

Field Research Experience Report



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DMin 736: Judeo-Christian:

A Theological Overview of Judaism, Christianity, and the Noachides

Portland Seminary

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Research Experience Details

Beginning Hebrew Reading & Headlines in Halacha

Dates & Times: Wednesdays 7:30 PM – 9:30 PM from August 30, 2017 through October 25, 2017.

Beginning Hebrew Reading & Kitzur Schulchan Aruch Study

Dates & Times: Shabbos 4:15 PM – 5:30 PM from September 9, 2017 through November 4, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/kitzurstudy/>

Derech HaShem Book Study

Dates & Times: Wednesdays 8:00 PM – 9:00 PM from November 1, 2017 through November 29, 2017.

<http://www.kesserisrael.org/derech-hashem>

Summary of Experience

For my Field Research Experience, I opted to learn more about practical living within Halacha.¹ To accomplish this, I have been reading through the Kitzur Schulchan Aruch² with a group of men each week to gather more of what it means to live Judaism. Within the KSA,³ I have learned that there are drastically different expectations for Jews, non-Jews, and those caught in-between.

¹ Jewish Law

² Abridged Code of Jewish Law

³ Kitzur Schulchan Aruch

Another learning opportunity has been the continuation of the Wednesday night group. Originally Mesora, then Jewish Medical Ethics, this term the group focused on the application of Halacha within headlines, such as unlocking the phone in the San Bernardino case and so forth. This class looks at a situation and then evaluations all the Halacha that could impact the case. Additionally, to prepare for the High Holidays as well as find a cohesive connection in the community, this same group has been studying basic Hebrew reading in part on Wednesday night but also on Saturday afternoons (in between prayer services). The goal is to be able to read the Hebrew print pages in a Siddur (names of letters as well as meanings of words are part of a more advanced class in the future).

Lastly, for the month of November the Wednesday classes are paused for permit participation in a book study at the Orthodox synagogue. The book is part of required reading for those on a conversion path and covers the basics in Jewish philosophy in this community.

Methodology & Research Objectives

Jewish theology is quite diverse and agnostic of granular control and oversight. While Orthodox Judaism in particular has an overarching Beis Din,⁴ each Orthodox community has its own minhag⁵ and rabbinical rulings. The Portland Orthodox community is no different. However, despite this diversity, there are general components that define the Jewish faith.⁶

⁴ House of Judgement, Court in Israel

⁵ Tradition of observance.

⁶ One in particular is the “13 Principles of the Jewish Faith” by Rabbi Moses ben Maimonides (Rambam).

Additionally, the Noachide Laws⁷ are widely accepted as Halacha for goyim.⁸ Thus, within Judaism and Jewish theology at large, there are two main categories of observance: Jews that hold to some level of Torah and mitzvot observance and non-Jews that follow the Noachide Laws, thus being considered “Noachides.”

This is the focal point of my research for this module: engage the community and learn the expectations on halacha application as well as cultural implications for Jews within a Jewish lifestyle and non-Jews within a Noachide framework. To accomplish this, I participated in several courses on halacha that include detailed differences of requirements for Jews compared to Noachides or even those on the path of conversion. These experiences are all religious in nature since the status of Gerim⁹ and Noachides hinges not on Jewish cultural inclusion but rather religious acceptance.

Critical Analysis

These field research experiences have aligned with my path of study and research, pairing well with my term readings and guiding me in my module goal of defining the religious framework that encompasses Judaism and the Noachide walk and how (if) Christianity fits into the mix. A primary question that guided me in my research was how Christianity is interpreted in the Jewish community and how to adjust the view, if necessary, of Christianity. This ties in

⁷ Seven laws given to Noah and his offspring post-Flood.

⁸ Yiddish term for non-Jews. The term “Gentile” is generally discouraged in Jewish circles due to its association with Roman-Greek linguistic structures and its root application describing “non-Christians” within the Roman Empire.

