

When is it Shabbat in cyberspace? Just Ask the Rabbi

By [Daphna Berman](#)

If you were ever curious about when Shabbat takes place on the Internet, whether it is permissible to go to morning prayers only after you finish your daily jog, or why Jews place pebbles on tombstones, you might consider visiting a Web site that answers these and a raft of other Jewish-related questions.

"Ask the Rabbi" - an Internet service that promises detailed replies to all types of religious inquiries - has fielded over 11,000 questions since the project was launched five years ago.

Questions range from the bizarre ("Is it possible that there are Jews on other planets?") to the practical ("Is it permissible for a religious woman to be treated by a male gynecologist?") - but all, including the most mundane, get personalized responses.

"We give these questions serious attention," says Rabbi Yosef Carmel, dean of Eretz Hemdah, the learning institution that administers the site, www.erezhemdah.org

"We don't just say yes or no. We provide detailed answers that always include the sources."

In the years since Ask the Rabbi first made its way to the Internet, the institute's staff has fielded thousand of questions, all in English, from all corners of the globe. Through the Internet, they reach Eretz Hemdah, the Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies, which is located near the entrance to Jerusalem, in a narrow, somewhat dilapidated building that will soon be razed to make way for ultra-Orthodox apartment units.

The 35 rabbis enrolled in Eretz Hemdah's seven-year program are preparing for yadin yadin, an advanced form of rabbinic ordination recognized as being equivalent to an academic doctorate. Answering queries from abroad is not their main job, but every week, the rabbis take time to answer the wide-ranging questions retrieved from the Ask the Rabbi inbox.

Each rabbi is personally responsible for researching the individual queries he is given and for providing well-grounded answers, complete with sources, if possible. Before they are sent back, the answers are approved by at least two other rabbis and translated into English.

Queries can take anywhere from 30 minutes to 50 hours to research and answer, but

the service is free and answers are usually e-mailed within two weeks. Users don't have to identify themselves, which allows even the most personal questions to remain anonymous.

Eretz Hemdah is not the only Internet service of its type, but some of the others are more ultra-Orthodox in nature, including a popular Chabad site that allows users can chat online with a rabbi and get answers in real time. Eretz Hemdah, however, is more modern in its approach to religious law and those interested in the rabbinic sources will be pleased with the very detailed answers.

For the Ask the Rabbi staff, some of the queries are quite standard and involve straightforward issues dealing with the laws of kashrut, for example. But sometimes, the questions are more complicated.

Take, for example, the issue of Shabbat on the Internet. Though seemingly theoretical, for observant people who run a Web site or an online store, the issue could be potentially problematic since other Jewish people would be using and benefiting from the site during Shabbat.

After considerable research, the rabbis determined that Shabbat exists on the Internet for a particular user only in the place that he or she uses the Internet. Their ruling - which Rabbi Carmel said was like "having to invent the wheel, because there were no available sources" on the subject - meant that a person is allowed to operate an online store on Shabbat if he or she isn't actively doing something on the site.

The rabbis also recommended that someone in New York, for example, not check an Israeli Web site on Friday afternoon, since it would be Shabbat in the place where the site operates, even if it wasn't yet Shabbat in New York.

"Almost everything we have an answer for, except spiritual or kabbalistic questions, which we tell people aren't our specialty," says Carmel. When someone asked if it was true that there will be fire in hell that will consume sinners, the team of rabbis replied they didn't know, since no one has reported back to them.

Carmel feels that people in the ultra-Orthodox camp who have shunned the Internet are missing out on a host of religious opportunities.

"There's lots of garbage out there, but there is also a lot of important information, which people could really use for their benefit," Carmel says.

"In just two clicks, you can get to sites that we don't want people to go to, but in just two clicks, you can also get to wonderful places, where you can learn Torah."
