



'Post' crossword editor promises fresh challenges

• By EITAN AROM

You do it by yourself, with thousands of others – nine letters.

The answer, of course, is CROSSWORD. And those clues are not easy to craft – lame though it is, that one took me nearly 20 minutes to write.

But David Benkof has perfected the art over two decades, infusing his crosswords with his knowledge of Jewish history and whimsical personality.

The result, he says, is much more than a list of questions and answers.

“A lot of people think crossword puzzles are a kind of trivia contest, and they’re not,” said Benkof, who has crafted *The Jerusalem Post* crossword that has appeared in *In Jerusalem* and *Metro* for six years.

His role makes him the de facto leader of the world of Jewish wordplay – the *Post* crossword is syndicated to 20 Jewish publications worldwide.

“Part of what makes them fun is the wordplay, and seeing words cross each other and figuring out the theme,” he explained. “The idea that it’s just a list of questions, that wouldn’t be any fun at all.”

Starting this week as the editor of the *Post*’s crosswords instead of their sole creator, Benkof plans to open up the range of difficulty and topics for the world’s premier Jewish-themed crossword series.

Though Judaica might seem like a narrow topic for a weekly crossword, Benkof, who has a master’s degree in Jewish history from Stanford University, sees no shortage of material.

“We draw on everything from Hollywood to rabbis to Israeli history,” he said. “It’s very broad, so that people of all backgrounds have a shot at finishing a puzzle.”

Questions cover everything from biblical narrative (“It had a major part in the Ten Commandments” – six letters) to Jewish cuisine (“It takes guts to cook them” – seven letters) and draw as much on wordplay as knowledge of the Judaism.

(The respective answers, by the way, are REDSEA



Crossword editor David Benkof (Courtesy)

and KISHKES.)

And starting with Benkof’s editorship, the puzzles will generally include themes within the broader category of Judaica – among the puzzles for January

are “Noshing Ventured” and “Amblin’ Actors.”

And Benkof has some twists planned for solvers; this week’s puzzle has some letters circled, so that the letters that land in those circles spell out the name of items found in a synagogue.

A range of difficulty will put different puzzles within the grasp of amateurs and experts.

Even for the advanced puzzles, however, Benkof’s goal is not to stump solvers. “Stump’ isn’t the right word,” he said, “because I want them to eventually figure it out. But I also want them to initially think, ‘Wow, this is too hard for me.’”

In the first issue under Benkof’s stewardship, solvers will indeed face a challenge: Benkof said the first puzzle will contain a “double-triple stack,” insider jargon for a puzzle where the top three and bottom three answers all have 15 letters.

He said the puzzle will be the first “in the history of crossword puzzles” to combine such a formation with a Jewish theme.

An Orthodox Jew, Benkof, 44, speaks in a gravelly tone that exudes excitement when he starts discussing crosswords. He works as a writer and editor for the Daily Caller, a politically conservative opinion website, and produces crosswords on the side.

Part of his fascination with crosswords comes from a genuine love of trivia – he once won \$5,000 on the game show *Win Ben Stein’s Money*. But beyond that, it’s his lighthearted attitude that he points to as central to his pursuit.

“I’m a playful guy, and I’m particularly playful with language,” Benkof said, speaking from Orlando, Florida, where he was on vacation, visiting Disney World. “I’ve always like puns, for example.”

But beginning in the upcoming year, his personality will be just one of many featuring in the *Post* crossword.

“In 2015, the puzzles will be a lot more fun,” he promised. “The themes will delight solvers, the clues will be more clever and the puzzles will be stamped with the personalities of their constructors.” •