

the JEWISH COURSE of **Why**

A new six-session course from the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute

The Jewish Course of Why— Course Rationale

Jewish Cultural Literacy

Judaism has a cultural language of its own, and some—not least, many Jews themselves—will find themselves feeling lost in Jewish literature and Jewish social settings, or making misassumptions about Jewish beliefs and values.

Just as a literate reader knows his or her language's alphabet, grammar, and vocabulary, people within a given culture share knowledge of that culture's particular dialect, symbols, expressions, ideas, stories, and idiosyncrasies that allow them to understand one another and participate fluently in that culture.

“We have ignored cultural literacy in thinking about education. We ignore the air we breathe until it is thin or foul. Cultural literacy is the oxygen of social intercourse,” said E.D. Hirsch, who coined the term “cultural literacy” in 1983 and believed it equally important to general literacy.

Recognizing the need for a course that lays the foundation of Jewish cultural literacy, The

Rohr Jewish Learning Institute will launch *The Jewish Course of Why* in February 2016.

Intellectual Depth of Judaism

In a style that allows for both easy conversation and in-depth discussion, the six-week course endeavors to tackle fifty “why” questions about Judaism. The course is not about the “what?” and “how?” It is about exploring the scholarly and sophisticated rationale behind mysterious Jewish beliefs and practices. Debunking common misconceptions and introducing little known but vital facts, the course will surprise, intrigue, and equip students with an arsenal of ideas about the richness, relevance, and scope of their heritage.

Most Frequently Asked Questions

To develop the course and to select the most frequently wondered-about questions, JLI reached out to its student base—tens of thousands of Jews from around the world and of virtually every demographic and level of involvement in Jewish life—and asked them to submit their most perplexing questions about Jewish culture and religion.

Starting a Deeper Discussion

The nature and beauty of Jewish scholarship is that there are diverse angles from which to approach any given question, and virtually limitless nuances and layers can be uncovered within every question and answer.

There are few questions about Judaism whose answer can be packaged neatly in a nutshell and declared the answer. The course therefore strives to a different goal: to share perspectives, spark curiosity, deepen the conversation, shed light on oft-wondered-about beliefs and practices, and let participants decide on *the* answers for themselves.

The goal is for students to walk away from *The Jewish Course of Why* dissatisfied—not with the course, surely, but with the paucity of what they learned in relation to the vastness of knowledge that awaits them, and with an awakened thirst to never stop asking “Why?”

Some of the fifty questions in the course:

Why have the Jews outlasted so many other groups of people throughout history? Why were there tribes that were “lost”? And why were they never found? Why is the Star of David a Jewish symbol? Why are there so many Jews in Hollywood?

Why do some Jews say they are the “chosen people”? Is this not chauvinistic? Why is the Land of Israel important to the Jews? Why would anyone want to remain Jewish after so much suffering throughout the ages? Why does Halachah decide the Jewishness of a child solely on the lineage of its moth-

er and not its father? Why doesn't Jewish law have provisions for someone who desires to convert out of Judaism? Why doesn't Judaism seek converts?

Why are eggs *pareve*, when the chickens that make the eggs are not? Why aren't vegan foods automatically kosher? Why does Judaism have so many rules? Why is it caught up with details? Why does the Talmud prescribe different requirements for men and women? Why does Judaism place emphasis on praying with a congregation? Shouldn't prayer be a personal experience? Why do we say Kadish after someone passes away?

Why do we pray? Doesn't God know what He is doing? Do we think we can change His mind? Why am I responsible for my actions if God knows what I will do in advance? Why doesn't God respond to my requests? Why are we born with inclinations that we are forbidden to act upon? Why don't Jews accept Jesus? Why does the Bible instruct us to “fear” God? Isn't fear a negative emotion?

If the miraculous stories in the Bible are to be taken literally, why are there no such miracles today? Why did Moses have a stutter? Why does the Bible call for animal sacrifice? Isn't it inhumane and violent? Why is slavery sanctioned by the Torah?

Why do we say “mazel tov”? Why do Jews follow a lunar calendar? Why do some Jews eat gefilte fish and chulent? Why do we place pebbles on a headstone? Why do we light candles on a yahrtzeit? Why do some Jews sway when they pray? Why do some people hold up a little finger when the Torah is lifted? Why do Jews toast with “lechaim”?



