



Prof. Shaul Kelner

Vanderbilt University

**Syllabus**  
**Jewish Studies 155**  
**AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE**  
Fall 2010  
MWF 12:10 – 1:00

**CATALOG LISTING:** How diversity, individualism and constant change reshape Jewish life. Topics include food and culture, memory and identity, gender and assimilation, Reform-Conservative-Orthodox culture wars.

**COURSE OBJECTIVE:**

JS 155 has two broad pedagogical goals: 1) To enrich your understanding of the American Jewish experience. 2) To help you think beyond the Jewish case, so that you can develop your ability to think sociologically about religion, ethnicity, and social groups more generally.

Our consideration of American Jewish life is structured around core sociological dilemmas:

- What is the relationship between the individual and the group?
- What is the nature of authority?
- What holds a social group together?
- What causes a social group to change?
- How does the economy affect the cultural life of a group?

- What is the place of religion in modern society?
- How are people sorted into ethnic groups, and to what consequences?

These questions will guide our exploration of key trends, innovations, dilemmas and flashpoints in American Jewish life in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Through these questions, we will learn about food and culture, memory and identity, gender and assimilation, innovation and transformation, family and economy, Israel and diaspora, cohesion and conflict, and much more.

The issues we will be discussing are not only Jewish issues. Rather, they capture American Jewish responses to things like change, complexity, individualism, diversity and risk – aspects of the modern condition that all religions, ethnicities, cultures and societies confront.

### **TEXTS:**

#### **Required:**

Chabon, Michael. 2007. *The Yiddish Policeman's Union: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins. (Chabon)

Freedman, Samuel G. 2000. *Jew vs. Jew: The struggle for the soul of American Jewry*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (JvJ)

Joselit, Jenna Weissman 1996. *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950*. New York: Hill and Wang. (Wonders)

Moore, Deborah Dash, ed. 2008. *American Jewish Identity Politics*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. (AJIP)

Shandler, Jeffrey. 2006. *Adventures in Yiddishland*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. (Shandler)

#### **Recommended:**

Wertheimer, Jack. 1993. *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Other texts will be available on E-RES, on the web, or in the library.

### **STUDENT REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:**

#### **Culture Paper<sup>1</sup>**

Select a Jewish ritual (e.g., bar/bat mitzvah, baby naming ceremonies), object (e.g. Passover haggadot, cookbooks, food, greeting cards), image/stereotype (e.g., Jewish American Princess, Jewish masculinity, Jewish mother) or cultural pattern (e.g., leisure, humor) and interpret its evolution in its American context. How can one make sense of it in terms of the institutions, structural forces, cultural beliefs and practices that prevail in the United States of America and in American Jewish society? How does this one cultural element shed light on broader transformations within American Jewish life? The paper will be 5-7 pages in length (Times New Roman 12 point font, 2 spacing), and will count for 25% of your overall grade.

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Prof. Shelley Tennenbaum, Dept. of Sociology, Clark University, who developed the assignment.

**Exams:**

There will be a take-home midterm and a comprehensive in-class final exam, based on readings and class discussions, each counting for 25% of your grade.

**Participation:**

On time attendance is required. Active engagement in class discussions is encouraged. Facebooking & texting in class is decidedly frowned upon. Participation will be graded three times over the semester: after 9/24, after 10/29 and after the last day of class. Each time will count for 8.3% of your grade, for an overall total of 25%.

**Grading:**

Culture Paper	25%
Midterm	25%
Final	25%
Participation	25%

**Late Work:**

Late assignments are reduced as follows:

- 1-2 days late: One half-letter-grade
  - 3-5 days late: One full-letter grade
  - 6-10 days late: One-and-a-half letter grades
  - More than 10 days: Two full-letter grades
- (Weekends count as days.)

