



Wrestling with Faith

A NEW SIX-SESSION COURSE FROM THE ROHR JEWISH LEARNING INSTITUTE

■ COURSE OBJECTIVES

Historically, Judaism has offered society many fundamental values such as morality, charity, respect, and accountability. All these gifts are branches of a central belief in, and embrace of, one G-d: He Who endowed each individual with divine dignity.

Judaism was born at Sinai, at the moment that the Creator proclaimed, "I am your G-d"—a statement that is the foundation of the Jewish faith. Jews rise and sleep, live and die, with the ultimate Jewish statement of belief in one G-d, the *Shema*, on their lips.

However, for some, belief in G-d is a reflexive, unexplored feature of being born Jewish, resulting in an inadequate, childlike understanding of the Almighty. Others believe in G-d, but, at the same time, remain personally uncomfortable with specific elements in Jewish laws or rituals. Some would like to believe or observe but are discouraged by lingering questions, doubts, or unease.

Belief in G-d seems to have run into trouble in the twenty-first century. Judaism, the Torah way of life, and the uniquely Jewish perspectives that have flourished for millennia under all forms of oppression are being severely jeopardized. In an era of unprecedented freedom to practice our faith, the Jewish belief system is fraught with widespread unfamiliarity and misconceptions.

Wrestling with Faith, a new six-week course by the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute, aims to comprehensively explore and address these challenges. It will provide participants an opportunity to identify and process the intellectual and emotional discomforts they may have with believing in and/or accepting G-d and face them head-on. The course hopes to inspire students to wholeheartedly find resolutions and answers, and reembrace their heritage and their Creator armed with solid knowledge and genuine appreciation. The formidable challenges lend the course depth and make arriving at resolutions all the more rewarding.

■ LESSON ONE

Does G-d Exist? If Yes, Is He Relevant (to Me)?

In ancient times, humans had countless gods and no questions. Happily, the situation has long been reversed: One G-d Who is the subject of innumerable questions. The motivation for these queries range from fascination to frustration, but they touch upon the core of Judaism and the essence of what it means to be a believing Jew.

What is G-d? Is it reasonable to believe that He exists? Is He knowable? Why should I care about Him? Does He care about me? Billions of people live without believing in G-d; why can't I? Is my life meaningless without G-d?

This lesson strips away the distractions to expose the misconceptions about G-d that form the basis of these challenges. A profound, more mature understanding of G-d leads to the realization that belief in Him can be natural, and that He is relevant and indispensable to the life of each individual.

■ LESSON TWO

What Does G-d Want from Insignificant Me?

In Judaism, faith is only the tip of the iceberg. It is followed by laws and regulations: the *mitzvot* (commandments). In an era of unprecedented freedoms and self-focus, the Torah's regulations can seem daunting, even disturbing. Questioning their necessity brings into question the purpose of all of existence.

Why did G-d create a universe in the first place? What does He want from humankind? Is a human being—a miniscule speck breathing temporarily on one planet in billions—worth anything to G-d? Does He even notice or care about what we do or don't do?

This lesson explores the multiple benefits of *mitzvot*, and more critically, the sheer weight of their significance to G-d. This knowledge can free us from a subservient relationship to a supreme Controller, and elevate our role to one of a cherished benefactor to the Creator Himself.

■ LESSON THREE

Can I Accept a G-d Whose Teachings Are the Antithesis of Progressive Western Principles?

Several of the Torah's teachings and directives may seem offensive and unacceptable today. Some ancient Jewish practices appear to clash with values currently championed by Western society. Are they unacceptable? Don't they reflect critically on their divine Author?

Does G-d enshrine inequality among nations, families, and the sexes? Why does He interfere with private lifestyle choices? Is He intolerant of intermarriage, gay relationships, and gender re-assignments? How can an eternal truth be so incompatible with liberating and fair values?

In addressing these hot topics, this lesson examines the perspectives that lie at the inner core of both Western and Torah values. Participants take a self-exploratory journey to discover their truest aspirations in life, to arrive at a fresh perspective.

■ LESSON FOUR

Can a Good G-d Do Bad Things?

Does the Jewish belief system allow for questioning G-d's ways? Can a believer legitimately challenge Him or feel resentment toward Him? What if we feel rejected by G-d?

Life is never easy and as Jews, we have a particularly long dossier of serious and passionate challenges to present.

If G-d controls the world, isn't He responsible for allowing tragedies to strike? Why does He not stop the perpetration of heinous acts? How could He allow good people to suffer? After all the injustice and suffering in every era of history, has G-d lost His credibility as the Source of Goodness and Truth?

These legitimate challenges are born from searing pain and intellectual bafflement. Left unaddressed, they threaten to torpedo a genuine relationship between a believer and the Creator. This lesson provides insight into the role of suffering in the narrative of humanity, as well as an understanding of G-d's intimate role in human suffering.

■ LESSON FIVE

How Can I Accept a G-d Whose Teachings Negate Scientific Findings?

Common sense might say that a scientist and a rabbi would not do well under the same roof. The faith-versus-fact dilemma seems unbridgeable when a rudimentary science education appears sufficient to undermine the Torah's account of a six-day creation that occurred only about fifty-seven hundred years ago.

From meticulous nutrition labels on food to heart rate-measuring exercise equipment on our wrists, the average modern-day person has become more of a scientist's walking laptop than we might admit. Can modern, educated people live lifestyles contrary to the latest scientific findings because they happen to be Jewish?

How could G-d have included such unscientific statements in an eternal Torah that He gave for all times, including the era of modern science and technology?

This lesson takes a logical look at the nature of science in order to determine its roles and limits and contrasts it with the definition of the Torah and its function to propose that science and Torah are not contradictory, but in fact, complementary.

■ LESSON SIX

Can I Have a Personal Relationship with G-d?

While, after the five previous lessons, we might conclude that belief in something invisible and intangible is possible, it is still a significant leap to feel a personal closeness and find a personal relationship with a G-d Who eludes our senses.

Much of Judaism is predicated on the principle that G-d desires a personal relationship with each individual, and this lesson explores how to make it real. We will examine the function of prayer and praise, as well as analyze the love-respect dynamic that powers the relationship and provides a compelling sense of purpose. We will also examine the role of the relationship within the context of our individual lives as well as in G-d's grand plan for Creation.