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## Rabbi joins University as spiritual guide

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Rabbi David Wolkenfeld and his wife Sara, who will spend this year at the University as part of the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC), aim to support Jewish learning on a non-denominational campus through weekly courses and informal interaction with students.

“Being a religious student of any religion at a modern university is something that can be tremendously challenging and tremendously rewarding, and there are opportunities to grow ... as one is getting a college education,” David said. “I hope to show to the full spectrum of students on campus that Jewish learning can be relevant to the questions they are grappling with as 21st-century Americans,” he added.

“What the Wolkenfelds bring is the experience of being college students in academic disciplines, and [they are] also very literate in sacred Jewish texts,” said Rabbi Julie Roth, executive director of the Center for Jewish Life (CJL). “They give the opportunity not only for students to learn about the secular disciplines offered in the University, but also about sacred Jewish texts.”

### Academic meets Orthodox

The JLIC, a joint initiative between Hillel and the Orthodox Union that sends young Jewish couples to college campuses, is a “modern orthodox organization that believes that traditional Jewish learning and a university education are not only compatible, but go hand-in-hand with each other,” Roth explained.

“We have an important orthodox community, [but one that] is relatively small in size,” Roth said. Princeton’s Jewish community comprises 10 to 12 percent of the undergraduate population and between 200 and 300 graduate students, Roth said.

Roth noted that she thought the Wolkenfelds, as a modern orthodox couple, would be particularly able to relate to many Jewish students because they attended secular schools for their undergraduate educations. David earned his B.A. in history from Harvard, and Sara earned a B.A. in Judaica and comparative literature from Penn.

By contrast, members of Chabad, whose rabbi, Eitan Webb, [was granted chaplaincy just last May](#), do not believe in attending secular universities and instead attend separate schools to receive a traditional Jewish education, Roth said.

Sara said she and her husband “are working side by side with Chabad,” adding that “we’re hoping students will feel free to use us as a resource and use Chabad as a resource.”

“My understanding is that they’re planning to work with the orthodox students, and I think that’s great,” Webb said.

## **Spiritual scholarship**

Dedicated to serving Orthodox Jewish students primarily, but not exclusively, in an educational capacity, both David and Sara will teach small classes at the CJL that are open to undergraduates, graduate students and faculty.

This semester, David will teach both a beginner's and advanced course on the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic writings about Jewish laws and traditions that is accepted as an authoritative text by Orthodox Jews. In late October, Sara will launch a course on the philosophy of prayer. The classes will meet for about an hour per week and are not graded or offered for University credit, Sara explained.

“Our goal is to get to know people and to meet as many people as possible and make people feel that getting in touch with Jewish texts is something that is accessible to them and enjoyable for them,” Sara said.

In addition to the classes, the Wolkenfelds will offer individual study sessions for students interested in learning about sacred Jewish texts one on one.

David noted the unique role that a spiritual leader can play in an academic setting.

“The teaching and the relationship-building are present in this job in a very pure way” that avoids some of the difficulties that “congregational rabbis have to deal with,” he explained.

For students who prefer a less formal setting, the Wolkenfelds host weekly lunch-and-learn events at which they discuss topics such as Jewish law, philosophy and history.

## **Engaging the community**

In addition to sharing meals at the CJL, the Wolkenfelds will invite students to have dinner with them at their house, which is within walking distance of campus, and meet with them for coffee so they can “get to know students informally as mentors,” Roth explained.

The Wolkenfelds will also participate in retreats and training a few times a year with other JLIC couples, Roth said, as well as share program ideas throughout the year.

Roth said that since the couple arrived, they have been “interacting with students at all our orientation events” and talking to “all the CJL student leaders” and to Orthodox Jewish students on campus. The Wolkenfelds will also be involved in the CJL’s plans to expand its educational programs by organizing more retreats and trips and working in partnership with the University’s Program in Judaic Studies, Roth said.

“Our goal is to find the intersection between Judaism and students’ other interests,” Roth said, explaining that “through retreats and trips and on-campus educational learning programs, we hope to focus on making Judaism speak to students’ lives.”

This is the seventh year that the CJL has participated in the JLIC, and the Wolkenfelds, who were preceded by Rabbi Joshua and Rivky Ross, are the third couple to come to Princeton under the program, Roth said.

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