**Evaluation of Written Work**

Written work is evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Clarity of argument
- Sophistication and depth of analysis
- Application and extension of concepts discussed in class and in the course readings (here, originality of ideas counts for much)
- Use of empirical or textual support where applicable
- Organization & structure
- Grammar/spelling/rules of composition

**Grading policy on written assignments:**

*A, A-*: Reserved for work that achieves excellence. *A* work shows artistry. It shows critical reflection on its own premises and assumptions. It makes me think and teaches me something new. It demonstrates sophisticated understanding of key concepts, originality of thought, and distinction in written communication. *A* work is the type of work that I would be proud to show off to my colleagues in order brag about what great work my students do.

*B+, B, B-*: Awarded for good, solid work that successfully meets course requirements and demonstrates an adequate working understanding of key ideas. (Whereas B-work does a good job representing what the

textbooks and the professor say, A-work extends those ideas, challenges them, or otherwise engages with them in an original and independent manner.)

*C+ and lower:* Given to work that fails to demonstrate a basic understanding of key ideas. Also given to work that is incomplete, inadequately prepared, and/or carelessly presented.

**Honor Code:**

Vanderbilt's Honor Code governs all tests and assignments in this course. I expect that you will thoroughly familiarize yourself with the Honor Code, and adhere to it in both letter and spirit. Uncertainty about the code does not excuse a violation. If you have any questions about the code, speak to me for clarification.

**Class Schedule**

Date	Day	Topic	Readings Before Class
<b>Frameworks</b>			
25-Aug	W	Introduction	
27-Aug	F	Studying American Jews	AJIP: Sarna chapter
30-Aug	M	American Jews and American Judaism	Video "The Jewish Americans" - Episode 1; (Optional: Wertheimer chs.1 & 2)
<b>Wrestling with the Sovereign Self</b>			
1-Sep	W	Locus of Authority	"Red Letter Days," ch. 3 in Wonders (pp. 89-105, 130-33 required. Remainder of chapter recommended); Jack Wertheimer "The Rabbi Crisis," <i>Commentary</i>
3-Sep	F	The Sovereign Self	Steven M. Cohen & Arnold Eisen, <i>The Jew Within</i> , Ch. 2
6-Sep	M	Return to Tradition	Lynn Davidman, "Teachings on Jewish Religious Observance" ch. 6 in <i>Tradition in a Rootless World</i> , pp. 136-173; (Optional: Wertheimer chs. 3 & 4)
8-Sep	W	The Identity Industry	Barry Chazan, "The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education"; Selections from Hillel Birthright Israel Staff Manual
10-Sep	F	Rosh Hashanah – No Class Meeting	
<b>Wrestling with Flux</b>			
13-Sep	M	The Only Constant...	JvJ, Prologue & Ch 1
15-Sep	W	Gender, Scapegoats and Assimilation	Riv Ellen Prell, "Strangers in Paradise," ch.5 in <i>Fighting to Become Americans</i> , pp. 142-176.
17-Sep	F	Creating Islands of Stability: Food, Memory & Nostalgia	Jack Kugelmass, "Green Bagels: An Essay on Food, Nostalgia and the Carnavalesque"; Eli Evans, "Atlanta Brisket" and "Kosher Grits" in <i>The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South</i>
20-Sep	M	More Food	"Kitchen Judaism," ch. 5 in Wonders
22-Sep	W	Politics of Memory: American Culture and the Holocaust	AJIP: Rosenfeld chapter. (Recommended: AJIP - Diner chapter)
24-Sep	F	Language Loss	Shandler, Intro and Ch.5

