The University of Tel-Aviv Overseas Student Program
CONTEMPORARY JEWISH ISSUES - Spring 2019

Instructor: Dr. Moshe Gresser

Course Description:
This course will explore in a personal 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 articulating the intelligence of opposing views while struggling to discern the truth, the classic Jewish procedure in an "argument for the sake of Heaven."

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

Grading System:
1) Attendance, class preparation and participation: 10%
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.
2) Midterm Exam [based on both readings and class discussion]: 30% (if you do the paper with a partner), or 40% (if you choose not to do a paper)
3) Optional Jewish Issue paper with a partner (4-5 pages): 20% - Email submission not accepted. You must turn in a paper copy to receive credit. 10 point penalty for email submission.
4) Cumulative Individual Final Paper (8-10 pages): 40% (with the issue paper) or 50% (without a paper). Email submission NOT accepted. 10 point penalty for email submission.

Students are responsible for assigned readings whether they are reviewed in class or not.
Please Note: In accordance with OSP policy, class attendance is required.
*More than 3 unexcused absences will lower your grade by at least 10%.
*Any request to take the exam on a date other than the one scheduled must be submitted to the OSP Office. The professor is not authorized to make separate arrangements for a make-up exam.
*Cell phone use or Laptop Internet surfing during class will not be allowed. Ignoring this rule will lower your participation grade.

Weekly Schedule and Reading Assignments:
First Week:
Class 1 – Tues. Mar 5 - 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. Mar 7 - 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 Israelis and Diaspora Jews view each other? Is "exile" a part of modern Jewish identity? What's the difference between a law and a religious requirement or obligation?
Second Week:
Class 3 – Tues. Mar 12 – 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 14 - 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?
Third Week:
Class 5 – Tues Mar. 19 - 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. 21- PURIM! No Class.

Fourth Week:
Class 7 – Tues. Mar. 26 - 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?


Fifth Week
Class 9 - Tues. Apr 2 - Christianity, Jew-Hatred and Antisemitism.


Sixth Week
Tuesday, April 9th  – Yom HaAtzmaut – NO CLASS

Thursday, April 11 - MIDTERM EXAM (30% or 40%)**

Passover Vacation: April 15th - April 27th

Seventh Week:
Class 12 – Tues. April 30 - Jewish women, Jewish men, Feminism and Halakha (Jewish law); Men's and Women's roles. How do Judaism and feminism challenge each other?


Eighth Week:
Class 14 – Tues. May 7 - The Abortion Debate Pro and Con: Can feminism include an opposition to abortion?

Class 15 – Thurs. May 9 – 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 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).

Ninth Week:
Class 16 – Tues. May 14 – 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?

**Optional Jewish Issue paper with a partner due (20%)
Class 17 – Thurs. May 16 - What is Jewish marriage? Why marry Jewish? The Jewish Wedding ceremony ("Kiddushin") as an expression of values. Does the tradition have a right to define my marriage?

Tenth Week:
Class 19 – Thurs. May 23 - 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.

Eleventh Week:
Class 20 – Tues. May 28 - Judaism and Adultery. Is it any of Judaism's business?
Class 21 - Thurs. May 30 - Homosexuality, Gay marriage. A modern argument for the sake of heaven, or simple prejudice and fear? What do we do if we believe the halakha is wrong?
- Summing Up and Looking Back. What's this all about? Why does it matter?

**Cumulative Final Paper (40% or 50%) – Due Thursday, May 30th**

**Suggested Supplementary Reading:**
Jack Wertheimer, A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America
Mendes-Flohr & Reinharz, The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History
Prager and Telushkin, Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism
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
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
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)