

# Jewish Study for Non-Jewish Clergy



ONE DAY in the spring of 2012, the Catholic archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, paid a visit to the main *beit midrash*, or study hall, of Yeshiva University. There he saw hundreds of young men engrossed in their learning, fervently discussing and noisily debat-

ing the Talmudic texts they were studying.

Reflecting on his visit in a stirring essay for *First Things*, Chaput wrote, “What struck me first was the passion the students had for the Torah. They didn’t merely study it; they consumed it. Or maybe it would be better to say that God’s Word consumed them.” The atmosphere in the *beit midrash*, he wrote, crackled with energy. The zeal the students brought to their Torah study reminded him of the current that sizzles when a couple falls in love — “a kind of electricity runs not just between them, but also in the air around them.”

Such ardor for learning helped illuminate for Chaput one of the astonishing wonders of history: the endurance of the Jewish

people against all odds. “Despite centuries of persecution, exile, dispersion, and even apostasy, the Jewish people continue to exist because their covenant with God is alive and permanent. God’s Word is the organizing principle of their identity. It’s the foundation and glue of their relationship with one another, with their past, and with their future.”

Then came a remarkable coda: “What I saw at Yeshiva should also apply to every Christian believer, but especially to those of us who are priests and bishops.”

If a relatively brief visit to a yeshiva could evoke in the archbishop such strong admiration for the serious study of Torah and Talmud, how much more enthusiastically might he have reacted had he been able to take part in such study himself? What if he could have encountered traditional Jewish learning at some point in his career, not merely as an onlooker but as a participant? Imagine that it were possible for non-Jewish clergy — Catholic, Muslim, Baha’i, Mormon, Baptist, Hindu — to have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the world of Torah study from the inside, even if for only a limited time.

What could such a program engender among the nation’s non-Jewish religious leaders? Consider the potential benefits:

- a deeper understanding of Jews and Judaism, and of the unique bond between the “people of the book” and the books they venerate;
- a firmer grasp of the deep Jewish roots of Christianity, Islam, and ethical monotheism;
- a more informed perception of the dual status of Jewishness as both a religion and a nationality;
- the enrichment of Gentile pastoral practice and spiritual oversight with insights drawn from the Jewish tradition;

- strengthened recognition of the centrality of the Land of Israel to Jewishness—a bond that anti-Zionist activists in some mainline Protestant denominations denigrate or disregard;
- effective tools for combating the spread of antisemitism or ignorance about Jews within non-Jewish communities;
- above all, perhaps, an enhanced awareness of “the gifts of the Jews”—the transformative ideas about morality, human dignity, and social justice through which Judaism shaped human civilization for the better.

Some seminaries and organizations offer courses and small programs to enable non-Jewish lay leaders to learn about Judaism. But there has never been a program to engage exclusively with clergy from across the spectrum of religious traditions in focused Jewish study.

I propose that we build such a program: the Jethro Project, a national initiative designed to provide promising non-Jewish clergy members with the opportunity to devote a significant period of time to traditional Jewish religious study. Jethro Fellows would fortify their own religious commitments and expand their spiritual horizons through meaningful exposure to Jewish texts, culture, and thought, guided by qualified Jewish instructors who are respectful of non-Jewish faiths.

The project and fellowships would be named for the most prominent non-Jewish cleric mentioned in the Torah. Jethro was a Midianite priest who admired Moses and exulted in God’s redemption of the Israelites. In midrashic literature, he is portrayed as a religious explorer and seeker of truth. Yet when Moses invites Jethro to join the Jewish people, he declines, choosing to return to his own society. He is arguably the greatest example in the Jewish tradition of a non-Jew who revered Jewish learning. It is surely no accident that the weekly Torah portion that recounts the giving of the Law at Sinai is known as *Parashat Yitro*—the portion of Jethro.

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Like its namesake, the Jethro Project would have no conversionary intent. Nor would it be designed for interfaith dialogue. Its purpose is different: to develop a measure of Jewish literacy among non-Jewish clergy, thereby introducing more of the world’s religious elite to the riches of Jewish wisdom while expanding the Jewish people’s circle of knowledgeable allies and admirers.

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Jewish literacy begins with studying Hebrew.

One cannot experience authentic Jewish learning without possessing at least the rudiments of the language in which the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish prayerbook, and countless Jewish texts are written. Many clergy members will already have studied another language (Latin, Greek, Arabic, Sanskrit) and will readily grasp the importance of Hebrew to Jewish proficiency.

Of course, beginner’s-level Hebrew is not enough to read and understand the Torah and other works in the original. But even a very simple grasp of the biblical tongue would enable Jethro Fellows to (for instance) comprehend the Torah’s explanation of many names, which typically turn on a common root, readily apparent in Hebrew but lost in translation. Similarly, they will gain a window into the frequent ambiguities in the biblical text—anomalous spellings, doubled words, “wrong” tenses—from which the Jewish sages derived countless insights.

