

Contemporary Jewish Issues  
TAU International Study Abroad Program  
Spring Semester 2021

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Dr. Moshe Gresser – [moshe.gresser@gmail.com](mailto:moshe.gresser@gmail.com) – 054-538-3264

Contact by E-mail or phone; Office hours: TuTh 09:30 – 10:00

Course Credits: 3 TAU Semester Credits

For course times/days and location, please visit the TAU International web site (Study Abroad Course Offerings and Schedules). Please note that all information below is subject to change and/or adjustment as necessary.

**Course Description (Summary)**

This course will explore in an inter-personal and dialogical way a series of issues that engage and concern contemporary Jews, through readings and class discussions. Issues will be set in the context of relevant Jewish laws, traditions and selected texts, to provide necessary Jewish substance and background. The tension between tradition and modernity, as well as that between Israel and the Diaspora, especially America, will serve as the backdrop for many of these issues, so vital to the Jewish future. Class discussion will attempt to develop the skill of listening in order to articulate the intelligence of opposing views, while struggling to discern the truth - the classic Jewish procedure in an "argument for the sake of Heaven."

**Course Requirements, Expectations, Readings and/or Required Materials**

**Required Reading:** Articles and texts for Contemporary Jewish Issues, available online on the course Moodle site. Occasional handouts.

**In order to cultivate a serious and focused learning environment in class, cell phone use, texting, laptops or Internet surfing will not be allowed during class. Ignoring this rule will lower your participation grade.**

N.B. TAU does not permit, under any circumstances, taking any in-class (including midterm or final) exams early or later than the scheduled exam day. When selecting courses, it is thus very important to read the syllabus and check if there is an in-class midterm or final exam as this date/exam cannot be changed. Early departures from the program are not approved, nor are early or exception in-class exams.

**Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the course, students will have acquired some knowledge and an increased awareness of a series of major issues facing modern Judaism and the Jewish people in contemporary society, as well as some of the ideas, ethics, laws, rituals and texts that highlight what is at stake. Secondly, on the basis of our study and discussion of these issues and their supporting texts, students will have learned to engage their peers and explore these issues in a personal way, while learning better the skill of collaborative listening, so as to articulate the



intelligence of opposing views while struggling to discern the truth - the classic Jewish procedure in an "argument for the sake of Heaven."

### Evaluation Criteria

**1) Preparation, Attendance and Class Participation, as measured by 8 short Class Discussion Reports ideally completed in class over the course of the semester: 20%**

**Please Note:** In order to facilitate a non-distracting and intellectually productive learning environment, cell phones, texting, Ipods, laptops, PDAs, and their accompanying earpieces are NOT allowed during class. **Ignoring this rule will lower your participation grade.**

Students are responsible for assigned readings whether they are reviewed in class or not.

**2) Midterm Exam [based on both readings and class discussion]: 40%**

**3) Final Issue Debate Paper with a Partner (8-10 pages): 40%** (See additional page below for details.)

### Absence Policy

Please note the TAU International Absence Policy as outlined on the next page. In accordance with policy, class attendance is required. More than 3 unexcused absences will lower your grade.

### Course Schedule

#### Weekly Schedule and Reading Assignments:

##### First Week:

**Class 1** – Tues. Feb 23 - Introductions and overview: Issues bind, issues divide. What is a Jewish Issue? What are the most important issues that engage Jews today, and Why? Judaism as a generative culture of debate. Jewish literacy as an issue of Jewish survival. Is Judaism a religion, a nation, a family or a civilization (or all four)? What do you think are the most important Jewish issues today? For next class, read Handout from Encyclopedia Judaica: "Who is a Jew?"

**Class 2** – Thurs. Feb 25 - The "Who is a Jew?" Debate in Israel and in Judaism: A defining issue. What is at stake? Who cares? Brother Daniel, the Shalit case and the State of Israel: What is a Jewish State? How do religion and ethnicity intertwine in Jewish identity? What is the role of law in Judaism? What's the difference between a law and a religious requirement or obligation?

##### Second Week:

**Class 3** – Tues. Mar 2 – Context and Historical Background: Jewish Modernity and the Emancipation. Matrilineal vs. Patrilineal descent: What's the issue? What are the values reflected in each position? Reform versus Orthodox positions. Is it all a matter of taste?

**Class 4** – Thurs. Mar 4 - Zionism and Israel-Diaspora relations: What does Israel mean to you? How do Israelis and Diaspora Jews view each other? Is "exile" a part of modern Jewish identity? Is Judaism without a national dimension fully Jewish?

##### Third Week:

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**Class 5** – Tues. Mar. 9 - The Chosen versus the Choosing People: the role of autonomy.

