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Zionism, religion a winning combination at Eretz Hemdah Institute

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Even from the time of its original coalescing in the 1800s as a distinct group, the religious Zionist movement strained to weather allegations that it sacrificed religion at the expense of Zionism. The critiques varied – and continue to – but the tie that binds them is their insistence that Zionism will always, theologically or practically, somehow compromise religion.

Exhibit One for the defence goes by the name of the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Jerusalem.

Founded in 1987 by Rabbis Yosef Carmel and Moshe Erenreich, the

Israeli institute has become both a top-flight school for rabbis (imagine a Harvard-level, post-doctorate program for Jewish law), and the go-to source for rabbis the world over.

But it's not only the level of the school, but the rationale behind its establishment, that gives true pause. After all, by 1987, there was hardly a lack of yeshivot (schools for the study of Jewish law) in Israel.

Rabbi Carmel conceded that in a recent interview. But that wasn't the point, he said.

"We got the feeling that there was no place to raise up *Gedolei Torah* (Torah giants) that are Zionist and open-minded, and sensitive to the needs of

the entire nation."

There were, and are, a number of ultra-Orthodox institutions that pursued the high level of post-ordination study that the founders envisioned, and there were multiple Zionist yeshivot, but it was the combination that was at a premium.

As a result, the founders contacted Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli, a former judge on the rabbinical court of appeals and one of the more famous students of Rabbi Abraham Kook, a legendary figure in the religious Zionist world. He agreed to lead the institution, although he has since passed on.

Specifically, Eretz Hemdah's seven-year program produces *dayanim* (lit-

erally, judges). This designation, and as a result, the program as well, is only open to those who have already received their semichah, or rabbinic degree.

Rabbi Carmel made no secret of the program's exclusiveness. Out of about 50 applicants every year, five are accepted to the program. The application process includes a rigorous examination and lengthy interview. And, in a nod to its Zionist and more modern orientation, Rabbi Carmel said applicants "must feel an obligation to the state of Israel" and they must have completed their army service. In addition, university graduates have a greater chance of gaining acceptance.

Similarly, students are required to provide a half-day of community service each week. More than that, a condition of acceptance to the program is that the student must commit himself to serve the community in some capacity immediately upon completion of his studies.

According to Rabbi Carmel, graduates of Eretz Hemdah are widely recognized for their excellence. Of those who take the annual national test to achieve the 'judge' designation, he said, 45 to 50 per cent typically pass. Eretz Hemdah graduates, by contrast, pass at a clip of 87 to 90 per cent. On the most recent test, he continued, five rabbis passed and received honours; four of the five called Eretz Hemdah their alma mater.

Graduates have often fulfilled the founders' leaders of tomorrow vision, with some heading yeshivot, others serving as judges on the rabbinical courts and still others serving as community rabbis.

The institute's reach extends abroad,

as well. In conjunction with the Orthodox Union of New York City, it fields thousands of questions relating to Jewish law, through its 'Ask the Rabbi' web link, from all over the world. In the past six years, according to Rabbi Carmel, the rabbis at Eretz Hemdah have answered 11,000 questions on topics ranging from lifecycle functions and family relations to kosher food and business matters.

The institute also maintains contact with rabbinic professionals around the world, and many, including two Toronto rabbis – Reuven Tradburks of Kehillat Shaarei Torah synagogue and Jay Kelman of the Torah in Motion organization – have visited the Jerusalem headquarters to attend "enrichment programs."

In Italy, for example, Eretz Hemdah was invited, 15 years ago, to take over management of the Rabbinical Collegio in Rome, which trains local rabbis. Two years ago, the leaders of the Johannesburg community also turned to Eretz Hemdah to take the helm of its rabbinical school. Today, classes are given several times a month by Eretz Hemdah faculty in Israel, who interact with students via videoconference and e-mail.

The organization continues to grow. In April, management opened *Mishpat ve-Halakhah be-Yisrael Bett Din*, a private rabbinic court system that resolves monetary claims cases through alternative dispute resolution (arbitration). In Israel, civil courts are backlogged and rabbinic courts operated by the Chief Rabbinate are typically clogged with marital and family issues cases. To date, the program has received an average of a case a day.



Eretz Hemdah Institute co-founder Rabbi Yosef Carmel, seen here working at the Jerusalem-based institute, believes strongly that there is no need to compromise when it comes to mixing religion and Zionism.