

**JTH 5157: Is [Jewish] Religious Belief Rational?****Fall 2015**

Wednesday: 5:35-8:15

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Office Hours: Thursday 10:00-11:30 and by appointment

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We live in a time of pervasive atheism among the highly educated. Religious belief is looked upon, with anger or condescension, as a vestige of a more credulous age. Much of contemporary philosophy is focused on grounding ethics and metaphysics in a rigorously secular mode. As a community with higher than average educational attainments, American Jews lead other groups in radical religious doubt (e.g. doubt about whether God exists). One might assume that even knowledgeable and committed Jews harbor deep doubts about the possible irrationality of their religious beliefs.

This course will give systematic philosophical consideration to the question of whether religious belief—especially but not exclusively, Jewish belief—is rational. It will explore various classical and contemporary philosophical conceptions of rationality with respect to forming and rejecting beliefs. After having surveyed a range of relevant conceptions, the focus will shift to Jewish thought. Why did Jewish thinkers hold that Jewish belief was rational? What did they mean by rationality? How did they think Jewish belief related to contemporary standards of rationality, such as those exemplified by Aristotelian philosophy (in the Middle Ages) or a scientific outlook (in modernity)? Beyond that, what has been the status of belief as such in Jewish thought? Is piety compatible with bracketing belief claims or even doubting them? Is doubt, for Jews, the virtue that it seems to have become for modern persons?

**Course Goals:** The goals of the course are to increase our knowledge of philosophy in general and of Jewish philosophy in particular. The course aims to help students assess arguments pro and con vis-a-vis religion and to question and advance their own beliefs in a philosophical way. These goals will be met by close reading, intensive seminar discussion, and papers which show a serious critical engagement with a selection of the material.

**Grading:** There will be three main papers based on the reading of 5-7 pages. Each paper will be worth 30% of the grade. A prompt will be given for each paper. Dates are in the syllabus. Additionally, brief 1-2 page response papers will be due in class each week

(10%). On weeks when one of the three main papers is due, no response paper will be necessary.

**Disability Policy:** The JTS policy on disabilities may be found at [www.jtsa.edu/About\\_JTS/Administration/Policies/Students\\_with\\_Disabilities.xml](http://www.jtsa.edu/About_JTS/Administration/Policies/Students_with_Disabilities.xml)

**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 [http://www.jtsa.edu/About\\_JTS/Administration/Policies/Student\\_Disciplinary\\_Procedures.xml](http://www.jtsa.edu/About_JTS/Administration/Policies/Student_Disciplinary_Procedures.xml). 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.

**A Note about Laptops:** Nothing is more annoying to a teacher than students using their laptops for non-academic purposes in class. Please limit your use to note taking or occasionally looking things up. Other uses border on rudeness and disrupt the academic atmosphere we are trying to create in the classroom. *Ha-maskil yavin.*

### **Required texts:**

John Cottingham, *Why Believe?*  
 Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*  
 Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*

These books have been ordered for this course at Book Culture, 536 W 112th St, New York, NY 10025

### **Reading Assignments:**

#### **The Condition of Modern Rationality**

**Week 1**      **9/9**      Hart, *The Experience of God*, pp. 46-84 (e-reading)

#### **What is Rationality?**

**Week 2**      **9/16**      Steven Lukes, "Some Problems about Rationality" in Bryan Wilson, *Rationality* (e-reading)  
 Barnes and Bloor, "Relativism, Rationalism, Sociology of Knowledge," pp. 21-47 in Hollis and Lukes, *Rationality and Relativism* (e-reading)  
 Robert Nozick, "Evolutionary Reasons," pp. 106-114 in Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (e-reading)

**Week 3**      **9/23**    Yom Kippur—no class

**Rational Belief and Evidence; Clifford vs. James**

**Week 4**      **9/30**    William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" (e-reading)  
 William James, "The Will to Believe" (e-reading)  
 Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Religious Belief" (e-reading)

*Recommended:* "The Ethics of Belief," in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (e-reading)

**Rationality and Religious Belief Today**

**Week 5**      **10/7**    John Cottingham, *Why Believe?* pp. 1-94

**Week 6**      **10/14** John Cottingham, *Why Believe?* pp. 95-170  
*First paper is due.*

**The Rationality of Jewish Religious Belief: Medieval Arguments**

**Week 7**      **10/21** Saadya Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, S. Rosenblatt, trans. Introductory Treatise and Treatise I, pp. 3-37; 38-86 (e-reading)

**Week 8**      **10/28** Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, S. Pines, trans. Chapters I: 32-35 (pp. 68-81) I: 71 (pp. 175-184) II: Introduction, Chapters 1-3 pp. 235-254 (e-reading)

**Week 9**      **11/4**    Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, S. Pines, trans. Chapters II: 13-25, pp. 281-330 (Reserve reading)

**Week 10**    **11/11** Hasdai Crescas, *The Light of the Lord*, in C. Manekin, *Medieval Jewish Philosophical Writings*, pp. 216-235 (e-reading)  
 Joseph Albo, *Book of Principles*, Vol. III, pp. ??-?? (e-reading)  
*Second paper is due.*

**The Rationality of Jewish Religious Belief: Modern Arguments**

- Week 11**     **11/18**   Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* pp. 1-64
- Week 12**     **11/25**   Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* pp. 66-126
- Week 13**     **12/2**     Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, pp. 1-131
- Week 14**     **12/9**     Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, pp. 132-243  
*Third paper is due.*