Course Description

To study parshanut is to join an enduring, multivalent, polyvocal conversation about the meaning of the Torah. Building upon rabbinic modes of interpretation, medieval Jews innovated new ways of reading the Torah text; this course will examine the contexts, methods, sources, and impact of their foundational commentaries, recorded on the pages of Miqraʾot Gedolot. Through the in-depth study of a selection of parshiyyot from Vayiqra, Bamidbar, and Devarim, students will emerge grounded in traditional methodology and prepared to engage knowledgeably and creatively in their own work interpreting the Torah text.

The course will focus on the development of different schools of interpretive methodologies; we will approach Miqraʾot Gedolot not as a unitary, disembodied text, but as one made up of distinct voices influenced by each commentator’s time, place, method, and, sometimes, by one another. As such, we will consider individual voices and regional conversations before moving, in the second half of the course, to a full intertextual dialogue. The texts that we study will take us from early Ashkenaz to “golden age” Sefarad and through to the close of the medieval period of the Rishonim—but also on a narrative progression through the complex parashot of the last generation of Israelites in the desert as they approach the Land of Israel and prepare to enter. Our study will culminate with a sustained unit on the strange story of Bilaʿam as interpreted by the great commentators, before turning briefly to the intriguing matters raised by the death of Moshe and ending with a consideration of the legacy of the commentators in modernity.

Throughout the course, we will probe the pathways by which the medieval Torah commentaries have been transmitted to us, asking questions about why and how they were written and used by their authors and first audiences, and what impact they have had on Jewish tradition. Students will have the opportunity to present their own commentary and supercommentary in three written derashot, as well as in a final project writing their own line commentary on a set of parshiyyot, in dialogue with classical mefarshim.

Course Objectives

1. To attain a familiarity with and deep understanding of the concerns, methodologies, and interpretations of (1) individual commentators, (2) schools of commentary, and (3) intertextual conversations;
2. To gain facility with the classical texts of Torah commentary, developing an individualized process for working through parshanut;
3. To contextualize the commentators historically and culturally and appreciate the textual and material problems presented by the study of premodern texts;
4. To culminate with the ability to contribute knowledgeably and creatively to traditional materials.

Course Expectations
You are, first and foremost, expected to be an active participant in your own learning and in the formation of a respectful, engaged discussion space in the classroom. This means that you should come to class prepared to discuss the assigned materials, as follows:

- You should be comfortable reading the Miqraʾ and able to explain it, i.e., what is the context, what is happening in the text?
- You should be able to identify potential issues in the Miqraʾ and suggest what the commentator(s) will address;
- You should be able to capably read and translate the commentary;
- You will have looked up any references you identify within the texts, such as other pesuqim cited in the text.
- You should have an idea to propose about the content of the commentary, e.g., what is Ibn Ezra getting at here?

Please note: This does not mean that you should be able to do all of the above flawlessly and without having any questions or doubts. Preparation means doing a careful, close reading of the material, a skill we will practice together and actively develop a process for in class. It means you will know, for the most part, what you’re unsure about on class day. Maybe you couldn’t find the midrash referenced (maybe you didn’t realize it was referenced), maybe you are unsure of the niqqud of that unfamiliar word, maybe you are stumped by an entire comment—not only is that okay, all of that is the reason we are working on this material! The idea is to have spent focused time with the text, so that you can bring these questions to class and get closer to the ideal presented in the bullet points above.

Texts
You may use any text of Miqraʾot Gedolot that you own or prefer, which will serve as our main text for the course. The commentaries we will be working on that are included most editions of Miqraʾot Gedolot are: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radaq, Ramban, Rashbam, Hizquni, and (just a little bit of) Seforno. These are usually standard, but if they are not included in your edition, please plan to get them on your own. (Not sure where/how? Ask me.) We will be working with a few other commentaries and rabbinic sources as well, and I will provide you with copies of these.