What is the Jewish Role in the World? Is "The Chosen People" necessarily chauvinistic? Does a Jew have an obligation to anything other than individual self-interest?

**Class 6** – Thurs. Mar. 11 - Conversion: Why are circumcision (Brit Milah) and ritual immersion in a mikveh necessary to conversion? (Are they?) If circumcision is the sign of the Covenant, how are women included? How does conversion help us understand Jewish identity?

**Fourth Week:**

**Class 7** – Tues. Mar. 16 - Antisemitism, Anti-Judaism, Anti-Zionism: Why hate Jews? Five stages in the development of Jew-Hatred.

**Class 8** – Thurs. Mar 18 - Christianity, Jew-Hatred and Antisemitism.

**Fifth Week**

**Class 9** - Tues. Mar. 23 – Anti-Zionism and Contemporary anti-Semitism. Israel and the Media. The BDS Movement. Does antisemitism affect American Jews? How do you understand contemporary antisemitism like the slaughter of Jews in a synagogue in Philadelphia? What role does the Holocaust play in contemporary Jewish identity? What role should it play?

**Class 10** – Thursday, March 25th - MIDTERM EXAM (40%)

**Passover Vacation: March 27th - April 3rd**

**Sixth Week**

**Class 11** - Tuesday, April 6 - Judaism and Gender. Jewish women, Jewish men, Feminism and Patriarchy; Men's and Women's roles. How do Judaism and feminism challenge each other? What can they learn from a dialogue?

**Class 12** - Thursday, April 8 - Feminist Judaism: Women's Torah, women's rituals, women's leadership. What do women want? What do men want? What does God want? Can we be friends?

**Seventh Week:**

**Class 13** – Tues. April 13 - The Abortion Debate Pro and Con: Can feminism include an opposition to abortion? How do both rights and moral obligations play a role in this issue? What has Judaism said and ruled about the issue?

**Thursday, April 15<sup>th</sup> – Yom HaAzmaut – NO CLASS**

**Class 14** – Tues. April 20 - Issues in Jewish Dating 1: Modesty (*tsniut*) and Jewish dress. Gender Display and Power. What do our clothes say about how we see ourselves and how we see others? What do we want them to say? What does self-restraint say? Covering one's hair and sexiness as different ways of feeling good about oneself (social conditioning and self-esteem); the naked body as artistic expression of the innocence of the body (Steven Tunick) .

**Eighth Week:**

**Class 15** – Thurs. April 22 – Issues in Jewish Dating 2: Hooking up, non-marital sex and Judaism: Touching (*negi'ah*) and not touching: What do they mean? Does virginity have any value to Jews today? What role does self-restraint play in Jewish dating?



**Ninth Week:**

**Class 16** – Tues. April 27 – What is Jewish marriage? Why marry Jewish? The Jewish Wedding ceremony ("*Kiddushin*") as an expression of values. Does the tradition and the community have a right to define my marriage, or is it solely between the individuals?

**Class 17** – Thurs. April 29 - Intermarriage and Assimilation: What's the Issue?

Why marry a Jew? Isn't love all that matters? Should Jews not date non-Jews? What is at stake? What are the benefits of intermarriage? Should Rabbis agree to officiate at mixed marriage ceremonies?

**Tenth Week:**

**Class 18** – Tues. May 4 - Sex and Judaism. What's love got to do with it? Jewish Marital Sexuality and Family Purity Laws. Should a Jewish marriage include the Jewish way in love and sex? Can a Jewish marriage include consensual extra-marital sex? Sex as partnership.

**Class 19** – Thurs. May 6 – Judaism and Adultery. Does consent have limits? Is it any of Judaism's business?

**Eleventh Week:**

**Class 20** – Tues. May 11 – - Homosexuality, Gay marriage. The reciprocal challenge of LGBTQI and Judaism. A modern argument for the sake of heaven, or simple prejudice and fear? What do we do if we believe the halakha is wrong?

**Class 21** – Thurs. May 13 – Summing Up and Looking Back. What's this all about? Why does it matter?

**\*\*Final Debate Paper with a Partner (40%) – Due Thursday, May 13<sup>th</sup>**

**Final Debate Paper with a Partner**

**Contemporary Jewish Issues**

Instructor: Moshe Gresser

**Paper Length: 8-10 typed pages, double-spaced, depending on the topic.**

**DUE DATE: Last Day of Classes: Thursday, 13 May 2021**

**Topic:** Your choice of an issue about which there is a debate among contemporary Jews and that you care about. For example: Feminism and Judaism (focused on a specific question); men's and women's roles in Judaism; Intermarriage or Jewish Marriage (focused on an issue); Judaism and marital sexuality (*taharat hamishpacha*), pre- or non-marital sexuality, homosexuality or alternative sexual identities (LGBTQI); modesty (*tsni'ut*) and Jewish dress; issues in Jewish dating (e.g., *negi'ah*, or hooking up); the abortion debate and Judaism. **Other topics are possible**, but must be approved by the instructor.