Feedback on *The Jewish Course of Why*:



LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN, PHD

Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies; Director of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies, New York University

This course will provide participants a deep understanding of numerous traditional Jewish practices and customs and their historical context. In addition, it will expose them to the rich literature that explains and clarifies these practices and their deep meaning. Participants will come to understand the complex processes that produced and encouraged so many of our beautiful customs. The deep understanding that they will acquire should greatly increase their appreciation for the unending intellectual quest that is a major part of Jewish life.



MALCOLM HOENLEIN

Executive Vice Chairman,
Conference of Presidents of Major
American Jewish Organizations

To meet the multitude of external and international challenges facing Jews and Judaism in the 21st century, it is essential we are a knowledgeable, informed and committed community. The key to achieving this is meaningful education made accessible to the largest numbers possible. There is a growing desire on the part of younger Jews to know, to understand, our great heritage introduced in the Torah and sacred texts.

Moses taught that the greatest perpetual dangers to the future of the Jewish people are not wars or natural disasters, but apathy, indifference and ignorance. The response lies in the “Jewish Course of Why”. It will challenge the students of all ages, on intellectual, emotional and personal levels. It addresses in a meaningful way the questions most perplexing to this generation that often become a barrier to the acceptance of Jewish practice and tenets. The course is a key to the treasure house of Jewish wisdom, scholarship, significance and great relevance.

Popular culture and ignorance have often created mythological explanations or significance for our mitzvot and observances. Knowing the “why” will dispel these inaccuracies and provide a more meaningful and authentic basis for adherence to our glorious traditions.





JONATHAN GREENBLATT
National Director and CEO,
Anti-Defamation League

We are at an inflection point in modern Jewish history. External challenges to core Jewish values and beliefs, including the concept of Jewish national identity and connection to the land of Israel are growing. The physical safety of Jews in parts of Europe and elsewhere is threatened. At the same time, levels of assimilation and ignorance within the Jewish community have never been higher. Many Jews, especially younger ones, don't have the same sense of connection to and responsibility for other Jews and the Jewish people. Initiatives to elevate Jewish literacy, like JLI's *The Jewish Course of Why*, are vital, not only for personal spiritual growth, but to ensure that Jews have the knowledge and motivation to address today's critical challenges.



ALTIE KARPEN
Editorial Director,
Schocken Books

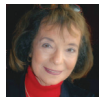
The Jewish Course of Why is an excellent portal into the richness and relevance of Jewish ritual, belief, and practice that will leave students eager for more in-depth explorations of the topics—both timely and timeless—that are discussed.



RABBI BENJAMIN BLECH
Professor of Talmud, Yeshiva University
Author of thirteen books on Judaism
including, *The Complete Idiot's
Guide to Understanding Judaism*

There was a time when the most asked question by Jews who wanted to strengthen their connection with G-d was "How?" How to fulfill the laws of Torah was the most important quest for generations past untouched by the Western mind-set of scientific inquiry and secular doubt. That age is gone. Today's generation needs to know why. And perhaps there is much to be gained by this modality - a faith strengthened by the profundity of Jewish thought and law which, when studied through the lens of Rabbinic wisdom, makes us ever more convinced of the divine truth of the revelation of Sinai. How relevant then is a course such as this which is unafraid to deal with the ultimate questions of why - and aids us to become more fervently attached to our faith by way of the illuminating answers.



**CAROLYN STARMAN HESSEL**

Director of Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature; Jewish Book Council, Executive Director Emeritus

The Jewish people have been called “the people of the book.” Why? Different people will offer different explanations. But no one will question that the expression is ingrained in our culture. Some expressions are part of our vocabulary and our daily lives; we may know how and when to use them but not WHY they are part of who we are. The background and reasons behind 50 of these questions distinguishing the attitudes and customs of the Jewish people will come to life and be more meaningful through *The Jewish Course of Why*. It will enrich your appreciation and understanding of Jewish culture.

**CHIEF RABBI WARREN GOLDSTEIN, PHD**

Chief Rabbi of South Africa;
Author, *Defending the Human Spirit: Jewish Law’s Vision for a Moral Society*

The new JLI initiative of *The Jewish Course of Why* presents the awesome intellectual, philosophical and spiritual depth of Judaism in a remarkably accessible way. As the wisdom of Hashem, Torah Judaism has the answers to life’s most difficult and profound questions. I would like to commend JLI for sharing the Torah’s life changing ideas with an audience which spans the full spectrum of Jewish life today.

