The University of Tel-Aviv - Overseas Student Program

The Essence of Judaism
Fall Semester 2018 - Instructor: Dr. Moshe Gresser
Tuesdays and Thursdays – 10:15 – 12:00

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 engage and concern contemporary Jews. 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 The Essence of Judaism, available online on the course Moodle site. Occasional handouts.

Grading System:
1) Attendance, class preparation and participation: 5% (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).
2) Two short individual take-home Reading Quizzes: 15% each, total 30%
   Email submission NOT accepted. You must turn in a paper copy to receive credit.
3) Midterm Exam: 30%
4) Cumulative Final Paper: 35% Email submission NOT accepted.
   Exams will be based on both readings and class discussion. 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%. Secondly, in order to cultivate a serious and focused atmosphere in class, cell phone use, texting, laptops or Internet surfing during class will not be allowed.

Weekly Schedule and Reading Assignments:
(reading selection numbers refer to Reader Table of Contents)

I. The Biblical Story, Its Themes and Issues

First Week:
Class 1 – Tues Oct. 16 - 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. Starting with texts: 1st Creation Story (Gen. 1:1-2:4): The nature of God, the world and human beings in Judaism. Background Readings


Second Week:


Third Week:
Class 5 – Tues Oct 30 - 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?
Class 6 – Thurs Nov 1 - The 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 – Tues Nov 6 - Circumcision - Why is it the sign of the Covenant? Gen. 18: Abraham arguing with God for Justice - an image of Jewish national identity

**Reading Quiz #1 Due**
Class 8 – Thurs Nov 8 - 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 10 - Thurs Nov 15 - 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 – Tuesday, November 20th - MIDTERM EXAM (25%)

**Sixth Week**
II. The Jewish Calendar, Its Themes and Issues
Class 12 – Thurs Nov 22 - The Jewish Calendar and Jewish Identity - Ex.12-13; Lev. 23;
The Jewish Religious Year. Assimilation vs Jewish national identity: Do you know your Jewish date of birth? Are the Jews a nation or a religious group?
Class 13 – Tues Nov 27 - 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:**
Class 14 – Thurs Nov 29 - The High Holidays and their themes: Elul, Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur; Mishna Rosh HaShanah 1:1; Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah.
Class 15 – Tues Dec 4 - Channukah and Purim and their themes; Books of the Maccabees and Hellenism. The issues of assimilation and intermarriage.

**Reading Quiz #2 Due**

III. The Jewish Way and the Sanctification of Life: Shabbat, Food and Marriage
Eighth Week:
Class 16 – Thurs Dec 6 - 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 – Tues Dec 11 - Shabbat Kiddush: Argument for the Sake of Heaven: Mishna Berachot 8:1 Shabbat and the Mishkan (Temple). What is melakha?

**Ninth Week:**

**Tenth Week:**

***Cumulative Final Paper (35%) due Thursday, December 20, 2018***
Suggested Supplementary Reading:
Biale, Rachel. Women and Jewish Law
Davidman, Lynn. Tradition in a Rootless World
deLange, Nicholas. Judaism
Donin, Hayyim. To Be A Jew
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
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
Mendes-Flohr, Paul & Reinharz, Jehuda. The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History
Plaut, Gunther ed., The Torah: A Modern Commentary
Prager, Dennis and Telushkin, Joseph. Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism
Sarna, Nahum. Understanding Genesis
Sarna, Nahum. Exploring Exodus
Wertheimer, Jack. A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America
Wistrich, Robert. Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred