

**Field Research Experience Report**



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DMin 726: Global Perspectives: Practical Judaism in a Multicultural Setting

Portland Seminary

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## Research Experience Details

Skirball Cultural Center

Dates & Times: December 28, 2016 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM

<http://www.skirball.org/>

Mesora: Portland Kollel Programming

Dates & Times: Wednesdays 7:30 PM – 9:30 PM from January 25, 2017 through April 26, 2017.

<http://www.portlandkollel.org/events/>

WorldPerfect: Portland Kollel Programming

Dates & Times: January 29, 2017 7:30 PM – 9:00 PM

<http://www.portlandkollel.org/events/>

Chinese New Year Celebration

Dates & Times: February 12, 2017 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM

<http://www.lansugarden.org/>

MJCC Winter Orchestra Finale

Dates & Times: February 12, 2017 3:00 PM – 5:00 PM

<http://www.oregonjcc.org/>

Finding Your Inner Esther (Purim Webinar): Portland Kollel Programming

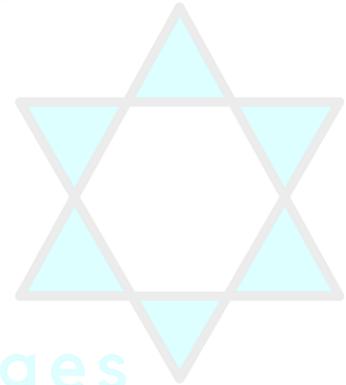
Dates & Times: March 9, 2017 8:00 PM – 9:00 PM

<http://www.portlandkollel.org/events/>

Purim Festival & Costume Party: Portland Kollel Programming

Dates & Times: March 12, 2017 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM

<http://www.portlandkollel.org/events/>



## MJCC Author Series

Dates & Times: March 14, 2017 7:00 PM – 9:00 PM; April 13, 2017 7:00 PM – 9:00 PM

<http://www.oregonjcc.org/arts-culture/mjcc-author-series>

## 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Wine Event: Portland Kollel Programming

Dates & Times: March 22, 2017 7:30 PM – 10:00 PM

<http://www.portlandkollel.org/events/>

## Pesach Prep Seminar: Portland Kollel Programming

Dates & Times: April 4, 2017 8:15 PM – 9:15 PM

<http://www.portlandkollel.org/events/>

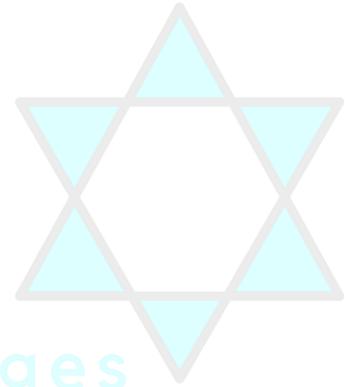
## Pesach Shacharit Service

Dates & Times: April 15, 2017 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM

<http://www.kesserisrael.org/>

YidBrik

Building Jewish Bridges



### **Cross-Cultural Connection**

At a first glance, my own Jewish confession would seem to identify me as part of the Jewish people and thus part of their culture. This, however, is simply not the case. I grew up in an agnostic home with evolution as a fact of life. My mother believed in an “all-loving” god that matched her own definition of love. My father believed that Jesus Christ would come at the end times and tell everyone to get on board of his UFO. In high school, I became a Christian and attended Pentecostal churches until my gradual transition to Messianic Judaism (this transition took lasted from around 2008 to 2017). My decision to enter Messianic Judaism was a call from HaShem to live out my heritage as a way to live for Him. While for the longest time I believed otherwise, I have recently accepted that Messianic Judaism is very clearly not Jewish in nature.

While some aspects are borrowed, such as the wording to prayers, there is still a huge essence of Christianity within Messianic Judaism. Thus, as Jewish critics would point out, Messianic Judaism is more likely a charismatic off-shoot of Christianity than it is an actual component of Jewish life and living. Thus, despite my own beliefs I had regarding my faith and practice, I knew that I was essentially looking at a foreign culture and would have to be cross-cultural in my connection with the Jewish people. I am, whether I like it or not, on the outside looking in.

### **Summary of Experience**

For my Field Research Experience, I opted to explore the different subcultures within Judaism to better understand the great diversity of cultures that makes up contemporary Judaism as a religious framework, as a people group, and as a culture overall. To accomplish this, I arranged for a variety of experiences that provided a well-balanced understanding of Judaism and what it means to be Jewish. My visit to the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles was an initial glance of a culture at-large, free of religious framework or influence. Additionally, the author talks at the Mittleman Jewish Community Center in Portland, Oregon allowed me to taste the local flavors of Jewish life as a people, with one discussion being about Seinfeld and its overarching influence on American life and the other presentation being about Jewish cooking and how it has adapted to stay relevant yet traditional in its ability to recall recipes from millennia ago. The Portland Kollel provided a variety of experiences as well, with the wine event being an introduction to the Jewish community, the Purim celebration a feet-wetting of a semi-religious event, and the more in-depth courses on Halacha and religious framework as a better grasp on how the Jewish religion is closely tied to the Jewish people and Jewish culture. Lastly, my experience at Kesser Israel, observing morning prayers for one of the Chol Hamoed days of Pesach, provided an in-depth experience of Jewish Orthodoxy within a religious framework.

