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2022

### Introduction to Jewish Life and Religion

Dimitry Ekshtut  
*CUNY City College*

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**Jewish Studies 10000**  
**Introduction to Jewish Life and Religion**  
**The City College of New York, Fall 2022**

**Mondays and Wednesdays, 2pm - 3:15pm**

**Room: NAC 6/311**

**Prof. Dimitry Ekshtut**

**Contact: [dekshtut@gmail.com](mailto:dekshtut@gmail.com)**

**Office: NAC 5/202. Office Phone: 212-650-6790**

**Office Hours: Virtual, by appointment**

**Zoom: Meeting ID - 865 9782 3008 Passcode - 288005**

**Course Description:**

This course will provide an overview and introduction to the core aspects of the religious practice, theology, culture, identity, and global history of the Jewish people.

In a 1898 Harper's Magazine essay entitled "Concerning The Jews", Mark Twain famously opined: "All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" What compelled Twain to make such a startling claim, particularly at a time of increased Jewish persecution in Europe? We will unpack this question by examining the rich, varied, and extensive history of the Jewish people through an interdisciplinary lens, with a focus on the stories Jews tell about themselves and the effect these stories have had not only on the Jews, but on the entire world.

**Essential Questions:**

- How does one define a Jew, exactly?
- Is Judaism a people, an ethnicity, a religion, a culture and society, a land, all, some, or none?
- How has Judaism changed and adapted over time, and how has it stayed the same?
- What contributions have Judaism and the Jewish people made to humanity's spiritual, intellectual-philosophical, and socio-political understanding?
- What innovations allowed Judaism to develop a "semi-permeable membrane" and become a "portable" religious culture, able to not only withstand but flourish under the duress of millenia of exile, diaspora, and persecution?

**Texts/Readings**

All readings and materials for this class will be provided to you free of charge and posted on Blackboard. If you would like to have your own physical copy, I encourage you to purchase "Jewish Literacy" by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, as that will be our most frequently-used text.

- Primary and Traditional Sources: Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, etc.
  - Accessible via [www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org) (I will teach you how to use this website)
- Becher, Mordechai. *Gateway to Judaism: The What, How, and Why of Jewish Life*. New York: Mesorah Publications, 2005.

- Greenberg, Irving. *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*. New York: Touchstone, 1993.
- Luzzatto, Moshe Chaim. *Derech Hashem / The Way of God*. Jerusalem, Israel: Feldheim Publishers: 1997 (originally published in 1730s-40s)
- Telushkin, Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People and Its History*. New York: William Morrow, 2008 (revised edition).
- Telushkin, Joseph. *Biblical Literacy: The Most Important People, Events, and Ideas of the Hebrew Bible*. New York: William Morrow, 2002.
- Weiss, Avraham. *Holistic Prayer: A Guide to Jewish Spirituality*. New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2014.

### **Assignments and Grade Breakdown:**

10% Class Participation  
 30% Reading Responses  
 20% Fieldwork Reflection Paper  
 20% Midterm  
 20% Final

**Note:** All assignments, readings, announcements, and other class materials will be posted on Blackboard. **Please check your email and Blackboard regularly for updates.** If you have questions regarding assignments, need additional support, etc., **please contact me in a timely manner** so that I can adequately assist you.

**Late Submission Policy:** 80% max for one day late (24 hrs), then 10% lower each subsequent day. You can hand in an assignment any time after it is due for no less than half credit.

### **Readings and Reading Responses:**

- In order to be prepared to discuss and ask questions during class, all assigned readings should be completed **ahead of the date they are assigned**. Reading responses are **due by class time** on the day they are assigned.
- You will submit **3 "thick" questions** you have regarding the reading/viewing for each class. They can be **curiosity questions, clarity questions, challenge questions** pushing back on the text or assumptions held by it, or any other kind of question you think is **worth asking**.
- Your questions should clearly indicate to me that you have: 1) **done the reading**, and 2) **thought deeply** about the material. **Focus on analysis**, not summary, and demonstrate your ability to **think critically** about the material. You may put readings in conversation with other readings, things we've discussed in class, your own lived experience, etc.
- **Explain, reference, or cite** a portion of the reading/viewing to strengthen, support, or build your questions. You may also want to provide potential answers or guesses.
- Pay careful attention to the **formatting and style guide** for assignments on Blackboard
- I reserve the right to amend the homework policy on a case-by-case basis.
- At the end of the semester, I will drop your lowest reading response grade. Grades for missing assignments are not eligible to be dropped.

