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February 7, 2002

## Hot-Synching With a Heavenly Presence

By DEBRA NUSSBAUM COHEN

**D**EREK MAY is an active member of Fellowship Bible Church in McKinney, Tex., and a devoted user of his hand-held computer, a Handspring Visor.

Mr. May, who bought the Visor two Christmases ago, takes notes with it during the pastor's sermon and records coming events from the church bulletin. When people in his Bible study group ask for prayers for someone in need, he jots down the requests so he doesn't forget. He uses the search function to find specific verses in the King James Bible that he downloaded from a Christian Web site that caters to palmtop users, [www.olivetree.com](http://www.olivetree.com).

And that's not to mention passing along Scripture by infrared. A program called Eternity Gospel Tract can be downloaded at a site created by Mr. May ([www.palmstogether.com](http://www.palmstogether.com)) and used to beam biblical verses and prayers from one palmtop to another in much the way business people exchange virtual business cards.

"If nothing else," Mr. May said, "it helps me to share my faith a little bit easier."

A growing number of people are finding that pocket-size computers are useful for religious purposes, from saying a virtual rosary to relaxing with a virtual Zen garden while using the palmtop's stylus to rake images of digital sand.

"Religious tradition and modern technology are not antithetical," said Randall Balmer, a professor of American religion at Barnard College. "People think that religion is a kind of quaint illusion and that it makes no room for technology or modernity. This certainly belies that."

Hundreds of religious software applications for



Ayad Sleiman, top, president of I.A.I., says that its Arabic palmtop software taps into the Muslim market; Derek May of McKinney, Tex., middle, searches Bible verses on his Handspring Visor; Rabbi Zalman Shmotkin, bottom, copies prayer wishes from his hand-held. Top, Marty Katz for The New York Times; Jerry W. Hoefler for The New York Times; bottom, Shannon Stapleton for The New York Times.

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hand-held devices, many of them free, can be downloaded from Web sites created by programmers with sectarian interests and from more general sites like that of Palm Inc. ([news/quote](#))(www.palm.com) and www.palmgear.com. Among the most popular downloads at PalmGear.com is Bible Reader (more than 30,000 downloads), a program from Olive Tree that offers a wealth of options for searching text and customizing the display screen.

The Bible can be downloaded in many languages. Roman Catholics may want to use the Saint a Day program, while Muslims can consult an Arabic dictionary, a Ramadan timetable or the Prophet Mohammed's last sermon. Mormons can download the teachings of their church's founder, Joseph Smith.

The Lubavitch Hasidim's forthcoming Web site www.palmtorah.org will present a selection of downloadable texts for palmtops, including Torah commentary from rabbis and philosophers as distant as the medieval sage Maimonides and as recent as Menachem Mendel Schneerson, grand rabbi of the Lubavitch Hasidic movement, who died in 1994.

"Our embrace of technology goes back to the understanding that everything created in this world was created to serve Hashem," or God, said Rabbi Zalman Shmotkin, director of www.chabadonline.com, another site founded by the movement.

Ed Kountz, a mobile technologies analyst with TowerGroup, a research and consulting firm in Needham, Mass., describes the use of palmtops as "just a step further in the process of democratizing access to religious information."

"It's easier to carry a P.D.A. than three or four religious texts," he said. "The image of the religious individual carrying a dog-eared Bible is changing with the times."

For Muslims like David Kearns, a convert, the hand-held can even deliver the muezzin's call to prayer. Mr. Kearns has set his Sony ([news/quote](#)) Clié to beep one minute before it is time to pray. A palmtop program that he created reports the correct time for the prayer ritual, which is pegged to daybreak, noon, afternoon, sunset and last light, wherever the worshiper is.

"If you're planning your day ahead of time, you want to know when that is — especially in the United States, where we don't have mosques every 10 feet to tell us when to pray," said Mr. Kearns, who works for a Web site developer in Washington.

Along with a few Nintendo-type games and the Washington Capitals hockey schedule, Mr. Kearns has loaded the Koran in English onto his Clié. When he prays on Friday, the Muslim holy day, at a mosque at Georgetown University, "they'll have maybe three Korans translated into English and they're all taken," he said. "My Arabic is very poor, and this makes it convenient not to have to carry a translation around."

Information Appliances International of Falls Church, Va., developed a system that enables users of Palm-based devices to function in Arabic — including right-to-left text entry, a Graffiti-type program and observance of the Islamic calendar.

I.A.I.'s president and chief executive, Ayad Sleiman, a Lebanese-born Muslim who said he did not consider himself religious, said that the company tapped into a market of observant Muslims hungry for technological tools. I.A.I. has even developed a kind of virtual compass for Palm OS users, Sala Times, which enables them to face Mecca when they pray.

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For Jews, the Web site PilotYid.com (www.pilotyid.com) offers downloads of hundreds of Palm-compatible programs, from lists of kosher restaurants to selections from the Talmud. The site's creator, Ari Engel, said that Jewish calendar programs were among the most popular downloads. Most of them sync with the secular calendar already on the organizer to help users anticipate scheduling problems.

"When someone wants to set up a meeting, I don't want it to conflict with a Jewish holiday, so I check it on my Palm," Mr. Engel said.

He said he realized how useful palmtops could be while studying in the library as a student at Yeshiva University in Manhattan. At evening prayer time, at least 10 men would congregate to form the required quorum. With few prayer books handy, most would pull out their hand-held organizers.

Mr. Engel began by scanning daily prayers and blessings after meals — things that observant Jews usually carry on laminated paper in their wallets — into a Palm-compatible format and posting them on the Web.

Today his site offers over 200 programs and texts, and 7,000 people have signed up to receive e-mail notification when something new is added. PilotYid also provides links to free programs and shareware based on non- Palm operating systems.

For users with less customary religious interests or enthusiasms, the Software Connection area of Palm Inc.'s Web site offers a Hindu Vedic astrology program, a free program outlining the tenets of China's Falun Gong spiritual movement, and software called Tarot2Go.

Scott Koon, creator of the program Pocket Zendo, available at [amsftw.tripod.com/id12.htm](http://amsftw.tripod.com/id12.htm), described it as being "like having a little meditation hall, complete with master, in your pocket." Users determine the timing for a deep-breathing routine in advance, and hand-held beeps cue them to breathe in or out.

Not every devotee of the hand-held organizer considers it an enhancement of the religious experience.

Sister Mary Boys, a nun and a professor of practical theology at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan, has been using a palmtop for more than a year, but only for secular purposes like keeping track of appointments and phone numbers.

"When I pray I don't want to sit with a computer, which I do enough during the day," she said. "I'm a real book person. I like to hold the little pages in my hands, thank you very much."

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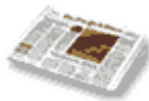
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