



A Training Ground For Tomorrow's Rabbinic Leadership: Eretz Hemdah Celebrates 20 Years

By: Shlomo Greenwald, *Jewish Press Staff Reporter* Wednesday, August 29, 2007

Twenty years ago this September, Rabbi Yosef Carmel and Rabbi Moshe Ehrenreich approached Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli, a longtime member of the Supreme Rabbinical Court and *rosh yeshiva* of the religious Zionist flagship Yeshivat Mercaz Harav, about starting Eretz Hemdah. Rabbi Yisraeli agreed and became president of the institute.

“And he said that from this moment your time is my time,” Rabbi Carmel said.

Today Eretz Hemdah is the only religious Zionist institute for Torah studies for post-*semicha* students – that is, students who had already received the first level *semicha* called *yoreh yoreh* before entering. Eretz Hemdah is a seven-year program, during which time students take tests to receive a higher-level *semicha* called *yadin yadin*. The tests and ultimate *semicha* are administered by the chief rabbinate of Israel.

“The program is much wider,” said Rabbi Carmel during a recent interview with The Jewish Press. “It’s really to be the next generation of *gedolei Torah*. One of the ways to climb up on top of the hill is take this examination of *yadin yadin*, which is one of the most difficult examinations in Israel from the chief rabbinate of Israel.”

In order to foster the next generation of Torah leaders, Eretz Hemdah’s program is intensive, with the young student rabbis dedicating 12 hours each day to Torah study. And the hours pay off. While the national average of passing all the *yadin yadin* tests is approximately 50 percent, Eretz Hemdah students have been averaging around 90 percent. In the last exam Eretz Hemdah participated in, 150 candidates took the test, with only five passing with honors – four of them were from Eretz Hemdah. (To get *yadin yadin semicha*, students must pass five examinations in seven years.)

“The atmosphere of 35 young rabbis – brilliant, top talented – gives you powerful tool to produce wonderful *talmidei chachamim* from one side, and to serve the nation in the other side,” said Rabbi Carmel. (Eretz Hemdah accepts five new students each year, for a total of 35 students in the program.) The serving the nation part is fulfilled by the requirement that each student dedicate one day each week to the public, usually giving classes to a variety of segments of the Israeli population – teenagers and adults, secular and religious.

Rabbi Carmel and Rabbi Ehrenreich serve as Eretz Hemdah’s deans and as the primary teachers. Additionally, lectures are presented by Rabbi Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, a member of the Supreme Rabbinical Court. And many prominent rabbis have delivered guest lectures, including the *roshei yeshiva* Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg of Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh, and Rabbi Hershel Schachter of Yeshiva University.

Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, the *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maaleh Adumim, Israel, is part of the institute’s *halacha* committee, and Rabbi Yisrael Rosen, head of the Tzomet Institute for Technology and Halacha, is the technological halachic adviser.

While the institute’s primary purpose is to educate rabbis, Eretz Hemdah has grown to become a very prominent force in Torah education for the public, primarily via its website, www.erezhemdah.org. Through the website’s “ask the rabbi” feature, Eretz Hemdah rabbis have answered some 12,000 questions over the last seven years. From these questions, Eretz Hemdah recently published its first book for a general audience, *Living the Halachic Process*, edited by Rabbi Daniel Mann, who is a graduate of Eretz Hemdah, a judge with its *beit din*, and a senior respondent for the website’s “ask the rabbi” feature.



Rabbi Yosef Carmel and Rabbi Hoshe Ehrenreich

Rabbi Carmel said that in 2006, a quarter of a million pages of *divrei Torah* from the website were downloaded. A conservative projection for all of 2007 is 350,000.

Even if you haven't heard of Eretz Hemdah, your rabbi probably has. Many American rabbis come to Eretz Hemdah as part of an enrichment program – to refresh themselves religiously. Rabbi Steven Pruzansky of Teaneck, Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Englewood, Rabbi Yaakov Kermaier of Manhattan, Rabbi Kenneth Brander of Boca Raton and now Yeshiva University, Rabbi Jeffery Bienenfeld of St. Louis, and Rabbi Jonathan Muskat of Oceanside have all spent some time studying at Eretz Hemdah – some as long as a year.

And rabbis from around the world look to Eretz Hemdah for guidance. The institute recently published its sixth volume of *Shut Bemareh Habazak*, a collection of answers to questions from rabbis around the world. Flip through this latest volume and you'll find submissions from rabbis from Slovakia, Croatia, Australia, along with several states in the U.S.

“We are very well connected to OU, RCA, and YU,” said Rabbi Carmel, “and all the rabbis in the world they know about Eretz Hemdah, and they know how to use the facilities of Eretz Hemdah.”

Eretz Hemdah also has supporting *batei midrash* to prepare rabbis in Italy and South Africa.

Eretz Hemdah frequently addresses questions about *agunah* problems – from both rabbis and individuals. One case that Rabbi Carmel mentioned was of an American woman who had been an *agunah* for seven years because her husband refused to give her a *get*. She found in her home an envelope with stolen credit cards. She came to a prominent American *beit din* and asked permission to tell her husband that if he does not give her a *get*, she's going to approach the police with this envelope. The *beit din* consulted with Eretz Hemdah. On the same day that they finished to write the answer that she could, one of the *dayanim* convinced the husband to give a *get* without having to go to police.

“If you have wide shoulders and deep knowledge, you can try to find a solution to almost any problem,” Rabbi Carmel said. “But you need three things: the knowledge, the shoulders, that the question will arrive on time. Sometimes it's too late to find a solution.”

On the question of what his students need to know, Rabbi Carmel offered a broad response. “Every rabbi must know also *Tanach* and Jewish philosophy,” in addition to *halacha*, said the dean, “and how to speak to people and how to listen to people. A little psychology. Law. They're tools that every rabbi needs to have. I bring in professionals who give good advice, and teach counseling.”

He added, “If you are giving 12 hours a day to *halacha*, and half hour a day to Jewish philosophy, nothing bad is going to happen to you – the opposite, actually.”
