



A six-week course from
THE ROHR JEWISH LEARNING INSTITUTE

JUDAISM DECODED


The Origins and Evolution of Jewish Tradition

COURSE RATIONALE

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai and communicated to the Jewish people G-d's words, the people replied with a message that still echoes today, "All that G-d spoke we will do and we will understand" (Exodus 24:7). At that moment, says the Talmud (Shabbat 88a), the ministering angels placed two crowns upon each Jew: one corresponding to "we will do" and one corresponding to "we will understand." The granting of two crowns underscores that our obedience of G-d's will ought to be accompanied by a desire to comprehend and appreciate Jewish law and tradition thorough investigating its origins, nature, and evolution.

Judaism Decoded: The Origins and Evolution of Jewish Tradition fills a modern-day scholastic need by tracing the origins of the halachic system, rabbinic law, and Jewish traditions, and providing participants with a thorough understanding of the nature and process of Jewish law.

This course is relevant to every Jew—regardless of denomination or level of observance. When a Jew fasts on Yom Kippur, attends a bar/bat mitzvah, lights Chanukah candles, or partakes in a Passover Seder, he or she engages in a component of Jewish law and tradition. By investigating the foundations of this system, participants will enrich their understanding of whatever level of Jewish observance they have



already embraced and enhance their appreciation of Torah as a whole.

This course is a revised and updated version of the JLI course *From Sinai to Cyberspace: How*

an Ancient Wisdom Guides a Modern World, a course that was received with critical acclaim by JLI instructors and students alike both in 2002 and 2006, and for which we have received numerous request for another release.

KEY QUESTIONS

- If Judaism rejects the claim that we need an intermediary to connect us to G-d, shouldn't that mean we do not need anyone to tell us how to read the Bible?
- In what way are ancient laws relevant to modern life?
- Did rabbis change Torah laws that they regarded as too harsh?
- Isn't Jewish law filled with debates, leaving us with unclear guidance and with an impression that it is all a matter of opinion?
- Is it possible that the Torah was passed down accurately after so many years?





COURSE OVERVIEW

LESSON 1: MOUTH TO MOUTH

Jewish practice and observance, indeed the entire system of Jewish law (Halachah), is founded on more than Scripture alone. The other foundation is called “Oral Torah.”

What is the Oral Torah? Who is its author? And why isn't the Bible sufficient?

After we answer these questions, we will have a few more: Why wasn't the Oral Torah written? And is it possible that it was accurately transmitted through the millennia?

LESSON 2: DECIPHERING CODE

Our study of Torah is not limited to passive transmission of received teachings. Through a sophisticated system of interpretation, we are able to apply the Torah to new circumstances and technologies. This explains why an ancient Torah remains relevant to this very day.

What are the rules for interpreting the Torah and deriving new applications? Who is tasked with deriving new concepts and rulings? And how great a role does human innovation play in this process?

LESSON 3: POWER OF THE PEOPLE

The rabbis loom large in Jewish tradition; they have the authority to legislate new laws in addition to clarifying divine laws. Does G-d always concur with their decisions? Are there limits to what the rabbis can legislate? In which way are rabbinic enactments different from biblical law?

On the other end of the spectrum, what about the power of the people? What happens if a rabbinic enactment proves to be untenable for the masses? And do the behaviors and traditions that originate with the masses enjoy any legal or spiritual standing?





LESSON 4:
POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

For many, Talmud is synonymous with debate. It is indeed a matter of fact that Jewish law abounds with disagreements and dissenting opinions. Does that mean Jewish law is just a matter of opinion? Furthermore, do the debates indicate that the system is not divine? How can there be multiple opinions in a G-d-given Torah? Is Talmudic debate unfortunate or ideal? Lastly, how is a final *halachah* determined in the event of differing opinions?

LESSON 5:
THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Are there areas of Jewish law that can use change or repeal? If yes, who has the authority to amend or revoke? A heavenly voice? A prophet? A sage? Is modifying rabbinic enactments a

simple process? After all, what human beings create, they should be able to abrogate.

A deeper understanding of the nature of Torah law and its ultimate objective will help us navigate these thorny questions.

LESSON 6:
THE TRUTH OF SINAI

Is there a rational basis to accept that some 3,300 years ago, G-d revealed Himself to our ancestors at Sinai? Why was Maimonides—a rationalist par excellence—so convinced of the historicity of this event? And in what way is the Jewish claim of divine revelation any different from the many thousands of claims made by various other religious groups?