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The answer man

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As a member of the tribe famous for answering a question with a question, Rabbi Yosef Carmel is an anomaly.

Carmel is dean of the Eretz Hemdah Institute of Jerusalem, which has provided answers to more than 12,000 questions on Jewish law and practice over the past seven years via its free "Ask the Rabbi" service at eretzhemdah.org.

Coinciding with the publication of the institute's new 400-page book "Living the Halachic Process: Questions & Answers for the Modern Jew" (Simcha Publishing House, with CD containing full textual sources), Carmel is visiting this area on a speaking tour.

"We have a strong connection with people and with [shul] rabbis here," said Carmel, "and to keep up the relationship we need to come and visit so we can understand them deeper and know how to give them much better answers."

Among the many rabbis who've spent varying periods of "enrichment" time at Eretz Hemdah attempting to find halachic solutions to contemporary problems are Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Englewood's Cong. Ahavath Torah and Rabbi Steven Pruzansky of Teaneck's Cong. Bnai Yeshurun.

Following a private lecture on May 30 in Englewood exploring the different leadership styles of Samson and David, Carmel will make a return engagement to Bnai Yeshurun on June 3 at 9 a.m. to discuss "Yichud in the Workplace."

"Yichud" refers to the laws governing circumstances under which a man and woman may interact socially and professionally when they are not married to each other.



Rabbi Yosef Carmel

"I gave some topics to the rabbis and this is the one they chose," said Carmel, 54. "Maybe it's because of Israelis who have had many problems because they didn't keep these laws," he surmised, referring to charges of serious sexual misconduct leveled at government officials including President Moshe Katzav.

"I don't know if the president is aware of these laws," he said, "and I don't know if he's guilty or not, but even someone with a kippah on his head ... found himself in trouble. It is an important issue because it's normal for men and women to work together in the same office and yet they must be careful that neither will be in a situation to be harmed."

Often, the 50 rabbis who answer questions at the website deal with yichud issues, Carmel said. "A young Israeli lady volunteering to work with mentally disabled men asked if she can sleep in the same apartment with them, for example. We get questions about this from outside Israel, too, [for instance] about whether the laws apply in families with adopted children. It's a very wide issue."

Eretz Hemdah maintains continuous contact with rabbis from North America, mainly via the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest rabbinical union in the world. In Italy, institute personnel have helped train rabbis in the unique characteristics, customs, and traditions of that country. In Israel, Eretz Hemdah's rabbinical court provides an alternative to a state-run system that is largely viewed as corrupt and out of touch.

But it's "Ask the Rabbi" that attracts the most attention for the institute.

"We are in a generation where everyone has the ability and tools to learn Torah and ... one of the most important tests is to see if we can provide Torah to everyone using technology," Carmel said.