

Jewish University and Christian group partner to educate devout Christians about their Hebrew roots

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In an unprecedented initiative, [Yeshiva University is partnering with the Philos Project](#) in a post-graduate program to give Christians a “deeper understanding of Jews and Judaism.”

“If one considers the improved relations between Jews and Christians in recent decades, and the corresponding thirst among many Christians for an understanding of the Hebraic roots of their religion, partnering with an institution like the Philos-project becomes an obvious step to take,” said Professor Daniel Rynhold, the Dean at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University, explaining the motivation behind the Orthodox Jewish university partnering with a Christian organization.

The course will include:

- An immersive Hebrew course
- 2 Bible courses
- 2 Jewish history courses
- 1 course on post-Biblical literature
- 1 course on Jewish-Christian relations

The [website](#) states that the goal of the program is to provide Christian students with a firm grasp of the deep Jewish roots of Christianity, highlighting both shared values and real contrasts. They also aim to promote a deeper understanding for Christians of Jews of the unique bond between the “people of the book” and the books Christians venerate, without compromising on the particularity of our respective faiths.

Yeshiva University, a private Orthodox Jewish university in New York City, was established in 1886 by the Eastern European immigrant Jewish community as an extension of primary Jewish education. A rabbinical seminary was chartered in 1897. It is essentially the center of New York Jewish academia.

Philos Project describes itself as “the network hub for leaders and future leaders who are committed to promoting positive Christian engagement in the Middle East”. The Christian organization’s [website](#) suggests there is deep relevance for the partnership as it proclaims that the organization achieves its goals by “taking action in the spirit of the Hebraic Tradition”.

While having a decidedly religious element, it is not a religious program, per se.

“The goals of the program are academic in nature,” Rynhold said. “Revel’s part in this program is the provision of an MA in Jewish Studies, so the goals are what they have always been – a commitment to using the tools of the academy to enhance understanding of Jewish religious and cultural heritage.”

[Robert Nicholson](#), the President and Executive Director of The Philos Project, has high hopes for the program.

“The goal of this program is simple,” he said. “We want to provide Christians with an immersive, comprehensive encounter with Judaism, Jewish history, and the Jewish people on their own terms. That last part is important because too often Christians study Jews from a distance, without any interaction with living members of the Jewish community, and unknowingly adopt all kinds of nonsensical and even offensive ideas about who they are and what Judaism is all about.”

“If the program is successful, we will see a small but growing number of Christians who understand where their faith comes from and who can empathize with Jews despite the many differences that separate them,” he added. “Eventually, I would love to see a world in which graduates of this program go on to impact Christian society in long-lasting ways.”

He pointed to the advantages of this dual-faith academic cooperation.

“I may be Christian, but I have benefitted immensely from my encounter with Jewish texts, Jewish history, and the Hebrew language,” Nicholson told Israel365 News. “I’ve been wanting to replicate that experience for others who are interested in understanding their own faith as well as the faith of their Jewish neighbors. But until now I’ve found nothing that is academically serious, ‘Jewishly authentic’, and genuinely respectful toward people of faith. For many reasons, Yeshiva University fits that bill.”

Rynhold had similar hopes.

“Christian students will hopefully gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the Hebraic roots of Christianity, which would be helpful to emerging religious and cultural leaders as well as understanding and cooperation between faiths,” he said. “And it will also be helpful for them, as it is for our own students, to be studying in an environment that is hospitable and respectful of students who are religious.”

Rynhold also emphasized that the simple act of intellectual dialogue can bear significant results.

“I’m a big believer in the importance of face-time,” Rynhold said. “As an Orthodox Jew who has on occasion met groups who have never encountered an Orthodox Jew before, I know how that can be life-changing. There is religious diversity and uniqueness that ought to be maintained and respected.”

“But there are also artificial barriers that can lead one group to view another as alien in the most damaging ways,” he said. “If you want to break down *those* barriers, all the political policymakers in the world cannot hold a candle to the basic encounter between two people simply sitting together, talking, and recognizing their common humanity. One of my teachers, the late Jonathan Sacks, maintained that the Hebrew Bible’s greatest contribution to ethics was the idea that God creates difference, so it is in ‘one who is different’ that we meet God. I don’t think that’s something that can be taught. But it is something that emerges naturally from sharing space and time, as we will in this program.”

Before embarking on this joint venture, YU had to first ascertain that teaching non-Jews was permitted by Halacha (Jewish law).

“The majority of our courses would not raise any halakhic questions,” Rynhold said. “Why should a Christian not learn about Eastern European or American Jewish history, for example? But if you want the technical halakhic answer for courses in areas such as the Bible, then for Maimonides (among others), one can teach Torah to sincere students who will not reject or distort these teachings.”

“It’s important to note that these students are religious, accept the accuracy of the Bible, and will benefit from learning its interpretation in the Jewish tradition,” he added. “Revel’s program fits well into the spirit and letter of what is permitted by halakha. Many people from diverse backgrounds can benefit from learning about Jewish wisdom, culture and history, and we are excited to be providing that in this program.”

He pointed out that the program was a first for YU but is not entirely unprecedented.

“Revel is a university graduate school of Jewish Studies,” Rynhold said. “So the truth is that it has always been a non-sectarian school open to all. Indeed, we had a South Korean pastor graduate with a Ph.D. just over a year ago. The real change is simply the creation of a formal partnership with an institution like the Philos-Project, which enables us to reach constituencies for whom we have always catered in theory, but not necessarily in practice.”

The dual-faith program also posed theological challenges for Philos which describes itself as “a non-sectarian organization whose board, staff, and members belong to various Christian churches and hold to various schools of theological interpretation within the realm of Nicene orthodoxy”. The stipulation referring to Nicene orthodoxy is a disclaimer that ensures a level of inclusivity that allows potential students to cope with the potential theological challenges.

“I sometimes laugh when Jews tell me that they’re divided,” Nicholson said. “Mainly because Christianity is broken into tens of thousands of sects scattered over the entire planet. Nicene orthodoxy is a baseline metric of Christian belief that allows us to operate in an ecumenical way across all of them.”

The announcement of the program was received with enthusiasm.

“The response has been overwhelmingly positive from both Jews and Christians,” Nicholson said. “I’ve talked with many who want to do the program, although practical considerations like time and money sometimes make it impossible.”

Rynhold concurred.

“We’ve had 12 applicants so far, and are aiming at an initial cohort of 10 students,” he said.

Retrieved April 3, 2023 from; [Jewish University and Christian group partner to educate devout Christians about their Hebrew roots - Israel365 News](#)