**Fieldwork and Reflection Paper:**

At some point during the semester, all students are expected to **attend at least one Jewish religious or cultural function and write a reflection paper** with observations and insights into the experience. I will coordinate one or two group outings (likely on Shabbat - Friday evening or Saturday morning/afternoon), and you are welcome to join us in order to fulfill your fieldwork requirement. Alternatively, you may organize your own individual or group trips, and I will provide you with a list of Jewish spaces, synagogues, community centers, etc. that you can contact independently. Either way, please communicate your plan with me at least one week ahead of time. **Any individual plans will require my prior approval**. You are welcome to either take the role of uninvolved observer or active participant - the choice is up to you.

I encourage you to wait until we begin our 3rd unit on "Jewish Religious Practices" before embarking on your fieldwork.

**Midterm and Final:**

Our two summative assignments - the Midterm and Final - will ask you to demonstrate in written form a thorough understanding of the material we have covered thus far, as well as show your developing thinking on the ongoing themes and essential questions of this course. Both assignments will be completed outside of class time and due at the start of class on 10/24 (Midterm) and 12/12 (Final). More specific instructions, including length, formatting, etc. will be provided as we approach these dates.

**Attendance:**

Students are expected to attend every class session and be on time. Plan to arrive at least 5 minutes before class time so you are able to get yourself set up to learn.

As per CCNY policy, more than 4 absences will result in a failing grade for this course. Two late arrivals count as one absence. Please be on time. Regular lateness or absence will negatively impact your learning and your grade. If you know that you will be late or absent, please email me ahead of time. If you have an unexpected absence, please email me before our next class.

**Plagiarism and Academic Integrity:**

*"Those who cite their sources bring redemption to the world"* (Talmud, Megillah 15a)

Please be sure to properly cite all sources in written work you submit. Accidental plagiarism will result in a failing grade for that assignment and a warning. Intentional plagiarism will result in an automatic drop from this class and potential further consequences. If you need assistance with citation conventions, the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#) is a great resource.

Extra Credit: You may submit the citations and a brief explanation/context for all the quoted verses or excerpts in the course schedule as an extra credit assignment.

### **Support, Accessibility, Questions, and Feedback:**

I highly encourage you to utilize the following CCNY resources that are available to you, should you need them:

**The Writing Center** at the Samuel Rudin Academic Resource Center, Upper NAC Plaza. Hours: M-TH 10am - 5pm, F 10am - 4pm. Appointments can be made online at [www.ccny.cuny.edu/writing](http://www.ccny.cuny.edu/writing) or by calling the office at 212-650-8014.

Appropriate and reasonable academic accommodations are offered for students, and I encourage you to reach out to the **AccessAbility Center** to learn more and to determine which services may be appropriate for you. The AccessAbility Center is located in the NAC, Rm. 1/218. Tel: (212) 650-5913. <https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/accessability>

Students who find themselves experiencing difficulties obtaining food every day or who lack a stable and safe place to live are urged to come to **Benny's pantry** for assistance (<https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/bennysfoodpantry>). Benny's pantry is located on the ground floor of the North Academic Center (NAC) and is open to anyone within the CUNY community (students, staff, faculty) in need of support. The pantry is open from 10am to 6pm and is self-serve. Additional emergency support for financial, health and housing needs are also available through Benny's. Please contact Dee Dee Mozeleski at [dmozeleski@ccny.CUNY.edu](mailto:dmozeleski@ccny.CUNY.edu) or Charles Ramirez at [cramirez@ccny.CUNY.edu](mailto:cramirez@ccny.CUNY.edu) for additional details.

For a **complete list of student support services**:

<https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/academics/support>

You can also of course **contact me at any time with questions or feedback**. I am available by email as well as for virtual office hours by appointment. Feel free to reach out at any time, but please note that I am not able to respond to you during Shabbat and Jewish Holidays.

