

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

Class 2 – Thurs Oct 18 - 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 – Tues Oct 23 - 2nd Creation Story (Gen. 2:4-3:24): Men, women, and the image of God; Is Judaism inherently sexist? Read "Biblical Narrative," Joel Rosenberg.

Class 4 – Thurs Oct 25 - 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 – 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 - 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 9 – Tues Nov 13 - Jacob, the Jew as God-Wrestler -Gen. 25:19-34; Gen. 26-32. The relationship to non-Jews (Esau). Antisemitism and Jewish racism.

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 - Chanukah 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:

Class 18 – Thurs Dec 13 – Kashrut as self-definition: You are what you eat; Encountering Jewish Chosenness. Read Meir Soloveitchik, "Locusts, Giraffes, and the Meaning of Kashrut" and Kass, "Why the Dietary Laws?"

Class 19 – Tues Dec 18 – Judaism, Marriage, and Sexuality. What makes a marriage Jewish? What makes sex Jewish? The Jewish Wedding Ceremony.

Tenth Week:

Class 20 – Thurs Dec 20 – Judaism and the Family Purity Laws: Personalizing the Impersonal. Howso? – Summing Up and Looking Back. What's this all about?

*****Cumulative Final Paper (35%) due Thursday, December 20, 2018*****

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 & Reinhartz, 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 Inter-marriage: Trends, Textures, Strategies, 1995.

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

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

Sacks, Jonathan, Radical Then, Radical Now. The Legacy of the world's oldest religion, 2009.

Sacks, Jonathan, The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilization, 2002.

Sarna, Nahum. Understanding Genesis

Sarna, Nahum. Exploring Exodus

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

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

Wistrich, Robert. Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred

Zornberg, Avivah. Genesis: The Beginning of Desire (1995)