young people tend to be more media-oriented and attuned to technology, so this could be particularly valuable since there are concerns about young Jewish people assimilating and separating themselves from the Jewish community," said Barry Morrison, executive director of the Philadelphia branch of the Anti-Defamation League.

Shalom TV officials are talking with other cable providers, including Time Warner and Cablevision, in the effort to make the network available across the United States.

Ultimately, Golub would like Shalom TV to be offered in both a linear and video-on-demand format.

But for now, Shalom TV officials are grateful to be on the air, and Karen Staller, of Northeast Philadelphia, is grateful as well.

Staller was driving along Interstate 95 when she saw a billboard advertising Shalom TV.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, it's so cool,'" said Staller, a sign-language interpreter. When she got home, Staller went on the Internet to find out more and eventually decided to subscribe.

"I want to bring my kids up with a strong sense of Jewish identity," Staller said. "I want them to love being Jewish, and I want them to be able to see what being Jewish is all about."

Contact Kristin E. Holmes at 215-854-2791 or kholmes@phillynews.com.

Illustration:PHOTO

Ben and Alexi Zabin with Fella. The on-demand channel was launched in parts of this region last month. Shalom TV fare includes talk shows, movies, childrens shows, religious study and news.

Shalom TV

Shifra Garber, the host, with Fella on the set of "Mr. Booksteins Store." Shalom TV hopes to spread across the U.S.

Rabbi Mark S. Golub, Shalom TV founder, seeks "to explain the genius of the Jewish tradition."