

Reality show rabbi

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'Kosher Sex' expert Rabbi Shmuley Boteach has found a new niche - on US reality TV.

Photo: [TLC](#)

Teaneck, New Jersey-based Rabbi Shmuley Boteach hates pornography, yet he publishes his writings in *Playboy*. He derides reality TV, yet he hosts one of the genre's biggest hits. Rabbi Shmuley, as he is called, has been a mainstay in the public eye for about 20 of his 39 years, so it's no wonder that [shmuley.com](#) sports a huge logo at the top with the words *America's Rabbi*. Despite much criticism to the contrary, Boteach claims that he does not seek fame. "Celebrity is a very noxious disease," he says.

But *America's Rabbi* might actually be a modest moniker for the progressive Orthodox thinker. Boteach is the founder of Oxford University's prominent L'Chaim Society, is the author of 1999's best-seller *Kosher Sex* and 15 other successful books and has participated in high-profile debates trying to persuade the likes of porn mogul Larry Flynt to be a little more righteous in their endeavors. Boteach has been a columnist in many prominent newspapers (including this one), and for five years he hosted his own talk radio pulpit on a Mormon-centric network (the show was canceled when Boteach implored Utahans to host Katrina refugees last year). He has

been appearing regularly on international television for several years – first as a colorful news commentator, often standing next to celebrities like Roseanne and Michael Jackson (in the role of personal spiritual coach), and most recently as host of TLC’s hit reality show *Shalom in the Home*, and guesting on high-profile programs like *Oprah* to discuss his latest bestseller or other brand manifestations.

As an extension of the *Kosher Sex* concept, Boteach has largely made a name for himself by mingling with celebrities who have non-wholesome sexual identities. After Uri Geller introduced Boteach to Michael Jackson, “I wanted to get him to stop this mystique that he was above other people,” Boteach says. Their association ended when Boteach saw Jackson reverting to dangerous behaviors: “I couldn’t help him any more.”

Around the same time, Boteach staged a series of three public debates against *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt. “I was out to change him,” he says, and claims to have made some headway trying to convince Flynt to publish a marriage fidelity-themed magazine. An Upper West Side event once had Boteach sharing the marquee with Lindsey Vuolo, the first publicly Jewish Playboy centerfold. Boteach says that through their dialogue, he even got Miss November 2001 to see somewhat eye-to-eye with him about the sanctity of modesty and the perils of exploitation. But it’s been through the new TV show, which aims to help average Americans, that Boteach has become most recognized.

Boteach is currently visiting Israel to enjoy the autumn holidays here and to help his oldest daughter (of eight children) get settled into a year of studies in seminary. But he’s also working, meeting with big names like Natan Sharansky to discuss participation in a book series he edits, meeting with executives from satellite TV outfit Yes about the possibility of their broadcasting *Shalom in the Home* locally (“there was some interest expressed,” he says), and lobbying publishers to market Hebrew translations of his self-help literature (so far, only *Kosher Sex* is available in an Israeli version). He’s also doing some publicity, giving interviews to the local press, this one beginning only after Boteach lovingly yet firmly instructs his older son to recite his morning prayers.

Boteach’s own parents divorced when he was young, which inspired the youth to fanaticize about becoming a holy healer. Young Boteach nicknamed himself “Love Prophet” in these fantasies. Later, his 17-year-old brother came out of the closet as an Orthodox Jew who is homosexual, an identity which the Boteach family learned to see as a non-paradox. “The Torah has 613 commandments,” he says of the perspective-shaping experience. “Just because you don’t keep one, doesn’t mean you should not keep all the others.” Today, the Love Prophet is out to heal Western society of what he has identified as its three chief ailments: dead marriages, a lack of interest in our own children and the corroding of the home’s role as sanctuary.

