

The Essence of Judaism
Dr. Moshe Gresser
TAU International Study Abroad
Fall Semester 2022

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Office Hours: Tu&Th 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

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 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.

Course Requirements and Expectations

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

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 of the major ideas, ethics, laws, rituals and texts that constitute Judaism as the living civilization of the Jewish people; and secondly, on the basis of our study of fundamental elements of Jewish tradition - such as key stories from Creation to Exodus, the role of Law (*Torah*), the Jewish calendar, and central religious practices such as Shabbat, the dietary laws (*kashrut*), and the laws of Family Purity - students will learn to engage and explore in a personal way a series of issues that emerge from those elements.



Evaluation Criteria

Assignments/Activities	% of Final Grade
Attendance, class preparation and participation	10%
Two Homework Assignment Pages	20%
Midterm Exam 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.	35%
Cumulative Final Paper- Length: 6-8 pages, double-spaced, plus Bibliography. See attached assignment description for details.	35%

Absence Policy

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

Course Schedule

Please Note: To make up for the one-week-late start to the semester, we will add 2 required online classes to the schedule of class meetings, dates and times to be announced.

The Biblical Story, Its Themes and Issues

Week 1:

Class 1 – Tues Oct. 25 - 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. 1:1-2:3): The nature of God, the world and human beings in Judaism.

Class 2 – Thurs Oct 27 - 1st Creation Story – cont'd. (Gen. 1:1-2:4): 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."



Week 2:

Class 3 – Tues Nov. 1 - 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 Nov. 3 - 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.

Week 3:

Class 5 – Tues Nov. 8 - 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. 10 - 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?

Week 4:

Class 7 – Tues Nov 15 - Circumcision - Why is it the sign of the Covenant?
Gen. 18: Abraham arguing with God for Justice - a first model of covenantal faithfulness.

Class 8 – Thurs Nov 17 - 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 second model of covenantal faithfulness.

Week 5:

Class 9 – Tues Nov 22 - Jacob, the Jew as God-Wrestler -Gen. 25:19-34; Gen. 26-32. The relationship to non-Jews (Esau).

Class 10 - Thurs Nov 24 - Israel in Egypt - Ex.1-12. The family becomes a nation. Are the midwives Jewish or Egyptian?

Week 6:

Class 11 – Tues Nov. 29 – Receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai - Ex. 19-20. Should a good Jew keep the commandments? The Law as the essence of Judaism?

Class 12- Thursday, December 1st - In-Class MIDTERM EXAM (35%)



The Jewish Calendar, Its Themes and Issues

Week 7:

Class 13 – Tues Dec. 6 - The Jewish Calendar and Jewish Identity - Ex.12-13; Lev. 23;
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?

Class 14 – Thurs Dec. 8 - 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.

Week 8:

Class 15– Tues Dec. 13 - Chanukah and its themes; Books of the Maccabees and Hellenism. The issues of assimilation and intermarriage.

The Jewish Way: Shabbat, Kashrut and Marriage

Week 9:

Class 16 – Thurs Dec 15 - Halakhah: the Jewish Way. Shabbat, a memorial of Creation and Exodus. The Law as the essence of Judaism. Kashrut (the dietary laws) as expressions of the partnership between God and the Jewish people.

Class 16 – Tues Dec 20 – 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



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.
- Cahill, Thomas. The Gifts of the Jews, 1998.
- 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
- Zornberg, Avivah. Genesis: The Beginning of Desire (1995)

Course Readings and/or Required Materials

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



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 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.*

Cumulative Final Paper Assignment for The Essence of Judaism – 35%

Length: 6-8 pages, double-spaced; plus Bibliography

Instructions: Choose **ONE biblical story**, **ONE holiday** from the Jewish calendar, and **ONE of the 3 halakhic observances (laws)** that structure Jewish life (Shabbat, *Kashrut*, or the Family Purity laws), and describe the following:

- 1) how the ideas, texts or practices of each of your 3 choices teach us something important about the essence of Judaism. Each of the three parts of the paper should conclude with a summarizing paragraph defining this essence.
- 2) how the story, holiday and law you have chosen each helps explain the survival and success of Judaism;
- 3) your personal response (of any kind, positive or negative) to the ideas, texts and practices you have chosen to write about.

Make use of readings and texts on the site and/or those studied in class to illustrate and support your explanations and include a Bibliography of what you read to write the paper.

Failing to do any of the three elements listed above will lower your grade.



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 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](#).