- Torat Hayyim (Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 7 vols.) can be purchased as a set on Amazon (usually quick-ship and at a competitive price, but worth checking) and online Judaica retailers. This is the edition I will be using, so if you prefer to follow along in the same text, you may wish to purchase this one.
• *Ha-Keter* (Bar-Ilan), a new, scholarly edition, covers not just the Humash, as does *Torat Hayyim*, but some of Na”Kh, with more volumes being currently produced. You can purchase volumes separately online (in US$) from Bar-Ilan University Press, in either small or large trim size: [http://www.biupress.co.il/website_en/index.asp?category=156](http://www.biupress.co.il/website_en/index.asp?category=156)

Please bring a print copy of the Miqra’ot Gedolot text with you to class with you for every meeting. You are welcome to bring a photocopy of the pages we are working on if you wish, for instance, if you want to refer to a different edition of Miqra’ot Gedolot than you own or if you don’t want to mark up your book. I encourage you to look at variant editions (including digital editions) while working on the text and do bring in and share interesting differences that you note.

**Secondary Source Readings**

These will be provided to you; refer to the course schedule for due dates.


Resources to have on hand:

- **A Tanakh:** I recommend using a Hebrew-only text (such as Koren) so that you are not distracted by the English translation; but any version of the JPS Tanakh (1999 revised text, the most recent) is a good study tool.

- **A Hebrew dictionary** that you are knowledgeable about and that works for you. For Hebrew/Aramaic-English, I recommend Jastrow for working with medieval commentators, and it'll work fine for most non-problematic words from the Miqra’ as well. The BDB (Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon) is the standard student reference (Heb-Eng) for Biblical Hebrew, but you may like to use or supplement with Even Shoshan (Heb-Heb), Alcalay (Heb-Eng), or others.

- **A dictionary of rashei teivot** (Hebrew abbreviations): most commonly, Otzar Rashei Tevot by Shmuel Ashkenazi and Dov Jarden, which is widely available at Judaica bookstores.

- **Encyclopedia Judaica:** Updated in 2007, this encyclopedia (not to be confused with the Jewish Encyclopedia in the public domain) should be your go-to for looking up accurate contextual information (e.g., the basic biographical outline of an unfamiliar figure).

We will go over these and additional resources available to you in your preparation for class, such as study tools for individual commentators and quality online sources.

**Assignments & Assessment**

Following is an overview of the assignments that students will receive as a way to practice skills, demonstrate mastery of the material--and, importantly, try out and contribute their own ideas. Assignment sheets with greater detail will be distributed well in advance of due dates, but for your reference, here is a brief description:

1. **Attendance, class preparation, and active participation (50%)**
   - Please refer to the bullet points in the “Course Expectations” section directly above for a detailed description of what class preparation means for our course. Active participation means ably reading, translating, and explaining the texts when called to do so; being prepared to knowledgeably add to others’ remarks; and being engaged in class discussions. Of course, for this you’ll need to be in attendance.

2. **Written Assignments (30%)**
   - Students will write three derashot (2-3 pp.).
     - For **Assignment 1**, students will write a derash incorporating and/or responding to a Rashi comment or comments from those we have studied together. **Due Feb. 12**.
     - For **Assignment 2**, students will write a derash in response to a devar Torah of their choosing: this can be a written piece, a shi’ur/podcast, or another source; the source should be identified, summarized, analyzed, and applied to your work. **Due Mar. 12**.
     - **Assignment 3** will be an original derash on a subject of your choosing, incorporating at least two commentaries. **Due Apr. 9**.

3. **Final Project (20%) – Due Wed., May 12**
For their final project, students will select a set of *parshiyot* to work on, in consultation with the instructor, and write their own line commentary on it, with reference to the classical *mefarshim* (approx. 5 pp.).

Please refer to the percentages as a reflection of the relative weight given to each area. This means that the effort that you put into weekly preparation and in-class discussion is really important, with room for exploration, mistakes, and learning.