**MICHAEL MEDVED**

Nationally Syndicated Talk Radio Host
Author, Political Commentator
and Film Critic

Too many American Jews know little about Judaism beyond what they learned from Woody Allen, Seinfeld or their Bar-and-Bat-Mitzvah preparations—in any case, hardly a sophisticated or challenging body of knowledge. This exciting and substantive class will provide a more fulfilling perspective, answering the troubling questions that many of us are reluctant to even ask.”

**RISA E. DICKSON, PHD**

Vice President for Academic Affairs,
University of Hawaii Educational System

The JLI course *The Jewish Course of Why* is a journey into the depth and beauty of Jewish thought and inquiry. This is a timely and important topic. So many people misunderstand Judaism on such a basic level - and these are precisely the issues and questions around which they focus. Through the exploration of misconceptions and perplexing questions in modern Judaism, one is introduced to the richness and elegance of the logic and ethic underlying Jewish belief and practice. The absolute gem of a course is that it leaves one not only with answers to questions, but also with a level of cultural literacy that underscores the importance of the core Jewish values of curiosity and questioning.





BETSY DOLGIN KATZ

Faculty Member, Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership; Member, Board of Director, The Covenant Foundation; Author, *Reinventing Adult Jewish Learning*

A quality that differentiates human beings from animals is our ability to ask “why?” Judaism and *The Jewish Course of Why* encourage us to wonder and to wander among multiple perspectives on questions like: Why have Jews survived when many other groups of people have disappeared? Why do we pray? Why does Judaism have so many laws about food? It is the course everyone has been waiting for that will answer fifty of the most-asked questions—chosen from a survey of adult learners—and pave the way for even more inquiry and learning.



PENINNAH SCHRAM

Professor Emerita, Yeshiva University; Storyteller, Award-winning Author of eleven books including: *Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another* and *Jewish Stories of Love and Marriage*. Recipient of Covenant Award for Outstanding Educator

Why? This is often the first question a child asks repeatedly. Perhaps the best way to answer that “Why?” is with a narrative – although it is the question that remains paramount. Questions serve as the catalyst for the narrative. Can the story of the Exodus from Egypt begin to be told at the Passover Seder unless someone (usually a child) asks the teller the four questions?

As Jews, we are the “people of the story.” As a storyteller-educator, I believe that two of the reasons why we tell stories and why stories still work powerfully in our contemporary electronic-oriented world are because stories provoke curiosity and inspire wonder. Curiosity and wonder are two major components of being human and Jewish. So what can be wiser than offering *The Jewish Course of Why* that poses that seminal question in order to prompt Jewish Cultural Literacy?





HENRY ABRAMSON, PHD

Dean, Lander College of Arts and Sciences; Producer and Lecturer, *This Week in Jewish History* online series; Author of six books including, *Reading the Talmud*

The Jews are an ever-questioning people, and the newest JLI course offers an excellent introduction to the art of the query. Jews are rarely satisfied with the facile answer “because,” and we’re proud of it—enshrined in the Four Questions of the Passover Seder, we teach our children that one of the most valuable aspects of speaking is asking. “The embarrassed cannot learn,” teach the Sages, and JLI provides a safe intellectual space for Jews to dig deeper into the foundations of Jewish philosophy and practice.



LISA AIKEN, PHD

Psychologist, Lecturer; Author or co-author of thirteen books including, *To Be a Jewish Woman*

I applaud The Rohr Jewish Learning Institute for providing *The Jewish Course of Why!* Its teachers present a wide range of Jewish topics with a depth that is both exciting and stimulating. I wish that such courses had existed when I started learning about Judaism. What a wonderful way for beginners as well as people with much background to expand their knowledge of Judaism.



IRA BEDZOW, PHD

Director, Biomedical Ethics and Humanities Program, New York Medical College

Today, when people are searching for answers that speak to them, a course that can provide intellectual depth and personal relevance is of the utmost importance. JLI’s *The Jewish Course of Why* is a foundational course that can give students the means to find answers and meaning for both novice and scholar alike. If you have ever asked “Why?” this course is for you.



GLENN A. DREW

Executive Director and General Counsel, American Hebrew Academy

The intellectual depths of Judaism can only be explored through self-examination and listening to one’s inner voice that questions, why? At the American Hebrew Academy we have the privilege of working with the leadership team of the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute and our student’s learning is enriched by the experience facilitated through the use of JLI course materials.