In *Shalom in the Home*, Boteach visits American families with problems. He parks his Airstream trailer in their yards and observes them before counseling the parents and instituting family activities like eating dinner or visiting aquariums together – activities which impose a need for closeness and real communication and therefore help to heal rifts. Family dynamics improve and love is spread – both on and off of TV. America has responded, with fans approaching Boteach in gentile bastions like

Idaho, North Dakota and Minneapolis to tell him how much his show has touched them.

“A lot of reality television is exploitative,” Boteach maintains. “It is inane – a lot of it is downright embarrassing.” But *Shalom* has been commended by critics for being different. “We know it has to be entertainment, but this is a show that celebrates family life. It really goes deep into peoples’ issues.” Of the families he visits on the show, Boteach claims that “we try very hard to make sure they represent a cross-section of America. We choose shows with relevance, not to be sensationalist.”

Boteach asserts that it’s not a Jewish-themed TV show, but he concedes that the issue is not so simple: He’s there in the role of helper, not theologian, yet his Jewish lenses make for advice grounded in Judaism. “I won’t throw Judaism in peoples’ face. I’m not there for that. I’m there to heal peoples’ families.” Nonetheless, “It comes organically and naturally because that’s how I myself think.”

Despite the advice of image spin-meisters, Boteach won’t groom his beard and he won’t tuck in his *tzitzit*-fringes. On *Shalom in the Home*, “Not only do we not hide my religiousness, my rabbinic title and the fact that I emerged from a womb of religious tradition. We celebrate it,” he says. “It’s probably the first time that a religious Jewish personality is hosting a prime time show. It’s not my accomplishment – it’s Judaism’s. That’s the brilliance of Judaism that we’re not cognizant of: that it has a universal appeal.”

Most strict adherents to Jewish law would think twice about using Jewish teachings to improve the lives of gentiles, but Boteach claims he’s “never making an effort to be careful” to make sure his advice is in accordance to Judaism’s “Noahite” codes. He cites his *Judaism for Everyone* book, which outlines the distinction between Jewish Ritual (mostly for Jews but with lessons to teach *goyim*) and Jewish Wisdom (meant to be spread to all mankind). “God loves us all equally, but he did give the Jews a special mission to spread his light into the world. The work that I do is about using Jewish wisdom to heal people and families, God willing, throughout the world,” he explains.

Ever since Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson sent Boteach to Oxford as his emissary in 1988, “I’ve only worked among non-Jews and secular Jews.... That was essentially my career. The same is true about my books.” Jews too have fallen prey to “corrosive influences of western culture” like TV, dress codes, drugs and materialism. “We’re seeing terrible things in the Orthodox community nowadays,” Boteach says. But he believes that the best way to influence Jews is to make the secular world see the beauty of Jewish wisdom. “It was organic,” Boteach says of his global vision. “It was a product of being at Oxford.”

As soon as he arrived there and opened his center, Boteach knew the mission was bigger than traditional Jewish outreach: Famous L’Chaim Society guests like Shimon Peres, Deepak Chopra, Elie Wiesel, Mikhail Gorbachev, Boy George, Simon Wiesenthal and Stephen Hawking began to draw largely non-Jewish crowds of thousands to Shabbat dinners. Despite the resulting acrimonious end to his Chabad post at Oxford, “the Rebbe made me a *shaliah* (emissary) and he’s not alive to unmake me a *shaliah*,” says Boteach – a statement ripe with implied criticism for the

recent state of the movement. “I’m doing *shlichut* in a slightly different way.... What I do cannot be embraced by the Chabad mainstream, and I accept that. So I turn to *halakha* as my guide. But there’s no question that the main inspiration in my life is Chabad teaching and the Rebbe.”

With or without an official seal of approval from 770 Eastern Parkway – or anyone else for that matter – Boteach’s life-long objectives to heal us all continues to gain momentum. *Shalom in the Home* has drawn millions of viewers every week, with thousands of new devotees emailing Boteach every week. Season Two airs in the coming months.