

Richmond rabbi offers a six-week course on the Jewish faith and dispelling its myth

Have you ever wondered where the expression, "an eye for an eye" came from? Or where kosher salt got its name? Or maybe you've wondered about why the pig is the quintessential no-no for Jews?

"These are common questions asked by Jewish people, so we decided to offer a course to address common questions and answer common assumptions as well," said Rabbi Yechiel Baitelman of Chabad of Richmond.

The course, Fascinating Facts: Exploring the Myths and Mysteries of Judaism, will begin Wednesday, Nov. 9 and run for six weeks at Chabad of Richmond.

"We strongly believe Jews should know the richness of their Jewish heritage," said Baitelman. "That is what we hope to accomplish with this entertaining and new educational offering.

"However, everyone is invited to take part, they don't need to be Jewish or affiliated to any religion."

Baitelman has been a rabbi for more than two decades and in Richmond since 1998.

Over the years, he's been asked all sorts of questions.

People often wonder whether in Judaism they believe in Hell or Satan, or whether or not they believe intimacy is for procreation only.

"These are a sampling of what we as rabbis get asked," he said.

Baitelman went on to say that the series of courses will cover a wide spectrum of topics meant to address and separate Jewish myth from actual fact.

This six-part Jewish factoids program hopes to answer biblical stories and events, Jewish foods, the Hebrew language, life cycle events and the mysteries of the occult.

"We've designed the course to be fun and to provide an insightful overview of our Jewish faith and to promote Jewish cultural literacy," said Baitelman, adding he'll also answer why marriage is affected by the wedding band.

Although he was initially reluctant to give out any answers, Baitelman agreed to answer a couple.

As to the question, "Are Jews allowed to have tattoos?" Baitelman said the broader question is: "Is a Jewish person who has a tattoo permitted to be buried in a Jewish cemetery," he said.

"The Torah prohibits tattoos. However, you can't be held liable for something you didn't know.

"Once the lessons are learned, there are no excuses."

Then there's the question about whether Jews believe an eye for an eye, which Baitelman said no, they don't.

"During the sessions, I will get in much more depth," he added.

As for why salt is called kosher salt, Baitelman said the term "kosher salt" is not derived from the way its made, rather it's due to its use in making meats kosher.

Baitelman explained it this way: The Bible forbids blood consumption, so after a kosher animal is properly slaughtered, all blood must be removed.

Salting the meat normally does this, as salt helps extract the moisture. The coarse salt that is just right for koshering meat is called kosher salt.

Baitelman encourages curiosity because "that's how people's faith grows."

"This class will fill in a lot of those gaps that aren't necessarily simply about theology, but about questions that are often asked of us," he said. "The more people know, the more they are likely to participate in their Jewish faith."

The goal of the program, he stressed again, is not to convert anyone.

The Rohr Jewish Institute presents Fascinating Facts: Exploring the Myths and Mysteries of Judaism, a six-session course beginning on Wednesday, Nov. 9 at Chabad of Richmond, 200-4775 Blundell Rd.

The course is open to everyone, regardless of faith.

Note: Register soon, as the class size will be limited to 25 participants.

For more information or to register, call Baitelman at 604-277-6427 or email at rabbi@chabadichmond.com or visit www.ChabadRichmond.com/JLI.

Course outline:

- Week 1: Story of your life? How to read the Torah/Bible.
- Week 2: Sunrise, Sunset. Exploring Jewish Life Cycle.
- Week 3: Under the Influence. Angels, Blessings and the Evil Eye.
- Week 4: Taking a Bite Out of Life. Kosher Food Facts
- Week 5: It's all Hebrew to me. Exploring of the holy Tongue. (The significance of it).
- Week 6: Beyond the Nose Job: Judaism Answers to Questions, Issues and Ethical Marriage.