Introduction to Rabbinic Literature

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Summary:
This course is an introduction to the history and culture of Rabbinic Judaism as can be seen through its literature. To the uninitiated rabbinic literature can appear odd in its language, structure and format. This course will provide a framework through which the material can be accessed and understood. We will work through the varieties of rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Tosefta, Targum, Midrash, and Talmuds) in addition to briefly addressing mystical and magical traditions as well as material evidence.

This class assumes an introductory-level course in either Hebrew Bible or in Jewish Studies.

Course Goals:
• Students will gain a familiarity with the various genres of rabbinic literature
• Students will develop skills for close and critical reading of primary source texts
• Students will understand the historical and cultural milieu from which the varieties of rabbinic literature arose
• Students will develop confidence in approaching unfamiliar rabbinic material
• Students will gain familiarity with the major personalities from rabbinic literature
• Students will hone analytical writing skills through close readings and comparisons of texts

Required Texts:
• The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature, edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (henceforth Fonrobert & Jaffee). This collection of articles
serves as a more advanced introduction to the material we will be covering in class. This book also contains a brief but useful glossary and rabbinic literature timeline.


- Each student should have access to a Hebrew Bible/Tanakh in English. While the choice of which bible/translation is up to the individual student, I recommend The Jewish Study Bible. You may use online bible translations, just be sure to have access to the assigned texts during class time, whether from a print-up or online.

- Other materials to be handed out in class or via WebCT.

## Course Requirements and Grading

### Evaluation

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1. **Attendance and Participation**

   Attendance and participation are a necessary part of learning in this course. Students are expected to attend each class session. *Since this course will be conducted as a discussion, absence from class will count against you.* Participation will be marked based on engagement during class, and you will also be asked to periodically respond to classmates’ reflection papers on WebCT.

2. **Quizzes** (total: 6; lowest grade dropped)

   In lieu of a mid-term examination, 6 quizzes will be given throughout the semester. The quizzes are meant to test your knowledge of basic vocabulary, names, geography, and concepts for each major section of the class. The quizzes will not be cumulative in nature. The lowest quiz grade will be dropped.

3. **Reflection Papers** (weekly)

   You will post weekly reflection papers reflecting on the primary sources which we are reading for class. While these reflections are informal, they will be posted on WebCt, visible to me and to the entire class. Reflections should be around 600 words, and should engage with the primary sources on the level of close-reading. They may also reflect on difficulties in the text (although this is not simply a place to complain about not understanding the reading). Note that these must be posted before class begins, and may be used to assist in reading and/or discussing concepts during class.

4. **Research Paper**

   The research paper is your opportunity to explore a specific topic of interest. It should critically examine the historical, social, conceptual or religious dimension of a specific topic that has been
addressed in class or in the readings. Alternate topics are possible but need to be approved by the instructor. Papers should utilize at least 4 academic resources; Wikipedia is not an academic resource, and while it may be a good place to begin your research, if you choose to use it, it should only serve as a starting point. Papers should be 5-6 pages in length, typed, double-spaced, 12-point font with 1-inch margins. You do not need a cover page; however, be sure you include a title and your name at the top of your paper.

5. Final Exam
The final examination will be cumulative and will be split into two separate areas: identification (ID) and short essays. For the IDs, you will be asked to give brief 2-3 sentence answers in order to identify the name, term, geography or concept. In short, this section is a review of the quizzes from the semester, and the terms for the quizzes will serve as a study guide. The short essays will require you to analyze rather than just repeat the information you have learning during the semester, and will combine material from the readings and lectures.

The final exam will take place during the Finals week as per school regulations.

Course Outline:

Introduction & History

Class 1: Class Introduction; Syllabus; Overview of basic historical background, sources and themes.

Selections from the McMillan Bible Atlas.

Class 2: Overview of basic historical background, sources and themes (cont)


Class 3: Issues of Orality, review of basic historical background, sources and themes (cont)

**Readings:** Strack & Stemberger, “Oral and Written Tradition,” p. 31-44; Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, “The Orality of Rabbinic Writing,” pages 38-57 in Fonrobert & Jaffee

Targum

Classes 4&5:

**Quiz:** Terminology, Time line, and Map Identification

**Readings:** Avigdor Shinan, “The Late Midrashic, Paytanic, and Targumic Literature,” pages 1-21 in *The Cambridge History of Judaism Vol. 4*. Edited by Steven T. Katz, with special emphasis to the sections on “Targum”; Handouts (given and reviewed in class) on Targumic interpretation.