**You must follow the following Guidelines for your Debate paper:**

Your paper **must debate two sides of a contemporary Jewish issue**. The key is finding the right **question** to focus the debate. This question should appear in the first paragraph and be reflected in the title. You must explain the intelligent **reasons** that support both sides, especially the side you disagree with. **You should coordinate the arguments in such a way so that each side directly counters the specific arguments of its opponent**. You must read all the material

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on the course site related to your topic, but you should also supplement that material with additional reading from the library or the Internet that deepens your knowledge of the topic. **You should provide a bibliography that reflects the sources of the debate positions.** Respond to the issue with your own thinking, but your discussion must be well informed, and well-argued. **Don't just advocate for your own view** without considering what others think and without considering the texts, practices, and ideas of Jewish tradition. **Your goal is to articulate the intelligence of both sides**, but don't hesitate to make the strongest argument you can in support of your view. **25 point penalty if you don't present a debate.**

**Some suggestions for a topic, but formulate a single question for your debate**

1. Is intermarriage good or bad for Judaism and the Jewish people? Why not intermarry? Isn't love all that matters? Isn't your own happiness of the individual your primary responsibility?
2. What issues are at stake in a Jewish marriage? Are Jews obligated to create one? Are Jews obligated to raise children who are Jewishly identified?
3. What is Jewish sex? Is it an ideal Jews should strive to achieve? Are the Family Purity laws (*taharat hamishpacha*) necessary to Jewish sex? Why or why not?
4. Is premarital sex good or bad for Judaism or for a Jewish way of life? Are there problems with premarital sex, from a Jewish perspective? Is there a problem with non-Jewish premarital sex partners?
5. Is there anything wrong with masturbation, from Jewish perspectives?
6. Is there anything wrong with homosexuality? Why has Jewish tradition been so consistently opposed to the practice of homosexual acts? Is homosexuality good or bad for Judaism or the Jewish people?
7. Is Judaism sexist? How so? How not so? What can or should be done about it? Is there any virtue in patriarchy? Where do feminism and Judaism disagree? Where do they agree? Are roles based on gender ever acceptable, in your view? Can a Jewish feminist be opposed to abortion in principle?
8. Can Jews really live a complete and authentic Jewish life in the Diaspora, living in a non-Jewish country? Why does Zionism claim they cannot? Is Judaism complete without a national dimension?
9. What is galut (Jewish exile)? Is Zionism a necessary part of Jewish identity? Can Jews who live in Israel still be in Jewish exile, or is simply living in Israel enough to overcome Jewish galut? Are non-observant Jewish Israelis in exile?
10. Do *tsniut* (modesty, self-restraint) and *negiah* (prohibition of touching) represent denigrations of the body and oppressions of women, or are they wise laws designed to promote authentic and deep relationships between Jewish men and women?
11. The controversy surrounding the "Women of the Wall"



12. Assimilation, Jewish illiteracy

13. Should Jews make aliyah? Is Judaism in the Diaspora viable in the long term?

14. The B.D.S. movement on college campuses

15. Both sides of the Abortion Debate

**Suggested Supplementary Reading:**

S.N. Eisenstadt, *Jewish Civilization. The Jewish Historical Experience in a Comparative Perspective*, 1992.

Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Modern Times. An Introduction and Reader*, 1995.

Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*

Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism*, 2005.

Mendes-Flohr & Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History*

Prager and Telushkin, *Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism*

Eliezer Berkovits, *Crisis and Faith*. New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1976.

Marc Kelner, *Contemporary Jewish Ethics*

Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*

David Feldman, *Marital Relations, Birth Control and Abortion in Jewish Law*

Shmuley Boteach, *Kosher Sex. A Recipe for Passion and Intimacy*, 1999.

Gila Manolson, *The Magic Touch. A Jewish Approach to Relationships*, 1992.

Gila Manolson, *Outside Inside. A Fresh Look at Tzniut*, 1997.

Kathleen Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*, 2008.

Robert Wistrich, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred*

Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*

Susannah Heschel, *On Being A Jewish Feminist*

S. Grossman, R. Haut, *Daughters of the King*

Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* 2004.

Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way. Living the Holidays*

Mordicai Waxman, ed., *Tradition and Change. The Development of Conservative Judaism*.

