

Q&A brings tradition online

By ABIGAIL LEICHMAN
STAFF WRITER

At the end of "Schindler's List," there's a scene where Holocaust survivors line up to place pebbles on the gravestone of Oskar Schindler, the man who'd saved their lives.

Many viewers wondered what that gesture meant, and their curiosity led them to Ask the Rabbi, an online service offered by Israel's Eretz Hemdah Institute.

Over the past six years, Ask the Rabbi has fielded some 11,000 e-mailed inquiries from across the world about every imaginable aspect of Jewish law and custom.

It should more accurately be called Ask the Rabbis, because up to 50 individual experts give their time to researching and providing answers to questions from Jews, non-Jews and even other rabbis.

"We have a wide spectrum of people asking," said Rabbi Yosef Carmel, 53, director of the institute. "Some don't have a [synagogue] closer than 150 miles from where they live. Others are learning in a yeshiva and have a specific issue to ask about. It's our pleasure to answer all questioners."

Carmel recently spoke at Teaneck's Congregation B'nai Yeshurun about one of many business-related issues the service has dealt with.

"Somebody got an offer to sell jewelry on a cruise. He's Jewish; the owner of the cruise [ship] is not Jewish and the shop worker is not Jewish. [Because Jews are not permitted to engage in commerce on their Sabbath], is it permissible for the shop to sell jewelry on Saturday? We gave him the formula to do it according to Halakha, Jewish law," said Carmel.

Several people who heard his presentation later sent their own business-related questions, Carmel said. Some were advised to ask their own rabbi.

"We are very careful not to give somebody the opportunity to take our answer to argue with their local rabbi," Carmel said. "If you belong to a synagogue, the rabbi is in charge. But many people don't have a rabbi. Others who do are asking us things they're embarrassed to ask their own rabbis."

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Englewood's Congregation Ahavath Torah has spent the past year on sabbatical studying in Israel at Eretz Hemdah, a 17-year-old

post-ordination program that trains rabbinic judges, educators and communal leaders.

"If my congregants have a question, obviously I prefer if they come to me," Goldin said. "How-

servant Jew living in Istanbul, where there are few Jews, Carmel related. "He asked us some questions and then his fiancée started to send questions, too."

Within two years, the couple married, moved to Israel for graduate school and committed to an observant Jewish life. "This is the power of the Internet if we use it for such things," said Carmel.

Is there such a thing as a question with no answer?

"The Torah is so wide and deep, you can find — if you try hard — an answer for almost every question," he said. "Most questions regard daily life: the Sabbath and festivals, customs surrounding death and mourning, how to keep kosher."

One person did ask whether Jews believe there is life on other planets. Research turned up a response to the same question from a medieval sage.

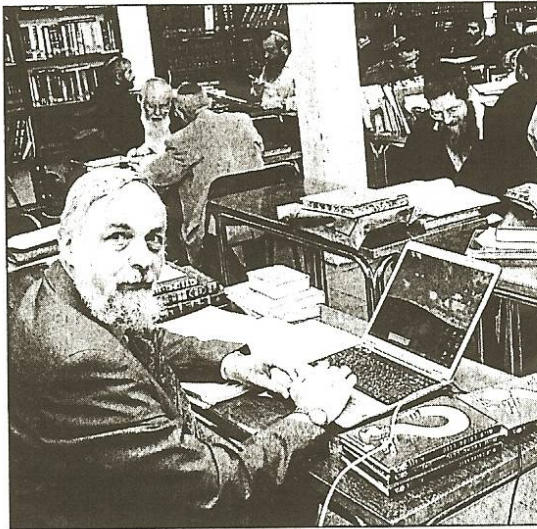
"He answered that there's no source for such a question. So that was our answer as well," Carmel said with a laugh.

For almost everything else, a detailed answer is on its way within 24 hours.

And why do Jews place pebbles on tombstones?

It's simply an ancient tradition that let others know someone has been there to visit the grave.

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Rabbi Yosef Carmel researching answers to Ask the Rabbi e-mails at the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Israel.

ever, if they are going to go on the Internet, this is where I'd like them to ask their questions."

Ask the Rabbi began as a project of the Orthodox Union, a Manhattan-based organization that services member congregations and oversees the world's largest kosher supervision service.

"They thought people would ask them about food products," said Carmel. But the questions were actually wide-ranging and the OU rabbis didn't have the staff to research and answer them.

"So they called us and asked us to be partners with them," said Carmel. Questions may be submitted via links at both ou.org and eretz hemdah.org.

"All our rabbis served in the Israel Defense Forces, so they know the world," said Carmel, himself a rabbinic judge, educator and author.

"Many have university degrees and are pursuing Ph.D.s. Each gives at least half a day every week to ... this project. Rabbis should not be above the people. They are servants of the people and we try to give good service."

While at Eretz Hemdah, Goldin was also involved in researching several questions received on Ask the Rabbi.

"I had a taste of what they do and it's just marvelous," he said.

In addition to Jews looking for practical guidance, Ask the Rabbi gets inquiries from university professors and from non-Jews "all over the world who want to understand Jewish life," said Carmel. "We like to help them appreciate Torah as well."

One questioner was a non-ob-

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