

# 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”?