Bruce A. Philips, *Re-Examining Inter marriage: Trends, Textures, Strategies*, 1995.

Egon Mayer, *Love and Tradition. Marriage between Jews and Christians*, 1985.

Sacks, Jonathan. *Crisis and Covenant* (1992)

David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism* (1999)

David Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition*

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State* (1992)

**Instructor Biography**

Moshe Gresser (1951- ) has taught Jewish Studies in the Overseas Students Program at Tel-Aviv University since 1994. He holds a PhD from the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he studied social scientific interpretations of religions and Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament literature), later publishing a revision of his dissertation as *Dual Allegiance: Freud as a Modern Jew* (SUNY Press, 1994). He studied Jewish traditions and texts at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 1983-85; 1991-92, later returning to teach in the Pardes Summer program. He took his undergraduate degree in English language and literature, with a

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minor in Classics, from the University of Maryland. From 1988-1994, he served as the Counselor to Jewish Students at Colgate University and taught Jewish Studies there in the Philosophy and Religion Department, and Hebrew in the Modern Languages Dept. In the 60s and 70s he played guitar and sang in a rock band, traveling in the eastern part of the U.S. He immigrated to Israel in 1994 with his wife and family, eventually helping raise six children (5 girls and a boy). He lives in Be'er Sheva, Israel.

### TAU International Academic Guidelines

Students may only attend classes which they are officially registered for. No auditing of courses is permitted. Students are responsible for reading and adhering to all policies and procedures in the TAU International Academic Handbook [posted here](#) at all times. Below is a summary of some of these relevant policies and procedures.

### Learning Accommodations

In accordance to University guidelines, TAU International may be able to accommodate students with learning disabilities or accommodation requests if these requests are also honored at the student's home university or home school. To be considered, students must submit official documentation from their home school or university (if not in English, a notarized official copy translated into English is required) to TAU International in advance of arrival describing in detail any specific needs and how these are accommodated at the home school or university. Students must also bring a copy of this documentation with them on-site and give it to their faculty on the first day of class while introducing themselves so that the faculty know who they are and what sorts of needs or accommodations they may have. **Without official documentation from the home school submitted on or before the first day of courses, TAU will not be able to honor accommodation support.**

With supporting documentation and by following the correct procedure as outlined above, TAU International and its faculty will do the best it can to make any suitable accommodations possible. However, we cannot guarantee that all accommodations received at the home school can be similarly met at TAU. For example, TAU is usually not able to offer note-taking services in English, private testing rooms, or advance viewing of classroom presentations, exams, or assignments.

It may be an option to provide a student with additional tutoring or support outside the classroom as needed. Students should be aware that this additional support cannot be guaranteed and is based on teacher availability in the subject as well as the specific student level. If available, the cost of additional tutoring or support will be the sole responsibility of the student.

### In-Class Exams

TAU does not permit, under any circumstances, taking any in-class (including mid or final) exams early or later than the scheduled exam day. When selecting courses, it is thus very important to note if there is an in-class midterm or final exam as this date/exam cannot be changed. It is also the student's responsibility to clarify exam dates with the professors at the beginning of a course, with the understanding that not all exam dates can be decided up front as it can

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sometimes depend on the pace of the course and class learning. It is the student responsibility to plan to be present for all courses including the final day of class for this reason. Early departures from the program are not approved, nor are early or exception in-class exams.

### **TAU International Absence Policy**

Attendance is mandatory in all of the courses including Hebrew Ulpan. Faculty can and will take attendance regularly. Missing classes will be reflected in the final grade of the course. Up to three justified and properly documented absences from classes may be accepted (for example: emergency matter or illness, both of which will require a doctor's note). Such cases of absence should be reported to the faculty immediately and again, a doctor's note is required. Teachers are entitled to treat any lateness or absence without documentation as unexcused. Some of our courses such as Service Learning or the Internship Seminar require more practical in-class work; thus, attendance policies may be stricter in some courses and students then must adhere to the stricter attendance policy as outlined by the faculty/syllabus.

Students are required to arrive on time for classes. Teachers are entitled to treat any single case of lateness and/or repeated lateness as an unjustified absence.

Please note that according to official TAU Academic Policy, if a student's behavior or attendance during is disagreeable his/her course participation may be cancelled at the discretion of TAU with no due refund.

### **Grade Appeals**

Students are responsible for checking grades once posted or distributed by faculty. The limited grade appeals window and the detailed procedure for appealing a grade – whether a graded assignment, exam or final grade – is outlined clearly in the policies and procedures in the TAU International Academic Handbook [posted here](#).

