

# Israeli institute prepares rabbinic PhDs

By PAUL LUNGEN  
Staff Reporter



Rabbi Yosef Carmel

If you thought they don't give out PhDs in Halachah, think again.

It's not a degree you can obtain at York University or the University of Toronto, but if you travel to Israel to an educational institute called Eretz Hemdah, they'd be happy to prepare you for one.

Of course, you'll have to devote seven years to an intense program of study and then pass five gruelling exams before you will be granted the prestigious Yadin Yadin certification from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the highest level of rabbinical ordination and which is recognized by the government of Israel as a PhD equivalent.

Founded about 12 years ago by three rabbis, "Eretz Hemdah tries to be the

Torah leader in the Jewish world, producing a new generation of rabbis," said Rabbi Yosef Carmel, one of institute's founders and its current dean.

"It's a post-smichah program" and graduate scholars are recognized as "the top of the pyramid of Torah," he said during a recent visit to Toronto.

Rabbi Carmel was in Toronto to urge local rabbis to explore Eretz Hemdah and its resources.

Eretz Hemdah, which has an enrolment of 35 students, has gained a reputation for the excellence of its program. Its candidates generally outperform rabbis from other educational institutes, and in the last Yadin Yadin test, four of the five students who passed and who were granted the prestigious ordination hailed from Eretz Hemdah. Over the last 12 years, the pass rate of Eretz Hemdah students has been in the 90 per cent range. Generally only 50 per cent of candidates pass any one test, Rabbi Carmel said.

Eretz Hemdah students must, in addition to the heavy workload, agree to devote half a day a week to public volunteer work not in the Orthodox community, he added.

It's all part of complying with the Eretz Hemdah commitment of developing halachic experts, judges and spiritual leaders to better serve the entire Jewish people. In addition to preparing full-time students, the institute also offers enrichment programs for rabbis from around the world who study for periods ranging from one week to one year.

Summarizing the institute's philosophy, Rabbi Carmel said "we are religious Zionist. We are pro *Torah umada* [the integration of Torah and general studies]. We are pro Torah with *derech eretz* [integrating Torah with mutuality of respect]. We show that everybody can be with these and be at the top of Torah scholarship."

With the level of knowledge at the school, Eretz Hemdah attempts "to serve as a halachic centre for rabbis all over the world," Rabbi Carmel said. "We have think tanks that try to find solutions to almost all problems of halachic life in Judaism."

Its scholars attempt to solve problems even when other authorities assert there is no solution. "To say there is no solution, any little child can say that. To find a solution, you need wide shoulders, deep knowledge and the courage to do it," he said.

Expanding on his assertion that courage is important to a halachic judge, Rabbi Carmel said "sometimes the atmosphere is to go all the way to the right. We are trying to say that if you want to give halachic decisions to the majority of the nation, you must take halachic decisions all the way to the middle. We

want to bridge the gaps between the Jewish people and use Halachah to do it."

Asked to comment on a move in the Orthodox world to limit child conversions to Torah observant families, Rabbi Carmel said, "If the parents will raise [the child] up in such a way that he will have a real ability when he is older to choose a way of life of observing mitzvot, that is good reason to accept him as a future member of our nation."

One of the "top issues" tackled by Eretz Hemdah scholars is that of agunot, women whose husbands refuse to grant them a Jewish divorce and who cannot remarry. Other key topic include medical

ethics, conversion and applying new technology.

One example of the latter cited by Rabbi Carmel is the question whether a Canadian, sitting at his or her computer on a Friday afternoon, can surf the Internet for news from Israel that would have

to have been posted there on the Sabbath. Rabbi Carmel advised against it, as doing so would mean the surfer is benefiting from someone in Israel violating the Sabbath.

An agunah case he cited was one in which a husband in his 40s suffered from early onset Alzheimer's. He loved his wife very much and relied on her to assist him. He did not want to leave her in agunah limbo, unable to remarry, but he also realized that as his condition worsened, he might not have the mental capacity to grant his wife a *get* (divorce) and free her to remarry.

The solution advised by the rabbis was to build on the "*get al-tnai*," a conditional divorce recognized in Halachah, and create a special *get* that would take effect one hour before he lost his mental capacity.

Another halachic issue tackled by the institute's rabbis was to respond to a group from Australia calling themselves Noahides – gentiles who under Jewish law are required to abide by only seven mitzvot.

The rabbis were asked if they had permission to wear a kippah? The answer was yes, but they should inscribe on the kippah that they are Noahides.

Asked by the group if they can say Jewish prayers such as the motzi (the blessing prior to eating bread), the response was also yes, but on condition they not recite the portion of the prayer that states that God had commanded them to say the blessing.

Eretz Hemdah operates a website ([www.erezhemdah.org](http://www.erezhemdah.org)) that includes an "Ask the Rabbi" page, inviting questions on halachic issues. Over the past six years, it has fielded more than 11,000 questions on a variety of topics. The site also offers a weekly Torah commentary that was downloaded more than 250,000 times in 2006.

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