Aided by their newly acquired language skills, Jethro Fellows

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will study some of the core texts of Judaism, starting with Tanach, the Hebrew Bible. Depending on the length of the program, they might sample multiple texts drawn from an array of scriptural sources, or undertake a deep dive into just one or two books. They would learn that Jewish study of Tanach involves an ongoing interrogation of the text, extracting layers of meaning from beneath the surface translation. Rare is the passage of Tanach that has not been elucidated by commentators across the centuries, deepened by midrashic allegory, or used as a proof-text to establish a legal or homiletical point. Jethro Fellows will find that biblical episodes with which they were already familiar from their own religious training acquire unexpected richness and relevance when viewed from a traditional Jewish perspective.

Less familiar to outsiders but no less vital to Jewish literacy is the Talmud, which, for 18 centuries, has been the paramount work of post-biblical commentary, law, moral instruction, and legend in Jewish life. Jethro Fellows will gain at least a glimpse of the Talmud's immensity and the revolution it worked in Jewish history. They will see how it exemplifies the uniquely Jewish religious passion for debate and argument, among contemporaries and across generations. And they will gain an appreciation for the religious alchemy through which the rabbis upheld the unquestioned authority of the Torah's words while dramatically reinterpreting

them, thereby ensuring the survival and relevance of Judaism long after the milieu in which it was born had vanished.

Another important takeaway for Jethro Fellows will be an understanding that Jewish law encompasses not just spiritual concerns but all of secular life. Part of their curriculum will focus on the preeminent code of Jewish practice and ritual, the *Shulchan Aruch* (the "Set Table") compiled by Joseph Caro in the 16th century. More than any other world religion, Judaism is a faith anchored in *commandments*, both positive and negative. Clergy whose own religious cultures may emphasize faith above works will learn that the Jewish approach has been different.

Every creed seeks to instill in its followers ethical values and moral teachings meant to guide them in all areas of life, including settings unconnected to religion. But normative Judaism fills even secular spaces with detailed laws and directives. Just as there are specific rules regulating prayer, the Sabbath, and kosher foods, there are equally specific rules that govern land ownership, criminal justice, labor relations, torts, and contracts—and the latter are no less integral than the former.

A leitmotif of the program will be the endurance of Judaism through millennia of upheaval. To that end, the Jethro Fellows will sample some of the vast body of rabbinic *responsa*, the written decisions from leading rabbis in response to practical questions addressed to them. These questions and answers often acquire precedential force, with rulings from one era guiding those drafted decades later. The *responsa* literature reflects the wrenching changes in the conditions of Jewish life over the centuries; it was the vehicle through which ancient Jewish teachings were harmonized with transformations in society, technology, medicine, and economics. From the end of the Iron Age to the age of the Internet, the rabbis continually adapted venerable religious principles to real-world situations, thereby maintaining the vitality of the world's oldest faith.

Participants will sample one additional genre of Jewish texts: that devoted to moral and behavioral instruction. The exhortations of the

prophet Micah, the Talmudic tractate *Avot* (“Ethics of the Fathers”), and the classic 18th-century work *Mesillat Yesharim* (“The Path of the Upright”) exemplify Judaism’s emphasis on the importance of integrity, justice, and kindness. By the end of their sabbatical, it will be clear to the Jethro Fellows that the Torah and the Jewish religion are meant to be a blueprint less for believing the right things than for acting the right way—a “framework for the construction of a society,” as the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed.

Finally, it is impossible to understand Judaism and Jewish tradition without grasping the centrality of the Holy Land to Jewish identity and faith. So Jethro Fellows will spend part of their time in Israel. A well-planned trip to Israel will add depth to much of what they will be studying—the significance of the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays, for example, the Torah’s insistence on the uniqueness of the land, or the miracle of Hebrew’s modern revival into the daily language of millions of native speakers. It will also let participants experience what life in Israel is really like, which may be quite different from what they have previously heard or read.



By and large, Jews have steered clear of providing Jewish instruction to non-Jews, to say nothing of non-Jewish clerics. The historical reasons for doing so are obvious. But in our era, when, despite rising antisemitism, so many members of other faiths are unabashedly philosemitic and openly grateful for the teachings of Judaism, this is an opportunity waiting to be seized. The Jethro Project will enable non-Jews who have found a vocation in their own religion to engage much more deeply with ours.

“No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny,” wrote the acclaimed Catholic historian Paul Johnson. “At a very early stage in their collective existence they believed they had detected a divine scheme for the human race, of which their own society was to be a pilot.”

In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Israelites that when they cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land, they are to erect giant stones and upon them “inscribe every word of this Torah.” The command ends with the words “ba’er hetev”—a cryptic phrase, commonly translated as “very clearly” or “most distinctly.” But Rashi in his classic commentary cites the Talmud’s explanation: The Israelites were to translate the Torah into all the world’s languages. To share Jewish wisdom with the nations around them is part of the mission of the Jews. Through teaching the clergy of other faiths, the Jethro Project would provide a new take on that age-old mission. Let us try it. \*