

# **Introduction to Judaism (HBRJD-UA 102)**

**New York University**

**Spring 2015**

**Professor David Ellenson**

## **Class Information:**

Days: T-Th

Times: 9:30-10:45

Office: KJCC 205

## **Contact Information:**

Email: dellenson787@nyu.edu

Class Location: Silver Center, Room 20

Office Hours: Tuesday, Thursday, 11-12, and Wednesday, 3-4

## **Course Description**

This class is intended as a basic introduction to Judaism – its history, beliefs, traditions, and ritual practices -- as a living religion from its roots in the biblical, intertestamental, rabbinic, and medieval periods until their appearance in the modern world. The course is open to students of all backgrounds and all levels of familiarity (or unfamiliarity) with Judaism.

Diverse data from various epochs in Jewish religious history will be drawn together in such a way that the student will be able to assess Jewish beliefs, institutions, and practices throughout the centuries. The aim here will not only be to indicate the seminal role that the Bible and rabbinic writings play in Judaism, but also to explore how these texts have been interpreted and applied over the centuries. Furthermore, continuity and discontinuity will be highlighted so that the student will gain an appreciation of how the Jewish religious tradition has evolved and grown in history.

## **Course Goals**

- To introduce students to the basic practices, beliefs, and history of Judaism.
- To study the historical development of Judaism through close study of texts.
- To encourage critical thinking about religion and Judaism.

## Required Texts

The Bible (Revised Standard Edition)

Michael Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*

Raymond Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*

Hayim Donin, *To Be a Jew*

Kerry Olitzky and Daniel Judson, *The Rituals and Practices of Jewish Life*

Milton Steinberg, *As a Driven Leaf*

## Reserve Texts

Other readings

## Course Requirements

- 1) All assigned readings are to be completed prior to the designated class session.
- 2) A mid-term examination on the material presented in the first half of the course. It will constitute 30% of the grade.
- 3) A final examination covering the material presented in the last half of the course. It will constitute 30% of the grade.
- 4) Two written papers of 1000-1500 words will be assigned during the semester.

The first paper will be an analysis/review/reaction to *As a Driven Leaf* by Rabbi Milton Steinberg. Steinberg's novel centers around the character of a prominent figure in rabbinic Judaism – Elisha ben Abuyah – and presents a “fictionalized portrait” of Judaism and Jewish life during the first centuries of the Common Era. That is, Steinberg, by employing the genre of the novel, was able to take liberties with the history of the period and employ his imagination in reconstructing the flavor of the era in a way that a historian could not. Nonetheless, many feel that Steinberg has succeeded in presenting this era and its ferment in ways that academic historians do not. Others feel he has presented a compelling portrait of religious faith and the struggles that surround it that is relevant to any period of history. I leave either of these approaches – or another – to your judgment. I only ask that the paper represent a thoughtful treatment of the book. It will constitute 15% of your total grade and will be due the first day of the seventh week of class.

On October 1, 2013, the Pew Research and Public Life Project issued a report on American Jewish Identity that has unleashed a torrent of discussion on Jews and Judaism in the United States today. A full spectrum of the reactions to this study can be found in the book, *Who Are We Now: Interpreting the Pew Study on Jewish Identity in America Today*, that *Jewish Daily Forward* editors, Jane Eisner and Josh Nathan-Kazis, published. Your assignment in this second paper is to read the report and assess the diverse reactions to it as expressed by the host of authors contained in the Eisner and Nathan-Kazis

volume. After summarizing what you see as the highlights of the report and the most important and insightful responses to it, you are asked to provide your own view of the study and its implications for Jewish life now and in the future. This paper will also constitute 15% of your grade and is due the final day of class in the fourteenth week.

5) 10% of your grade will be based on class participation.

### **Policy on Electronic Devices**

Please use electronic devices responsibly. When any of your electronic devices (including your cell phone) rings or buzzes or lights up or vibrates, you disturb the class, your classmates, your instructor and the environment of mutually beneficial learning. In addition, you take valuable time away from our class discussion and community. Accordingly, in order to foster a positive environment for learning, please limit your Wi-Fi access and computer activity to note taking or the reading of documents.

### **Statement on Disability**

If you have a disability that requires special arrangements (e.g., note- and/or test-taking), please be in touch with the Lucy Moses Center at NYU. The Center will indicate the accommodations that you are to receive.

### **Statement on Plagiarism**

Intentional plagiarism of any source is a violation of intellectual property rights. Please read and be familiar with what is written on “Academic Integrity” online by the NYU College of Arts and Sciences. If you do not understand exactly what kind of writing, quoting, citing, or researching constitutes plagiarism, I am happy to explain both how to recognize and how to avoid it. Please ask.

## **Course Outline**

- I. Introduction and Course Overview: The Study of Judaism within an Academic Context (January 27)**
  - a. Satlow, pp. 1-21**
  
- II. Judaism: Its Classical Religious Elements -- Creation, Covenant, Holiness, and Land (January 29 and February 3, and 5)**

- a. Readings in GENESIS 1-2, 9, and 15-18, EXODUS 19-21, LEVITICUS 19, and DEUTERONOMY 26-27:10
  - b. Satlow, pp. 22-68
  - c. Scheindlin, pp. 1-33
  - d. Arnold Eisen, "Covenant," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 107-112
- III. Judaism: Its Classical Religious History**
- A. Exile, Return to Zion, and Hellenistic Conquest (February 10)**
    - a. Readings in JEREMIAH 21 and 29, LAMENTATIONS 1-2:13, EZRA 1, NEHEMIAH 8, and MACCABEES I 1:1-23, 41-50, 2:1-6, 15-28, and 4:36-59 and II 1:11-19
    - b. Satlow, pp. 69-114
    - c. Scheindlin, pp. 34-49
  - B. Types of Palestinian Judaism Before 70CE: Philo, the Sects, and Christianity (February 12 and 14)**
    - a. Readings from JOSEPHUS (Antiquities 12, The Jewish Wars 2:8), NEW TESTAMENT (Matthew 1, 3-5:20, and 27; Galatians 1-3; and Acts 9) and RABBINIC TEXTS (Avot 1 and Avot d'Rabbi Nathan 11b-12a)
    - b. Scheindlin, pp. 50-69
- IV. Judaism: Its Classical Literature (February 17 and 19)**
- a. Readings in Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrash
  - b. Satlow, pp. 115-139 and 164-186
  - c. David Stern, "Midrash," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 613-620
  - e. Adin Steinsaltz, "Talmud," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 953-958
- V. Medieval Developments in the Classical Tradition**
- A. Bible Commentary, Codes, and Responsa (February 24 and 26)**
    - a. Readings in Rashi, Mishneh Torah, and Case Law (Responsa)
    - b. Scheindlin, pp. 71-121
    - c. Satlow, pp. 187-208
    - d. David Ellenson, "Jewish Legal Interpretation: Literary, Scriptural, Social, and Ethical Perspectives," *Semeia* 34 (1985), pp. 93-114
  - B. Philosophy and Mysticism (March 3 and 5)**
    - a. Readings in *Guide for the Perplexed* and the *Zohar*
    - b. Satlow, pp. 209-249

In Class Mid-Term Examination (March 10)

- VI. Developments in Modern Judaism**
  - A. Enlightenment and Emancipation (March 12)**
    - a. Scheindlin, pp. 149-171
  - B. The Rise of Denominationalism (March 24)**
    - a. Readings from leaders of modernist movements
    - b. Satlow, pp. 250-287
  - C. Zionism (March 26)**
    - a. Passages from Herzl, Ahad Haam, and Rav Kuk
    - b. Scheindlin, pp. 173-233
  - D. The Feminist Challenge (March 31)**
    - a. Readings from Jewish Feminist Sources
    - b. Susanah Heschel, "Feminism," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 255-259
  - E. The Impact of the Holocaust and the Rise of the State of Israel (April 2 and 7)**
    - a. Emil Fackenheim, "Holocaust," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 399-408
  - F. American Judaism Today: Patterns, Currents, and Prospects (April 9 and 14)**
    - a. Selections from the Pew Report
    - b. Satlow, pp. 22-68
  
- VII. The Significance of Ritual in the Cycle of Life**
  - A. Birth and Entry into the Covenant/Bar and Bat Mitzvah/Marriage/Death and Mourning (April 16 and 21)**
    - a. Relevant Biblical and Talmudic Sources and Liturgical Texts
    - b. Donin, pp. 121-141 and 271-310
    - c. Olitzky and Judson, 195-216
    - d. Josef Stern, "Gesture and Symbol," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 275-283.
  - B. The Rituals and Practices of Daily Life (Tallit and Tefillin, Daily Prayer, Head Covering, and Kashrut) (April 23 and 28)**
    - a. Relevant Biblical and Talmudic Sources and Liturgical Texts
    - b. Donin, pp. 87-120
    - c. Olitzky and Judson, pp. 1-60, 87-104, and 151-194
    - d. Mary Douglas, "The Abominations of Leviticus" in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, pp. 41-57
    - e. Melvin Harris, "The Abominable Pig," in Melvin Harris, *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*, pp. 67-79

**C. Cycle of the Year – Sabbath and Festivals (High Holidays, Pilgrimage Festivals, and Minor Festivals) (April 30 and May 5)**

- a. Relevant Biblical and Talmudic Sources**
- b. Donin, pp. 61-96, 239-246, 258-267**
- c. Olitzky and Judson, 61-86**

**VIII. “Whither Judaism?” – Conclusion (May 7)**

- a. Satlow, pp. 287-296**