⁹ Converts

closely with my dissertation work. In the process of my research and field experience, I encountered a number of views of non-Jews, ranging from a blanket view of pagans/idolaters to a more nuanced view of some having Jewish souls and others being enlightened to follow a different path. I found diverse views even within the context of the Portland Orthodox community. By and large, however, the general view of the community is that there are Jews and non-Jews (yids and goys, being the Yiddish translation). For the Yiddish (as in the Jews) in the neighborhood, much of Yiddish life is filled with communal engagement, regular davening, and studying.

Not much attention is given to the “goyish” neighbors, particularly on “Rabbi Row.”¹⁰ This is the general view of Christianity as well – a disinterest in the religion and its adherents.. Of the non-Jews who participate in the community, it is mostly in Kollel-related as well as other community courses/programs. These individuals can be broken down into three main “camps,” to so say: those on the path to conversion (Gerim), the Noachides who stay engaged, and the visitors who are more often than not tied to “Jews for Jesus.” In my experiences since April, however, I have heard of missionary attempts but not seen them. Additionally, I have not come across Noachides in particular but rather goyim interested in either becoming Noachide or becoming frum (usually the latter).¹¹ Thus, within my experiences in the local community, there are a high number of converts as well as a handful of those interested in conversion. This follows the seemingly traditional life of Portland Jews, of which the Orthodox synagogue, Kesser Israel,

¹⁰ Not literally named this row, “Rabbi Row” is where all but one of the Rabbis live, as well as most of the Orthodox community.

¹¹ The term best suited for being modest, observant, and engaged in Orthodoxy.

is a handful of FFB¹² with the majority being split evenly between BT¹³ and Ger. Many count BT and Ger in a single category¹⁴ as both have to (re)learn the derech HaShem,¹⁵ but within this community the difference is clearly noted.¹⁶

The ending question that this research leaves me is where to go next with Christianity. The theological implications are clear: in order for Christians to be considered Noachides, they must follow the Noachide laws.¹⁷ The question is then whether or not Christians follow the laws of Noah. If not, can they? I intend to address this inquisition more fully in the academic essay for this module, but suffice to say my thesis statement is that Christianity, from a certain point of view, can be considered a Noachide faith. This has significant implications that must be considered: (i) Christianity must clearly define doctrines on the Incarnation and the Trinity in a way that is compatible with Jewish theology, (ii) Christians must acknowledge more than one path to “salvation” and that the Jews have their own pre-existing covenant, and (iii) Christians must require Jews to observe Judaism and non-Jews to have the choice of conversion or the path of the Noachides. Can Christianity overcome this? Maybe. As my academic essay will tie in with

¹² Frum From Birth – being raised in Orthodoxy.

¹³ Ba'al Teshuva – non-observant Jews who return to Orthodox living.

¹⁴ Sarah Bunin Benor, *Becoming frum how newcomers learn the language and culture of Orthodox Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Path/Way of G-d

¹⁶ A BT can be called for Aliyah, or to come up for a Torah portion, as well as be part of a minjan (ten males Jews are required for davening Kaddish. In smaller communities, this can be challenging. Those on the path of conversion cannot count until after the conversion is completed (a process that usually takes between one and five years).

¹⁷ Aryeh Kaplan and Abraham Sutton, *The handbook of Jewish thought* (Brooklyn, NY: Moznaim Pub. Corp., 1979).

this term's readings, much of Christian theology today is not historical or biblical, but rather traditional and rooted in historical revisionism of the Roman government.¹⁸

In the course of my field research, I have discovered that Judaism, the Noachide path, and those stuck in-between (those converting or considered non-Jewish but encouraged to convert, such as myself), are all quite different than the outside would view it, yet again affirming that one must step into the culture in order to fully comprehend it.



¹⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged writing in the name of God: why the Bibles authors are not who we think they are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

Bibliography

Benor, Sarah Bunin. *Becoming frum how newcomers learn the language and culture of Orthodox Judaism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012.

Ehrman, Bart D. *Forged writing in the name of God: why the Bibles authors are not who we think they are*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

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