Additionally, if you would prefer to leave any **anonymous questions or feedback** for me, you may do so [here](#).

*Lastly, if anything comes up for you during our time together that is preventing you from being the best learner you can be, please let me know privately and I will do my best to accommodate you. I encourage you to communicate proactively with me and advocate for yourself.*

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

*(subject to change based on the needs of the class)*

<b>I. A Bird's Eye View of Judaism and the Jewish People</b>	
Mon 8/29	Intro to "Intro to Jewish Life and Religion"
Wed 8/31	"These are the Generations " - A Brief History of Judaism and the Jewish People
Mon 9/5	<b>NO CLASS (Labor Day)</b>
Wed 9/7	"From the Four Corners of the Earth" - The Diversity of World Jewry
<b>II. Jewish Religious Culture and Beliefs</b>	
Mon 9/12	"But My Face You Cannot See" - God According to the Jews
Wed 9/14	"In the Beginning" - Creation and its Implications
Mon 9/19	"Go For Yourself" - Patriarchs and Matriarchs
Wed 9/21	"A Pillar of Cloud by Day and a Pillar of Fire by Night" - Moses, Exodus, and Divine Revelation
Mon 9/26	<b>NO CLASS (Rosh Hashana)</b>
Wed 9/28	"A Tree of Life" - The Torah and <i>Mitzvot</i> (Commandments)
<b>Thurs 9/29</b>	"Both These and These are the Words of the Living G-d" - Oral Law and the Talmud <b>(THURSDAY on a MONDAY SCHEDULE)</b>
Mon 10/3	"Two Jews, Three Opinions" - <i>Halacha</i> (Jewish Religious Law and Legal Traditions)
Wed 10/5	<b>NO CLASS (Yom Kippur)</b>
Mon 10/10	<b>NO CLASS (Columbus Day / Indigenous Peoples' Day / Sukkot)</b>
Wed 10/12	"A Divine Spark" - The Soul, Humanity's Mission in the World, and the Afterlife
Mon 10/17	"Four Entered the Orchard" - Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah
Wed 10/19	"The Holy Tongue" - The Hebrew Alphabet and its Mystical Significance
<b>III. Jewish Religious Practices</b>	
Mon 10/24	"Seventy Faces of the Torah" - Jewish Denominations and Sects <b>TAKE-HOME MIDTERM due at beginning of class</b>

Wed 10/26	"You Shall Separate Between the Clean and the Unclean" - <i>Kashrut</i> (Jewish Dietary Laws and Practices)
Mon 10/31	"Bind Them as a Sign" - Ritual Objects: <i>Tefillin</i> (phylacteries), <i>Tzitzit</i> (fringes) and <i>Tallit</i> (prayer shawl), <i>Mezuzah</i> , <i>Sefer Torah</i> (Torah scroll)
Wed 11/2	"Open my Lips" - Prayer: How, When, Where, Who, and Why
Mon 11/7	"A Miniature Temple" - The Synagogue
Wed 11/9	"A Sanctuary in Time" - The Sabbath
Mon 11/14	"And You Shall Rejoice in Your Festivals" - Pt. 1: Biblical Holidays and Festivals
Wed 11/16	"And You Shall Rejoice in Your Festivals" - Pt. 2: Rabbinic Holidays, Fast Days, "Modern" Holidays
Mon 11/21	"Inscribed and Sealed in the Book of Life" - The High Holidays: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
Wed 11/23	"For Everything There is a Season" - Jewish Life Cycles: Birth, Circumcision, Rites of Passage, Marriage, Conversion, Death and Mourning
Mon 11/28	"This Too is Torah!" - Judaism's Sexual Ethic
<b>IV. Judaism and the World</b>	
Wed 11/30	"Do Jews Have Horns?" - Myths, Misconceptions, and Antisemitism
Mon 12/5	"G-d on Trial" - The <i>Shoah</i> (Holocaust)
Wed 12/7	"Like Dreamers" - Zionism and Israel
Mon 12/12	<b>LAST DAY / FINAL EXAM due at beginning of class</b>