Course Description

Jewish culture flourishes as an extended conversation about distinctive subjects rooted in core texts. As it unfolds in time, the conversation itself shapes the proverbial bookshelf of classic texts, adding and revising, changing focus, innovating, and ultimately recreating it. This course will examine these core texts—their contents, contexts, and significance—providing an engaged introduction to post-rabbinic Jewish thought, from the medieval through the modern periods. Importantly, we will be thinking together critically, throughout the course, about the bookshelf itself: what texts are included, and why. What is a “Jewish” text? How do we define a “classic”? The course will culminate with students nominating and presenting additions to the syllabus in accordance with their responses to these questions.

As this is an online course, we will be utilizing a variety of digital tools to learn, discuss, do close readings, present projects, and otherwise study together. Instructions for using all technologies will be posted on the course website.

Course Goals

Covering the period from the close of the rabbinic canon to the present day, Classics of the Jewish Tradition will introduce students to the most influential texts that have shaped Jewish culture, in a variety of genres and languages representative of the diversity of Jewish creativity. Through close reading of selected primary sources and a critical lens, we will consider the social, religious, and historical significance of the works treated in class against the background of the period in which they were written. Students will emerge with the content knowledge and analytical skills to respond meaningfully to the question of what defines a Jewish classic with reference to traditional answers to this foundational question.

Course Objectives

In this course, students will:

- Gain familiarity with key texts that shaped Jewish culture and approach them critically;
- Understand the historical, social, and cultural forces shaping a variety of genres and historical periods;
• Become prepared to approach the foundational texts of their chosen areas of study in historical context, as well as to consider critically the primary and secondary canonical texts of their respective fields;
• Articulate their own understanding of what constitutes a “classic” work in accordance with a wellconceptualized view of Jewish tradition.

Course Meeting Times & Procedure

Course website: https://jtsa.instructure.com/courses/1873

This online version of Classics of the Jewish Tradition aims to provide the most important aspects of face-to-face advanced humanities study, while also utilizing the transformative possibilities—and addressing the limitations—inherent in a digital environment. While allowing for self-pacing within each week’s material, an important part of this course is the interaction between the professor and students, and it is designed to allow for active participation.

The course is purposefully structured so that participation can be done asynchronously—students can access the materials and should be available to participate as convenient to them within the timeframe of the week. However, five optional synchronous discussions are tentatively planned (using Canvas) on the syllabus and highly encouraged, subject to scheduling after the start of class. In addition, live chat times are planned weekly and are available by appointment as well.

A traditional lecture course or seminar covers a number of activities, which are represented in this course as “modules.” Modules include:

- A prerecorded lecture;
- A reading guide;
- Readings (with group annotation);
- Discussion forums (guided by the professor); - A weekly response assignment.

Each week of the course has its own module, including an introductory and concluding module. Modules are organized into four units, and the course will emphasize connections within each unit. The course follows the JTS academic calendar, taking into account holidays and breaks.

Modules will be released on Fridays at 4 p.m. Eastern, with all assignments due by the following Friday at 4 p.m.

Assessment Strategies and Expectations

1. Class participation - 35% of final grade

In our online context, class participation consists of:
- Commenting on the unit discussion thread in Canvas;
- Annotating the readings in Kami (instructions below);
- Participating in optional group or one-on-one live text and/or video chats.

To be an active class participant, you should aim to create at least one original posting and respond in at least two substantive comments per weekly topic in the discussion, as well as annotating the reading.

2. Weekly Assignments - 35% of final grade

Weekly prompts for response will be posted on Friday and due the following Friday at 4 p.m. Eastern. Assignments will vary but include both analytical questions as well as creative prompts for you to respond to in approximately 500-700 words (1-2 typed pages).

3. Final Project - 30% of final grade

The final project will consist of a short paper (5-7 pages) arguing for the inclusion of an additional thinker/work to the canon of “classics” we have studied in the course, accompanied by a text sample annotated by the student (on Kami) and a presentation summarizing the argument. Presentations can be done on PowerPoint or using free software such as Voicethread and will be posted to the discussion board. Complete writing and technical instructions will be distributed at the midpoint of the course.

ePortfolio

Please collect your work in your ePortfolio, which you can access through your Canvas profile. You should include all “Assignments”—meaning, those files under the “Assignments” tab in Canvas, which can be easily added using the “course submissions” feature in your ePortfolio. You may include any other material you wish, and organize your ePortfolio as you like. While the course website itself will be closed after the end of the semester, your ePortfolio remains linked to your account and can also be downloaded as a zip file, which I highly recommend that you do at the conclusion of the course (I will send out a reminder). This file will serve as your notebook and annotated course reader, which you can refer back to in the future. ePortfolios may be made public, should you wish to share your work, or kept private, in which case you can share an access link with those you choose to send it to. If you choose to keep your portfolio private, please send me an access link by the last day of class (Monday, April 30) so that I can review your contribution.