Midrash
Classes 6 & 7: Introduction to Midrash

**Quiz:** Terms and Concepts from Targum


Class 8: Aggadic Midrashim: The Akedah

**Readings:** Strack & Stemberger 276-282. Gen 22; Gen. Rab. 55:2; 4, 7; 56:2 (last paragraph), 3-4, 7-9 (first paragraph).

Class 9: Midrash Halakha: The Decalogue

**Readings:** Selections from “The Halakhic Midrashim” in Strack & Stemberger, pages 247-256. Exodus 20:1-14; Deuteronomy 5; Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bahodesh 6-7.

**Mishnah and Tosefta**

Classes 10 & 11: Origin of the Mishnah

**Quiz:** Terms and Concepts from Midrash


Class 12: The Shema in the Mishnah


Class 13: Tosefta and its relationship to the Mishnah


**The Talmuds (Palestinian and Babylonian)**

Class 14: The Two Talmuds

**Quiz:** Terms and Concepts from Mishnah and Tosefta


Classes 15 & 16: Rabbinic Academies

**Readings:** Jeffrey Rubenstein, “The Rabbinic Academy,” Pages 16-38 in The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud. BT Ber 27b-28a; PT Sanh 1:2, 19a; BT Ber 63a.
Classes 17 & 18: “The Oven of Akhnai”

**Readings:** BT Baba Metzia 59a-59b; Jeffrey Rubenstein *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* p. 34-63.

Classes 19 & 20: The Destruction of Jerusalem

**Readings:** Reread Mishnah *Avot* 1-2; BT *Gittin* 55b-56b, Josephus *Judean War* 2.408-416; 3.340-408; 3.455-461; Selections from Lamentations Rabbah (to be handed out in class); Jeffrey Rubenstein *Talmud Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* p. 139-175.

Classes 21 & 22: Women in the BT


**Non-Traditional Forms of Rabbinic Material**

Classes 23 & 24: Material Evidence: Archaeology & art in the ancient synagogue

**Quiz:** Terms and Concepts from the Talmud section

**Readings:** Selections from Lee I. Levine *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years.* Powerpoint with images.

Class 25: Ancient Jewish Mysticism: the story of the four rabbis and beyond

**Readings:** Michael D. Swartz, “Jewish Visionary Tradition in Rabbinic Literature,” pages 198-221 in Fonrobert & Jaffee. Ezekiel 1-3; T. Hagigah 2:3; selections from *Hekhalot Rabbati*.

**Conclusions**

Class 26: Conclusions and Course wrap-up

**Quiz:** Terms and Concepts from non-traditional forms of Rabbinic material

Completion of all assigned reading in preparation for class discussion is essential to successful completion of this course, and class attendance is required.
**Brief Annotations of Primary Sources Used for this Class**
Not for distribution among students

**Mishnah Avot 1:1-18**
Lists the transmission of the Law from Moses on Sinai through to the first generation tanna Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel. Also includes teachings from various sages listed.

**Deut. 6:4-8, 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41**
These texts combined create the texts of the Shema as derived from the Hebrew bible.

**Mishnah Berakhot 1:1-3**
A discussion of the times when the Shema may be recited in the evening and the morning. Also includes why Hillel should be followed in that one should not recline to say the Shema in the evening.

**Comparison of Mishnahs and Toseftas:**

mPes 10:2 and tPisha 10:2
These texts describe the first cup of wine at the Seder. The Tosefta adds reasons for the differences between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel.

mPes 10:8 and tPisha 10:11a
Revelry should not take place after the Seder; Tosefta adds that specific foods should not be eaten.

mAZ 2:2a and tAZ 3:4
Using pagan neighbors for business is okay, but not for medical purposes. Tosefta gives an example as to why this is not okay (ie pagan women are not to be trusted in fertility issues in relation to Israelite women).

mAZ 1:1-2 and tAZ 1:1
A discussion of when to refrain from doing business with pagans in relation to their festivals. The Mishnah limits this to three days before and after, with the sages arguing it is only three days before. The Tosefta here refers back to the Mishnah, but limits it to one day before (only state) holidays. It is further expanded upon that non-state holidays are only prohibited on the day of a festival. The Tosefta then discusses what kinds of goods and the relation of the halakhah to contracts.

mAZ 1:9 and tAZ 2:9
Israelites may not rent their houses or bathhouses to pagans. The Mishnah includes a prooftext from Deut 7:26. The Tosefta states that it is okay to rent stables, storehouses and inns to a pagan.