The field research experiences have stretched me beyond what I expected both culturally and religiously. I had initially expected to find that Judaism was similar to my own expression of faith. As a result, my goal was to prove the similarity and prove my own Jewish identity.

### **Methodology & Research Objectives**

Judaism is different from other religions in that Judaism is baked into the very identity of a culture and people group. To be Jewish could be a religious affiliation, a citizenship, a cultural trend, etc. True Judaism is defined by the group encountered. The more religious the group, the more limiting on one's Jewish identity.<sup>1</sup> Outside of religiosity lies another layer of diversity as well: that of the subcultures transferred from one's raising. The most common groups, the "main three," are Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and Mizrahi. Each of these main groups have their own languages, traditions, and observances. Outside of the main three are even more differing varieties of Jewish living from a cultural assimilation. In fact, this was the main goal of this research: how much of Judaism has been affected by assimilation and how has Judaism remained standing, when compared to its alternatives, despite the risk of assimilation?

To approach this, I attended religious courses that were a blend of Sephardic and Ashkenazic tradition. Additionally, my participation in events not religious-based, but rather

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<sup>1</sup> While an individual could be Jewish from their father's side in a Conservative or Reform synagogue, for example, the same individual would not be accepted by the Orthodox community as Jewish and would be required to convert religiously. Those who are born Jewish, specifically being that their mother is/was Jewish prior to their birth, are considered Jewish by default and permitted their own level of observance. Those on the outside, however, are held to a stricter standard of affiliation.

culture-based, helped provide additional insight as to how Judaism, as a whole, has formed its own cultures and societies within other larger groups instead of accepting assimilation.<sup>2</sup>

### Critical Analysis

Judaism, while distinct from the rest of the world, being a set-apart group, is hugely influential in the world. An excellent example of this scenario is what makes a perfect world. The concept of a utopian society typically draws the same responses (value for life, value of choice, respect of women, etc.), of which these responses, when compared to the great empires of history, simply fall short. The only religious and cultural framework that first suggested the contemporary values of a utopian society and still continue to express them is the faith founded in the Torah. Considered controversial and opposite of how a government should operate, the values identified with utopia today find their origin with the Jewish people.<sup>3</sup> Another excellent example is that of Seinfeld: a television show about nothing except the everyday that gained the largest viewership on television to date (not to mention that it's quintessentially Jewish in nature and production).<sup>4</sup>

Judaism is no doubt unique, and perhaps one of the most unique, and necessary, parts of Judaism is not only its great cultural diversity within itself, but also its great level of cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Prime examples include Yiddish and Ladino as actual languages utilized today, as well as classic recipes being refreshed with modern flair yet retaining their cultural and traditional value at the Seder table. Yiddish is still a strong and vibrant language while Ladino is fading in usage.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Shapiro. *WorldPerfect: The Jewish Impact on Civilization*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Simcha Press, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Keishin Armstrong. *Seinfeldia: How a Show About Nothing Changed Everything*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

acceptance within that diversity. Judaism clearly stands for social justice, and within that concept, fleshes out not just Jewish living, but Jewish essence in fighting for diversity and freedom to be different. The cultures contained within the larger category of “Judaism” represent the world as a whole, and while the Jews may be a minority in number, their influence, and as a result, their culture, is the vast majority of the world today. All of us can identify with a component of Jewish life, but none of us can truly consider ourselves Jewish in essence, unless one is, of course, a true member of the tribe. In that regard, it truly is like a club membership: you can enjoy the work of the club in the public and appreciate its cultural impact and heritage from the outside, but to truly understand and value the club’s existence, you need to become a member yourself. Such is the case with the Jewish people: we all can see its great diversity in the world, but we cannot truly appreciate the unity behind its diversity as long as we are on the outside looking in.

The lesson learned here is that the definition of Jewish diversity is that of the Disneyland boat ride: *It’s a Small World*. In every generation, every culture, and every land are the Jewish people, living as part of the culture yet retaining their own distinctive flavor that is in synchronicity with every other Jew across the globe. That is a universal faith tradition and the true definition of what it means to be multicultural.

## Bibliography

Armstrong, Jennifer Keishin. *MJCC Author Series*. Live Q&A. Portland, OR, March 14, 2017.

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