Date	Day	Topic	Readings Before Class
27-Sep	M	Creating Islands of Stability: Text (or Orthodoxy's Non-Traditional Tradition)	Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy"; (Optional: Wertheimer ch. 6)
29-Sep	W		Continue Soloveitchik
1-Oct	F	Creating Islands of Stability: Enclaves and the Orthodox Revival	--JvJ "Who owns Orthodoxy" & Ch. 5 "New Haven", pp. 217-274
<b>Wrestling with Diversity</b>			
4-Oct	M	Ethical Challenge of Feminist Change	JvJ "Judaism & Gender" & Ch 3 "Los Angeles" pp. 115-161; (Optional: Wertheimer ch. 7)
6-Oct	W	Legitimizing Change: Traditionalizing	Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," ch 1 in Hobsbawm and Ranger, <i>The Invention of Tradition</i> , pp. 1-14. ; (Optional: Wertheimer ch. 8)
8-Oct	F	Sexualities	Read web resources on OAK
11-Oct	M	Multiculturalism in the Family: Debates over Interfaith Marriage	AJIP: Mayer and Fishman chapters; (Optional: Wertheimer ch. 5)
13-Oct	W	Denominationalism (or Jew vs. Jew)	JvJ "Who is a Jew," pp. 71-79; (Recommended: Wertheimer, ch 9, "Religious Movements in Collision") <b>MIDTERM ASSIGNED</b>
15-Oct	F	October Break	
18-Oct	M	Rethinking Modern Judaism	AJIP: Eisen chapter
<b>Wrestling with Complexity and Risk</b>			
20-Oct	W	Scientific Control	UJC NJPS 2001 report <b>MIDTERM DUE!!</b>
22-Oct	F	Professionalization	Moore, <i>At Home in America</i> ch. 6, pp148-174; (Optional Burstein, "Jewish Nonprofit Organizations in the US")
25-Oct	M	Empowerment as a Religious Imperative	J.J. Goldberg, "How the Jews Won the Cold War" pp. 163-86 in <i>Jewish Power</i>
27-Oct	M	The Legal Process	Michael Bazzyler, "The Holocaust Restitution Movement in Comparative Perspective," <i>Berkeley Jnl of Intl Law</i>
29-Oct	W	Israel and American Jewish Politics	JvJ Israel & America & ch. 4 "Jacksonville" pp 162-216

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1-Nov	F	Israel and American Jewish Politics: The June 2010 Beinart Debate	- Peter Beinart "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment" <i>New York Review of Books</i> - Theodore Sasson & Leonard Saxe, "Wrong Numbers," <i>Tablet</i> - Theodore Samets, "The Myth of Alienation and Apathy," <i>Forward</i> (Recommended: Theodore Sasson, "Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews' Changing Relationship to Israel" <i>Israel Studies</i> )
3-Nov	W	Whither American Jewish Liberalism?	Michael Staub, "Desegregation and Jewish Survival," in <i>Torn at the Roots</i>
<b>Perspectives on Jewish Culture</b>			
5-Nov	F	Culture as Difference	Jeffrey Summitt, "The Meaning of Nusach," Ch. 3 in <i>The Lord's Song in a Strange Land</i>
8-Nov	M	Multiple Identities and Hybrid Cultures	Marci Cohen Ferris, "There's No Place Like Home," Ch. 1 in <i>Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South</i>
10-Nov	W	Multiple Identities and Hybrid Cultures	Ruth Fredman Cernea, "Flaming Prayers: Hilula in a New Home," in Kugelmass, <i>Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jews</i>
12-Nov	F	Multiple Identities and Hybrid Cultures	"The Call of the Matzoh", Ch. 6 in <i>Wonders</i>
15-Nov	M	If Jews Do It, is It "Jewish" Culture? Jews & American Popular Culture	Stephen Whitfield, "Musical Theater," in <i>In Search of American Jewish Culture</i> (Optional: AJIP, Whitfield chapter)
17-Nov	W	Cultural Transformation & Cultural Projects: Yiddish in America	Shandler Ch.4
19-Nov	F	Open Q & A	Start reading Chabon
22-26-Nov	M	Thanksgiving Break	Read Chabon
29-Nov	M	Another Possibility?	Chabon, <i>The Yiddish Policeman's Union</i> ; (Optional: Shandler Ch. 1)
1-Dec	W	Another Possibility?	Chabon, <i>The Yiddish Policeman's Union</i>
<b>Wrap Up</b>			
3-Dec	F	Essentialism and Constructivism <b>PAPERS DUE!!</b>	Roberta Farber and Chaim Waxman, "Postmodernity and the Jews"; <b>PAPERS DUE!!</b> "Conclusion," pp. 293-295 in <i>Wonders</i>
6-Dec	M	Review and Synthesis	JVJ, "Epilogue"
8-Dec	W	Review and Synthesis	