**Gen 22**
The Akedah

**Gen. Rabbah (based on Gen 22)**
55:2 Only that of good quality is tested; ie the potter only tests the sound vessels, the flax worker beats the flax of good quality; thus the Lord test Abraham. Based around Ps 11:5.
55:4 Abraham has not set aside any offering to God; God argues that even if he were to ask Abraham to offer his son, he would. 2nd paragraph focuses on the argument between Ishmael and
Isaac, where Ishmael argues that he was circumcised at 13 and did not refuse, but Isaac, as an 8-day old, did not have a choice, thus Isaac asks for an opportunity to prove his love.

55:7 An extended discussion of Gen 22:2. First of God leading up to telling Abraham to take Isaac – an explanation for the many words used in the command from Gen 22:2. A break down of the origin of the name “Moriah” follows, leading to a question of whether a burnt-offering can be made without a priest, and then of God leading Abraham without specifics (ie “upon one of the mountains I will show you”).

56:2 (last paragraph) Isaac will return with Abraham, since they are going to worship (Gen 22:5). A discussion ensues showing that redemption happens through worship.

56:3 Abraham carried the wood of the burnt-offering like a criminal carries the stake for his own execution. The derivative of the 'ma'akeleth' (knife) and its relation to the redemption of Israel.

56:4 Samuel the wicked angel questions Abraham's willingness to slay his son, and Isaac's willingness to go along with it. A parallel is made to Job 4:2.

56:7 A discussion of the breakdown of Gen 22:12: the angel's tears dissolved the knife and Abraham, in his faithfulness, wishes to at least draw blood to show his obedience, but the angel argues that his willingness is enough to show that he has not withheld.

56:8 Isaac's request to be bound in order that he would not tremble as the sacrifice.

56:9 (first paragraph) A discussion of Gen 22:13, with Abraham seeing the ram. Just as Abraham saw the ram, so too will Israel be saved via a ram's horn (Zech 9:14). There is a hint of messianic expectation here with the play on the word achar in the verse from Genesis.

Exodus 20:1-14; Deuteronomy 5
The Decalogue.

Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bahodesh 6-7
Bahodesh 6: Midrashic explanation of Ex. 20:3-6. Begins with a mashal about an how it is like an earthly king who wants them to both accept his reign and his decrees. The text goes on to expand upon each part of the biblical text.

Bahodesh 7: Midrashic explanation of Ex 20:7-11.

BT Ber 27b-28a
The rabbis depose of Rabban Gamliel, and thus end his policy which restricts entry into the academy. Thus either 400 or 800 rows are added.

PT Sanh 1:2, 19a
Palestinian rabbis attempt to show that the Babylonian rabbis are in error by intentionally misreading the Torah and haftarah. Isa 2:3 is used as a proof text to show that the Palestinians are correct and the Babylonians are incorrect. This situation seems to take place in a synagogue.

BT Ber 63a
The Palestinian rabbis here do not read scripture but quote rulings in an academy setting, against the Babylonian rabbis. Isa 2:3 is still kept as a proof text.

BT Baba Metzia 59a-59b
The story of the oven of 'Aknai' which asserts that rule of the majority, but also that the sages have authority over God.

BT Gittin 55b-56b
A description of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai leaving Jerusalem during the Roman siege of the city, and his proclamation of Vespasian as emperor.

*Josephus* *Judean War* 2.408-416; 3.340-408
How the war began; Josephus's role in the war, his capture, and his proclamation of Vespasian as emperor.

*BT Ketubot* 62a-63b
A discussion of rabbis who spend time away from home in order to study Torah and thus the difficulty concerning the heavy emphasis on Torah study in comparison to the relationship with the sages' wives and home situation.

*Ezekiel* 1-3
Ezekiel's vision of the chariot of God. Ezekiel's commission as prophet.

*T. Hagigah* 2:3
The description of the four who entered “Pardes” and what happened to them.