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The Jews of Harlem

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CUNY City College

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Jewish Studies 31919 & Black Studies 31959
The Jews of Harlem
The City College of New York, Spring 2023

Mondays and Wednesdays 3:30pm - 4:45pm

Room: NAC 7/306

Prof. Dimitry Ekshtut

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

Office Hours: Virtual, by appointment

Course Description:

For a brief moment in time, Harlem's once-bustling Jewish community laid claim to being the third-largest in the world (after Warsaw, Poland and Manhattan's Lower East Side, respectively), peaking at 175,000 souls in 1917. But just a decade later, the hundreds of synagogues, educational and cultural institutions, the Yiddish heard wafting from the streets, and most other palpable signs of Jewish presence were muted to a near-whisper of its once-mighty roar. A different wave of migrants would soon enter the neighborhood - primarily Black Americans seeking a respite from the racial disenfranchisement of both "downtown" and the American South. Harlem instead became etched in the collective psyche of the American consciousness as the mecca of Black culture, and while a scattered remnant of Jewish inhabitation remained, Harlem would never again rise to the heights of prominence in the Jewish world that it once entertained. Yet today, over a century later, Jewish life is experiencing a resurgence in Harlem that no demographer, parishioner, or casual observer could have easily predicted, with significant implications for all the residents of this storied neighborhood.

The story of the Jews of Harlem is the tale of the American Jewish experience and the broader American immigrant experience in microcosm. We will go on a fascinating cross-disciplinary journey touching on a seemingly unlikely mix of Jewish, African-American, Latino, and New York City history, the American history of immigration, migration, assimilation, and urbanization, and the social, cultural, political, and religious lenses from which to examine them, all with an eye toward the present-day status of life in Harlem both for its Jewish and non-Jewish residents.

Essential Questions:

- What prevailing socio-economic pressures encouraged Jewish migration to Harlem, necessitated a Jewish exodus out of Harlem, and are now at work again in the 21st century as drivers of Jewish re-engagement with this long-forgotten Jewish community?
- In what ways has Harlem served as a laboratory for innovation and experimentation in Jewish life?
- How did the tensions between old and new residents of Harlem (older immigrants / newer immigrants, Jews / non-Jews) create both challenges and opportunities?
- What lessons can today's Harlem residents, both Jew and non-Jew alike, take from the winding history of Harlem's Jewish heyday as they collectively chart a course for the future of this neighborhood?

Texts/Readings

All readings and materials for this class will be provided to you free of charge and posted on Blackboard. I encourage you to have your own copy of **Jeffrey Gurock's "The Jews of Harlem"**, as that will be our most frequently used text.

- Gill, Jonathan. *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America*. New York, Grove Press, 2011.
- Gurock, Jeffrey S. *The Jews of Harlem: The Rise, Decline, and Revival of a Jewish Community*. New York: NYU Press, 2016.
- Gurock, Jeffrey S. *When Harlem Was Jewish, 1870–1930*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.
- Kahan, Abraham. *The Rise of David Levinsky*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917
- Moore, Deborah Dash. *Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Assignments and Grade Breakdown:

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

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 or an extension, 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 more than half credit.

Homework and Quizzes

Mondays - Reading Response HW due before start of class

Wednesdays - Short In-Person HW Quiz within first 5 minutes of class

- If you come late or are absent and miss it, you will make it up by submitting a reading response by 2pm Thursday (the next day)

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" responses (at least 1 of which must be a question)** to 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 responses 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 responses. You may also want to provide potential answers or guesses to questions you pose.
- **Pay careful attention to the formatting and style guide for assignments**
- 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 Harlem-based 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 a weekend), 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.

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 are due on 3/17 (Midterm) and 5/15 (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. 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.

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 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 or Charles Ramirez at 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.