**Policies & Attendance Requirements**

- **Attendance:** Missing more than two class meetings will result in a lowered grade, illness and emergencies excepted. If you will be absent from class, let me know as soon as possible.
- **Assignment Submission:** Written assignments are due in hard copy at the beginning of class on the day marked on the schedule.
- **Late Assignments:** Late assignments will be accepted only if arrangements are made beforehand, emergencies excepted. If you require an accommodation for an assignment or test date, the more time we have to work out an equitable solution, the more flexibility you can receive.
- **Office Hours:** By appointment, and I will generally be in the classroom before each meeting should you wish to drop in or go over any questions before class (but it’s always a good idea to confirm).
- **Email:** I’m available to you to answer any questions or concerns you may have via email and am usually able to respond quickly.
## Course Schedule

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 22</td>
<td>Introduction: What is (and is not) Parshanut? Forms, Methods, Sources, Transmission</td>
<td>Texts: In-class: Sa'adyah to Bereshit 3 Methodological comments (source sheet)</td>
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<td>Ashkenazic Approaches</td>
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<td>Jan. 29</td>
<td>Derash: Rashi</td>
<td>Shemini: Nadav and Avihu Texts: Rashi to Vayiqra 10 Reading: R. Harris, &quot;Jewish Biblical Exegesis from Its Beginning to the Twelfth Century&quot;</td>
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<td>Feb. 5</td>
<td>From Derash to Peshat: Rashi, Rashbam, Ḥizquni</td>
<td>Be-ha'alotekha: Miriam's Affliction Texts: Rashi to Bamidbar 12 Rashbam to Bamidbar 12 Ḥizquni to Bamidbar 12 Reading: E. Viezel, “The Secret of the Popularity of Rashi's Commentary on Torah”</td>
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<td>Sefaradic Approaches</td>
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*Assignment 1: Derash based on Rashi

*Assignment 2: Responsive derash*
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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mar. 19</td>
<td><strong>Miqraʾot Gedolot</strong>: Reading the Commentators Together</td>
<td><strong>Balag</strong>: Bilaʾam and Maʾaseh Peʾor (Bamidbar 22-24)</td>
<td><strong>Reading</strong>: R. Nikolsky, “Interpret Him as Much as You Want: Balaam in the Babylonian Talmud”</td>
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<td><strong>Miqraʾot Gedolot</strong>: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radaq, Ramban, Rashbam, Ḥizquni</td>
<td><strong>Texts</strong>: All commentators on Bamidbar 22</td>
<td><strong>Additional texts</strong>: Bamidbar 31:8, 16; Yehoshua 24:6; Micah 6:5; Avot 5:19; Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:3; Sifrei Devarim sec. 357, par. 40; Bava Batra 14b</td>
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<td>Mar. 26</td>
<td>Con’t.</td>
<td><strong>Balag</strong>: Bilaʾam and Maʾaseh Peʾor</td>
<td><strong>Reading</strong>: R. Nikolsky, “Interpret Him as Much as You Want: Balaam in the Babylonian Talmud”</td>
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<td>Con’t.</td>
<td><strong>Texts</strong>: All commentators on Bamidbar 22 (con’t.)</td>
<td><strong>Additional texts</strong>: Ramban, <em>Moreh ha-Nevukhim</em> II, 41</td>
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<td>Apr. 9</td>
<td>Con’t.</td>
<td><strong>Balag</strong>: Bilaʾam and Maʾaseh Peʾor</td>
<td><strong>Assignment 3</strong>: Original derash</td>
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<td>Con’t.</td>
<td><strong>Texts</strong>: All comments on Bamidbar 23 &amp; 24</td>
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<td>Apr. 16</td>
<td><strong>Textual Issues</strong>: Miqraʾot Gedolot</td>
<td><strong>Ve-Zot ha-Berakhah</strong>: The Death of Moshe</td>
<td><strong>Additional texts</strong>: Bava Batra 14b-15a</td>
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<td><strong>Texts</strong>: Ibn Ezra to Devarim 1:2 &amp; source sheet; all commentators to Devarim 34:5-12</td>
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<td>Conclusion</td>
<td><strong>Supercommentaries, the Early Moderns, and Modern Responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>Texts</strong>: Seferorno, Avi Ezer to Ibn Ezra, Reʾem to Rashi</td>
<td><strong>Reading</strong>: Simon, Uriel. “Interpreting the Interpreter: Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra’s Commentaries”</td>
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<td>Apr. 23</td>
<td><strong>Supercommentaries, the Early Moderns, and Modern Responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Torah: A Modern Commentary</strong>, rev. ed., ed. W. G. Plaut</td>
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<td>Apr. 30 – May 30: Reading Week</td>
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<td><strong>Final Paper</strong>: due Sun., May 6, via email by 11:59 p.m.</td>
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