

# 'Tech-un' olam

Technology start-ups with the potential to heal the world were honoured at a glittering ceremony in Malta last week. *Stephen Oryszczuk* had a front row seat

Four words scribbled and circled on a page: 'tech', 'Israel', 'Malta', 'rabbi'. Of the four, one stands out, and it isn't 'tech', 'Israel', or 'Malta'. I arrange them in a north-south-east-west configuration and stare at them for several minutes. You need 'rabbi' to make it a virtuous circle.

For nine years, "why rabbis and why tech?" has been the double-headed question perplexed journalists have asked Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), which funds an annual prize for tech start-

ups using innovation that has the potential to heal the world (tikkun olam). Goldschmidt, better known as the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, is currently in Israel after denouncing Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Asked again ahead of this year's awards ceremony in the middle of the Mediterranean, he spoke about how technology changes life in such core and fundamental ways that religious ethics simply have to be part of the conversation. There needs to be "a bridge between the spiritual world and the tech world", he said. Likewise, there needs to be "a bridge

between the past and the future. Our religion may be ancient, even eternal, but it has always survived because it has faith in the future."

This future was represented last week near the Maltese capital of Valletta by six small companies led by Germans, Norwegians, Israelis, Brits, French, Slovenians, and even a Venezuelan Italian. They are all thinking around problems and using the latest technology to do things such as reduce corruption in the developing world, create lenses against climate change, manage migraine care, screen people for dementia and help kids to code. The 2021 winner was uretra-lensing cards and an app to translate mouth-to-mouth science-backed advice on hydration, nutrition, immunity, liver and kidney health. It was incredibly inspiring to hear.

During the day, the contestants took part in a conference co-sponsored by CER and Malta's government that outlined the benefits of doing business on an island whose airport runway is about 20 percent of its total length. That evening, they dined up for a gala dinner, where Europe's major biblical group awarded prizes of €10,000 (€25,000) and €20,000 (€22,440) – potentially game-changing sums for a start-up.

Why €10,000 and €20,000? The number 20 is significant in Judaism, delegates learned, because it has the numerical value of the word for God.

Likewise, 10 is the equivalent of *da'at*, Hebrew for "BSE", Goldschmidt said, adding that God's purpose was for us to bring goodness into the world and to ourselves.

The technologies being celebrated by the CER Prize did just that.

This being a Jewish event, there were lots of schmoozing opportunities. Many traveled Malta's economy minister, who showed up twice at the



This year's annual prize for tech start-ups was held near Valletta, Malta

Malta, many of whom were born in Russia, have recently become citizens.

Aside from all the talk of connectivity, ICT adoption, digital public services and telecoms infrastructure, history suggests a natural friendship. During the Second World War, for instance, Malta was the only European country to accept Jews *visu-free*. It rescued thousands from persecution, a fact that deserves to be better known.

The Jewish presence on Malta goes back much further, however – to the Semite Phoenician settlers of 2,000 years ago. The first documented Jewish visitor to Malta was Paul of Tarsus, who was shipwrecked on the island on his way to Rome in about 60 CE.

A combination of location and safe deep-water harbours has ensured that Malta has been continuously inhabited since prehistoric times, with the first inhabitants

mainly a Jewish section known as Qbar il-Lhudin/Misrafa.

Alongside the infamous coins in Rabat, his former post to Jewish cemeteries in Kalkara (784), Mano (1079), and Tr' Sfrim's Jewish Cemetery in Valletta, Kalkara was funded by the Leghorn Fund for supporting Hebrew classes taken hostage by Moslems and was used between 1784 and 1832. Likewise, Tr' Sfrim was in use from 1826 to 1895. The cemetery in Mano, by contrast, is still in use today. Designed by Vittorio Passini, it was funded by the British Jewish philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore, who visited Malta in 1855.

Back in today, yards from the hotel where a giant casino is terms of gross value added, there is still no industry in Malta that can touch gambling and betting as an career, with brands such as Camden Market owner Toby Segel knowing all about this field. Yet Schreiber was keen to talk about other areas too, such as