JWST 31919 & BLST 31959 - COURSE SCHEDULE

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

I. Harlem's Origins		
Wed 1/25	#1	Intro to "The Jews of Harlem"
Mon 1/30	#2	Harlem's Jewish Heyday: A Glimpse Into the World's 3rd Largest Jewish Community
Wed 2/1	#3	"A Village on the Outskirts of the City": A Brief History and Overview of Harlem
Mon 2/6	#4	Ghetto: The Lower East Side and Jewish New York of the late 19th - early 20th centuries
Wed 2/8	#5	A Public Transportation Revolution Creates a Lifeline and an Opportunity: The "El" Trains (1879) and the NYC Subway (1904)
Mon 2/13 - NO CLASS		
II. When Harlem Was Jewish (1870-1920)		
Wed 2/15	#6	Harlem's 1st Jewish Wave: When Harlem Was German (1870 -1900) - Pt. 1
Mon 2/20 - NO CLASS (Presidents' Day)		
Tues 2/21	#7	Harlem's 1st Jewish Wave: When Harlem Was German (1870 -1900) - Pt. 2 (TUESDAY on a MONDAY SCHEDULE)
Wed 2/22	#8	Harlem's 2nd Jewish Wave: Eastern European Migration (1890 - 1920) - Pt. 1
Mon 2/27	#9	Harlem's 2nd Jewish Wave: Eastern European Migration (1890 - 1920) - Pt. 2
Wed 3/1	#10	East and Central Harlem: Economic, Religious, and Social Divisions Make for Two Distinct Jewish Neighborhoods
Mon 3/6	#11	The Synagogues of Harlem: Pt. 1 - A Laboratory for Experimentation and Innovation
Wed 3/8	#12	The Synagogues of Harlem: Pt. 2 - Schisms and Splinters; Then and Now
Mon 3/13	#13	From <i>Cheider</i> to "Jewish Harvard": Educational Opportunities for Jews in Harlem
III. Harlem's Jews on the World's Stage: Music, Theater, and the Arts		
Wed 3/15	#14	Live at the Apollo! Jews as Harlem Nightlife Moguls and Mediators of Black Culture TAKE-HOME MIDTERM due at 5pm Fri 3/17
Mon 3/20	#15	Jews and Jazz: Harlem's Joint Black-Jewish Musical Culture

Wed 3/22	#16	Entrepreneurs, Integrators, Appropriators, and Abstainers: Famous Jews of Harlem
IV. From 175,000 to just 5,000: The “End” of Jewish Harlem (1921-1930)		
Mon 3/27	#17	Black Migration to Harlem in the Early 1900s: Catalysts, Tensions and Alliances
Wed 3/29	#18	World War I, Overcrowding, NYC Housing Crisis, and Landlord Neglect (1915 - 1920)
Mon 4/3	#19	Jews and Jewish Institutional Life Migrates out of Harlem: Intra-city Relocation and Escape to the “Suburbs”
Wed 4/5, Mon 4/10, Wed 4/12 - NO CLASS (Spring Recess / Passover)		
V. Apart Together: Harlem’s Jews and their Black and Latino Neighbors (1910-1945)		
Mon 4/17	#20	Jews in Harlem’s Black and Latino Enclaves (1910-1930)
Wed 4/19	#21	The Black Jews of Harlem
Mon 4/24	#22	Blumstein’s, and Other Complex Tales of Harlem’s Black-Jewish Economic Relations
VI. Harlem’s Nadir and Resurgence (1945-2000)		
Wed 4/26	#23	A Neglected Community: The Disintegration of Harlem
Mon 5/1	#24	“Who’s Harlem Is It?” Inter-Community Tensions Simmer
Wed 5/3	#25	Harlem’s Jewish History Repeats Itself
VII. Contemporary Jewish Life in Harlem (2000-Present)		
Mon 5/8	#26	JCC Harlem and Its Partners: A Major Investment in Responsible Placemaking
Wed 5/10	#27	Flowering Experiments in Harlem’s Jewish Life Today
Mon 5/15	#28	LAST DAY / FINAL EXAM due at beginning of class