

**The University of Tel-Aviv - Overseas Student Program**  
**The Essence of Judaism**  
**Fall Semester 2019 - Instructor: Dr. Moshe Gresser**  
**Tuesdays and Thursdays – 10:15 – 11:45**  
**+ Weekly Online Class on Mondays (45 minutes each week)**

The goal of this course is two-fold: first, to acquire some knowledge of the major ideas, ethics, laws, rituals and texts that constitute Judaism as the living religious civilization of the Jewish people; and secondly, on the basis of our study of fundamental elements of Jewish tradition, to engage and explore in a personal way a series of issues that emerge from those elements. 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.

**Required Reading:** Articles and texts in the **Readings for The Essence of Judaism**, available online on the course Moodle site. Occasional handouts.

**Grading System:**

- 1) **Attendance, class preparation and participation:** 10%
- 2) **Eight Homework Assignment Pages** – 1-2 questions based on the Online Classes: 20%  
Email submission NOT accepted. You must turn in a paper copy to receive credit.
- 3) **Midterm Exam:** 35%  
Midterm Exam will be based on both readings and class discussion. Students are responsible for assigned readings whether they are reviewed in class or not.
- 4) **Cumulative Final Paper:** 35% In paper copy. Email submission NOT accepted.

**Please Note:** In accordance with OSP policy, class attendance is required. More than 3 unexcused absences will lower your grade.

**Secondly, 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.**

**Weekly Schedule and Reading Assignments:**

**I. The Biblical Story, Its Themes and Issues**

**First Week:**

**Class 1** – Thurs Oct. 24 - Introductions, Requirements, Overviews: The Jewish textual tradition and the Jewish people. What is the essence of Judaism? A relationship with God, the Jewish People and the world through texts, time and law. First texts: **1st Creation Story (Gen. 1:1-2:4)**: The nature of God, the world and human beings in Judaism. **Background Readings**

**Online Class #1** – Monday, October 28

**Class 2** – Tues Oct 29 - **1st Creation Story** – cont'd. (Gen. 1:1-2:4): **Readings #5 – 8 in Reader**. Does a good Jew have to believe in God? Evolution and the Biblical story of Creation – Read Leon Kass, "Evolution and the Bible: Gen.1 Revisited."

**Second Week:**

**Class 3** – Thurs Oct 31 - **2nd Creation Story** (Gen. 2:4-3:24): Men, women, and the image of God; Is Judaism inherently sexist? Read "Biblical Narrative," Joel Rosenberg.

**Online Class #2** – Monday, November 4

**Class 4** – Tues Nov 5 - Garden of Eden Story (Gen. 1:26-3:24): Eating, sex, and the life of mitzvah (commandment). Is it God's business what I eat or what I do with my sex life? The Story of Lilith.

**Third Week:**

**Class 5** – Thurs Nov 7 - Garden of Eden Story II (Gen. 1:26-3:24): Eating, sex, and the life of mitzvah (commandment). What is God up to in this story? What's his plan?

**Online Class #3** – Monday, November 11

**Class 6** – Tues Nov 12 - Cain and Abel Story, with midrash.

The Covenant: Choosing Abraham and Sarah; The Chosen People; - Gen. 12, 15, 17; Ex. 19. Isn't the Chosen People idea chauvinistic?

**Fourth Week:**

**Class 7** – Thurs Nov 14 - Circumcision - Why is it the sign of the Covenant? Gen. 18: Abraham arguing with God for Justice - an image of Jewish national identity

**Online Class #4** – Monday, November 18

**Class 8** – Tues Nov 19 - The Akedah (The Binding of Isaac) (Gen. 21-22). The Love and Fear of God: Does being a Jew mean being willing to suffer for God's sake? The Akedah as a symbol of the Jewish nation.

**Fifth Week**

**Class 9** – Thurs Nov 21 - Jacob, the Jew as God-Wrestler -Gen. 25:19-34; Gen. 26-32. The relationship to non-Jews (Esau).

**Online Class #5** – Monday, November 25

**Class 10** - Tues Nov 26 - The Birth of the Nation: Israel in Egypt - Ex.1-12; Receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai - Ex. 19-20. Should a good Jew keep the commandments?

**Class 11** – **Thursday, November 28<sup>th</sup> - MIDTERM EXAM (35%)**

**Sixth Week**

**II. The Jewish Calendar, Its Themes and Issues**

**Online Class #6** – Monday, December 2

**Class 12** – Tues Dec 3 - The Jewish Calendar and Jewish Identity - Ex.12-13; Lev. 23; The Jewish Religious Year. Assimilation vs Jewish national identity. The Jewish calendar defines the Jew. Are the Jews a nation or a religious group?

**Class 13** – Thurs Dec 5 - The Pilgrimage Festivals and their Themes: Passover; the Haggadah. What is slavery? What is freedom? To do whatever I want, whenever I want to (Mick Jagger's definition), or to do what's right, even if I don't want to?

**Seventh Week:**

**Online Class #7** – Monday, December 9

**Class 14** – Tues Dec 10 - The High Holidays and their themes: Elul, Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur; Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah as the culmination of both the Pilgrimage Festivals and the High Holy Days.

**Class 15** – Thurs Dec 12 - Chanukah and Purim and their themes; Books of the Maccabees and Hellenism. The issues of assimilation and intermarriage.

### **III. The Jewish Way and the Sanctification of Life: Shabbat, Food and Marriage**

#### **Eighth Week:**

**Online Class #8** – Monday, December 16

**Class 16** – Tues Dec 17 - Halakhah: the Jewish Way. Shabbat and Kashrut as expressions of the partnership between God and the Jewish people, a memorial of Creation and Exodus.

**Class 17** – Thurs Dec 19 - Judaism, Marriage, and Sexuality. What makes a marriage Jewish? What makes sex Jewish? The Jewish Wedding Ceremony. Summing Up and Looking Back. What's this all about?

**\*\*\*Cumulative Final Paper (35%) due Thursday, December 19, 2019**  
**(in paper copy)**

#### **Suggested Supplementary Reading:**

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

Biale, David, The Cultures of the Jews, 3 vols.

Biale, Rachel. Women and Jewish Law

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

Chill, Abraham. The Minhagim. The Customs and Ceremonies of Judaism, their Origins and Rationale, 1979.

Davidman, Lynn. Tradition in a Rootless World

deLange, Nicholas. Judaism

Donin, Hayyim. To Be A Jew

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

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

Greenberg, Irving. The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays

Grossman, Susan and Haut, R. Daughters of the King

Heschel, Susannah. On Being A Jewish Feminist

Hertzberg, Arthur & Hirt-Manheimer, Aron, Jews: The Essence and Character of a People, 1998.

Holtz, Barry ed., Back to the Sources

Kelner, Marc. Contemporary Jewish Ethics

Kepnes, Steven ed., Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age, 1996.

Lamm, Maurice. The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage

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

Mendes-Flohr, Paul & Reinharz, Jehuda. The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History

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

Neusner, Jacob. Between Time and Eternity: The Essentials of Judaism.

Philips, Bruce A. Re-Examining Intermarriage: Trends, Textures, Strategies, 1995.

Plaut, Gunther ed., The Torah: A Modern Commentary

Prager, Dennis and Telushkin, Joseph. Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism