

BLUMENTHALmysti



REL. 342: THE JEWISH MYSTICAL TRADITION

Emory University

Max: 25

Professor David R. Blumenthal (reldrb@emory.edu)

TTh 2:30-3:45

Writing Requirement: Yes

Callaway S-102

Content:

Jewish mysticism is one of the core disciplines of Judaism. This course will study four main streams of mysticism within rabbinic Judaism through a close reading of texts in translation. The final unit will be devoted to contemporary forms of Jewish mysticism. In addition we will try to define Jewish mysticism and its relation to other forms of Jewish spirituality.

Texts:

D. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, 2 vols. (=UJM)

D. Blumenthal, *God at the Center* (=GaC)

E. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* or, *Somewhere A Master*

G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

A. Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*

Tanakh

Reserve:

J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*

T. Schrire, *Hebrew Magical Amulets*

P. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*

M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*

Particulars:

We will read these central texts closely and consider the nature of mysticism and spirituality.

Everyone is expected to have a *hevruta* (study partner) and to meet regularly.

Class participation is expected.

One short reflection paper at the end of each unit.

One final exam / paper.

SYLLABUS

Introduction

Jan. 15

UJM, 1: xi-8

GaC, 191-94, 210-12

(Scholem, ch. 1)

Creating Worlds

Jan. 20

UJM, 1: 9-12

Psalms 16, 19, 92, 104

Jan. 22, 27

UJM, 1: 13-46, carefully

Jan. 29

student reports on Trachtenberg, Schrire, the "Golem"

Visions of Heaven

2/3

UJM, 1: 47-51 with Ezekiel ch. 1 and 3:12

Isaiah ch. 6; Psalms 48, 66

2/5, 10

UJM, 1: 53-91, carefully

(Scholem, ch. 2)

2/12

excerpts from prayerbook (handout)

UJM, 1: 93-97

2/17 Open Session

First reflection paper due.

Theosophic Mysticism ("Kabbala")

2/19

UJM, 1: 101-19

(Scholem, ch. 5)

2/24, 26; 3/3

UJM, 1: 121-57, carefully

(Scholem, ch. 6)

3/5

UJM, 1: 159-84

(Scholem, ch. 7)

3/10, 12 (spring break; no classes)

Philosophic Mysticism

3/17

UJM, 2: 3-23, carefully

Second reflection paper due.

Ecstatic Mysticism

3/19

UJM, 2: 37-53, carefully

3/24

UJM, 2: 54-79, carefully

(Scholem, ch. 4)

3/26

UJM, 2: 70-83

Report on Fenton

Hasidism: stories, prayerlife, leadership

3/31

UJM, 2: 87-110 (stories)

4/2

UJM, 2: 111-60 (prayer life)

4/7

UJM, 2: 161-92 (Zaddik)

Wiesel, either book

Modern Spirituality

4/9

UJM, 2: 197-204

GaC, xi-xxxii, 3-21

4/14

GaC, 49-57; students select and discuss readings

4/16

GaC, students select and discuss readings

4/21

Siddur Nashim and *The Book of Blessings* (handout)

4/23 Open Session

Final reflection paper due: Friday, May 5th, 5:00, Department of Religion; seniors beware!!

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FIRST SHORT REFLECTION PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to give you time to absorb and reflect on **what** you have learned and **how** you are learning.

There are two questions; please answer **both**. It is possible that a strong poem or other response could answer one or both of these questions indirectly.

There is no "correct answer" for this reflection paper; only my sense of how thoughtfully you deal with the issues.

(1) The material and I:

(a) What was my purpose in taking this course? Am I achieving that purpose?

(b) How did my past experience, values, and culture shape the way I perceived this material? How has the material changed my perception of myself and my culture? Or: How did studying this material heighten my awareness of my assumptions, perceptions, and positions? How did it affect them?

(c) What was the most emotionally or spiritually difficult part of this material? What was the part I was most in sympathy with?

(2) The class and I:

(a) How am I relating to my study partner? Am I contributing to the study session all I could?

(b) With which of my fellow students do I agree? With whom do I disagree? Are there any non-intellectual, personal dimensions to this agreement / disagreement? Have I spoken to them on the subject?

(c) Have I met with someone outside the class to discuss this material? How did that discussion go?

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SECOND SHORT REFLECTION PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to give you time to absorb and reflect on **what** you have learned and **how** you are learning.

There are two questions; please answer **both**. A strong poem or other response could answer one or both of these questions indirectly.

There is no "correct answer" for this reflection paper; only my sense of how thoughtfully you deal with the issues.

(1) The material and I:

- (a) What was my purpose in taking this course? Am I still on course with that?
- (b) How did my past experience, values, and culture shape the way I perceived the material we studied in the unit on the Zohar? How has what I learned changed my perception of myself and my culture?
- (c) What was the most emotionally or spiritually difficult part of the zoharic material? What was the part that I resonated to most? Which did I like better -- the Zohar or the Merkabah -- and why?

(2) The class and I:

- (a) How am I relating to my study partner? Would I change study partners now? Why / why not?
- (b) The class divided itself into skeptics and mystics. Is that still true? Which am I? What have I learned from the other "side"?
- (c) Have I discussed this material with my parents? How did that discussion go?

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FINAL SHORT REFLECTION PAPER

There are two parts to this final reflection paper. Please complete **all** parts, following the instructions for each part (and they are different). Remember, length does not count; thoughtfulness does.

General

The purpose of this part is to give you time to absorb and reflect on what you have learned and how you have grown. Please answer **all** the following questions:

- (1) What happened in this course that you were not expecting? How did this affect you? help you grow as a person?
- (2) How has your understanding / definition of "spirituality" and "mysticism" changed? Give your initial definition, your new one, and account for the development.
- (3) Which of the four types of mysticism which we have studied appeals to you most? Why?
- (4) What would you want future students of this course to learn? How would you have taught this differently?

Creative

The purpose of this part is to give you a chance to use the insights you have gained in this class. Choose **one** question and answer it. Or, propose an alternative to me and do that.

- (1) Write your own hasidic story. It should be rather short. (Don't forget that God has to be at the center of an ordinary event for this to work.)
- (2) Write a letter to God -- if you are a skeptic, suspend your belief for a little while -- and include something about holiness, praise, and petition God for something. (You will need to have a clear image of God before you begin: male, female, personal, philosophic, ecstatic, zoharic, abstract, etc.)
- (3) Write a death-bed spiritual will to your best friend. Discuss what you would like him

or her to know about your spiritual life and what you would like her or him to preserve of your own spirituality.

(4) Write a spiritual poem, a really good one.

DUE IN THE RELIGION OFFICE MAY 5TH, 5:00. SENIORS BEWARE !!!!

Reserve list:

J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* W: GR 98.T759J5

T. Schrire, *Hebrew Magical Amulets* T: BM 729.A4.S3

P. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool* T. BP 189.6.O23

M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives ?*: BM 526.I338