Live Chat & Office Hours

I will hold virtual office hours on Fridays between 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Eastern Time during which I can be reached for live chat in Canvas (which you can easily access from the course homepage or side navigation, by clicking “Chat”). In addition, for those who would like to participate in a real-time conversation in the discussion board, I will be present and active on Canvas during this time as well. Participation is optional but encouraged!
In addition, you are welcome to schedule an appointment for a private conference outside of office hours. Please note that I am based in Los Angeles, CA (Pacific Time).

**Email Policy**

I am available by email ([TaMarvin@jtsa.edu](mailto:TaMarvin@jtsa.edu)) and will usually respond quickly within standard business hours, but always within 24 hours Sunday through Friday. To expedite a response, please indicate clearly what your message concerns in the subject line: for example, “Question re: Spinoza annotation assignment,” instead of “Question for you.” If your question is time sensitive, you can put that first in the subject line: for example, “Urgent: ongoing power outage” or “Time sensitive: Brief question re: topic change.”

**Required Readings**

All readings, detailed below, are provided within the Canvas course environment, within each module, where you can download the PDF or view it in the Canvas reader. Please note, however, that you are responsible for annotating the reading using (third-party) software called Kami, where you can also see, and respond to, others’ highlights and comments, including mine. Links to a PDF of the reading in Kami can be found as a weekly “Assignment.” Readings are also linked to Kami on the online syllabus.

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<th>Academic Integrity Statement</th>
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<td>Academic Integrity Statement: Students in this class are expected to maintain academic integrity and academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in this class. JTS Student Disciplinary Procedures can be found at <a href="http://www.jtsa.edu/About_JTS/Administration/Policies/Student_Disciplinary_Procedures.xml">http://www.jtsa.edu/About_JTS/Administration/Policies/Student_Disciplinary_Procedures.xml</a>. JTS students are expected to bear individual responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity and to uphold its ideals.</td>
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<td>JTS is committed to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The dean of the respective school in which the student is enrolled is the ADA/504 coordinator for the school. Each dean can be located in the office of the school. Students may check the website for the dean’s telephone number and email address. Any student claiming a disability and requesting an accommodation must identify himself or herself to the dean as soon as possible and must provide JTS with current and appropriate medical or diagnostic documentation of his/her disability before any accommodations can be considered. The documentation should include a release form to enable a JTS administrator to discuss, with the student’s doctor, the student’s disability and 1) its impact on the student’s ability to participate in JTS programs, 2) the nature of the recommended accommodations related to the specific disabling condition and 3) the duration of the disability. JTS will then discuss with the student what reasonable and appropriate accommodations can be made. In most cases involving learning disabilities, appropriate documentation should include adult-level assessment and the current status of learning skills and strategies.</td>
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Schedule of Topics

INTRODUCTION (Jan. 16-19)


I. EARLY MEDIEVAL FOUNDATIONS


   Reading: Samuel Rosenblatt, ed. and trans., *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (Yale University Press, 1948), 3-37, 186-204.


3. [Commentary] Rashi & the Tosafists, Commentary on the Talmud (Feb. 5-9)

   Reading: Rashi on Qiddushin 29a (time-bound commandments); Tosefot on Megillah 3a and Rashi on Arakhin 2a-3b (on women reading Megillat Esther), Koren ed.


   Unit I Group Live Discussion, Friday, Feb. 9, 12:00 noon ET (subject to group availability)

II. MEDIEVAL CLASSICS


5. [Commentary] Ramban, Torah Commentary (Feb. 19-23)

   Reading: Chaim Chavel, ed., Vol. 1, 3-16 (Introductory Verses); 17-25 (on Bereshit 1:1); 214-218 (on 17:1); 290-293 (on 24:1); and 586-593 (on 49:10).


III. EARLY MODERN DISRUPTIONS

   *Reading*: Shulhan ‘Arukh Shalem (Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim, 1994), sec. 453 [on kitniyot]  


Unit III Group Live Discussion, Friday, Mar. 23

IV. INTO MODERNITY

10. [Historiography] Shivhei ba-Besht (Mar. 26–29; Passover break)


   **Final project prospectus, including a list of sources and materials, due Friday, April 13.**

    *Reading*: Mishnah Berurah (Jerusalem: Pisgah, 1999), vol. 15, sec. 453 [on kitniyot] and vol. 8, sec. 244, par. 32-36 [an example of a stringent ruling].
Unit IV Group Live Discussion, Friday, Apr. 20


CONCLUSION (Apr. 30)

Concluding Group Live Discussion, Fri., Apr. 27

**Final project due by Sunday, May 6** [i.e., 11:59 p.m.]**