



Prof. Shaul Kelner

Vanderbilt University

Syllabus
Jewish Studies 155
AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE
Fall 2014
TR 9:35 – 10:50

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:

This is a class about the American experience in the 20th and 21st centuries, and the way in which diverse minorities try to carve out a space in which they can be fully included as American without sacrificing the right to be different.

This is a class about the Jewish experience, and the way in which America has reshaped Jewishness in an American image—voluntary, individualistic, consumerist—different from the types of Jewishness created in Europe in the past, and in Israel today.

This is class about the sociology of religion, race, ethnicity and culture. I am sociologist, and I bring sociological lenses to study America and American Jews. I will teach you to how to use these lenses, not just

to look at the Jewish American experience, but so that you can look at any social group and think sociologically about them.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to...

- 1) Have a mental map that helps you tie together basic facts about American Jewish demographics, communal organization, religious expression and historical turning points;
- 2) Recognize core tensions that animate Jewish American life, and identify manifestations of these tensions when you encounter them outside of the classroom, in the news, etc.;
- 3) Understand key ways in which the Jewish American case is similar and different to that of other American subcultures;
- 4) Recognize the diversity within American Jewish communities, and major lines of fragmentation and debate among them;
- 5) Identify specific ways in which American Jewishness looks very American;
- 6) Distinguish normative pronouncements about what “should be” from empirical analyses of “what actually is.”

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?
- How do groups organize themselves politically?

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Benor, Sarah Bunin. 2012. *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language of Orthodox Judaism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

Goldstein, Eric. 2006. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Plaut, Joshua Eli. 2012. *A Kosher Christmas: 'Tis the Season to be Jewish*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Sasson, Theodore. 2014. *The New American Zionism*. New York: NYU Press.

Wenger, Beth S. 2010. *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Grading philosophy: You would not have gotten into a top-twenty university if you were not capable of performing very good work. I therefore expect that students in my classes should easily be able to earn B's and B+s if they take the work seriously. There is a difference between academic performance that is excellent and that which is very good or good, however. The grading scheme should recognize this difference. To earn A-s and A's, you will have to consistently produce work of the highest quality. I have structured the grading system accordingly.

Paired Discussion Prep Sheets:

We will begin class sessions with paired discussions about the readings. You should come to class with some notes on the reading, per the template I will give you. On the reading sheet, jot down the main point of the reading, one or two central issues and concepts, any questions you have to clarify things you didn't understand, and one probing question for discussion. On days when the readings are drawn from more than one source, just prepare a sheet for one reading only (although preparing for more will be helpful to your own understanding). I may from time to time collect the pages in class after the paired discussions, just to ensure that you are keeping up with this. 5% of total.

Archives Exercise

You will visit the Jewish Federation of Nashville's Annette Levy Ratkin Jewish Community Archives. There, you will identify documents about an aspect of local Jewish history that interests you and that sheds light on some of the broader questions about American Jewish life that we are exploring. For instance, you might find out how the local synagogues responded to the Civil Rights Movement, or how gender and Jewishness played out in sororities and fraternities in the 1930s or 1980s. I will give you guidelines to help you identify and analyze your documents. You will write a 5-7 page paper analyzing the documents in their broader context.

Interpretive Interview Paper on Being Jewish at Vanderbilt

After interviewing two fellow Vanderbilt students about the experience of being Jewish at Vanderbilt university (or expectations relative to home, for new first years), you will interpret the interviews in the context of broader issues raised in the class. The assignment is divided into two parts: First, preliminary interviews at the start of the semester, when your questions may not be as well formulated. Second: Follow-up interviews later in the semester, when you can use all you have learned in class to hone your line of questioning and to sharpen your analysis. Part 1, 3-5 pages, is worth 5%. Part 2, 5-7 pages, is worth 15%.

Mid Term and Final Exam:

There will be an in-class midterm and final exam, based on readings and class discussions, each counting for 25% of your grade. Exams will mostly consist of terms for identification and essay questions. **The final exam date is December 11 at noon.** I will not be offering the alternate exam date.

Note well!! Threshold! Even if the straight computation of your overall grade produces a number in the *A* range, you must earn an *A-* or *A* on each exam in order for it to be possible for you to earn an overall course grade of *A*. A *B+* or lower on either exam means that the maximum grade you could possibly earn for the semester would be *A-*.

Participation:

On time attendance is required. Active engagement in class discussions is encouraged. Participation will be graded at the end of semester. Worth 5% of your grade.

Things I am looking for: 1) Self-motivation during paired discussions. Don't wait for me to prompt you to begin. Don't sit silently as if you have exhausted all there is to discuss. There is always more! Dive into the conversation with your partner. 2) Probing questions that push the conversation forward. 3) Asking clarifying questions when you don't understand, rather than sitting there in confusion. Don't be embarrassed to ask. If you are confused, chances are that several other people are to. Help them out, and ask, ask, ask!! 4) Eye contact when I am teaching. I will try to make the class interesting. Please help me by not visibly zoning out.

Grading:

Paired Discussion Prep Sheets	5%
Interview Paper	5% + 15% = 20%
Archives Exercise	20%
Midterm	25%
Final	25%
Participation	5%

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+: Award for work that is very strong, yet still in missing some key elements of artistry, independent thought, novel insight, critical reflection, etc.

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 that is incomplete, inadequately prepared, and/or carelessly presented.

Technology Policy

Unless I give specific permission, I do not allow use of laptops, tablets, cell phones, etc. in class.

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.

Who are American Jews? Origins and Overview			
21-Aug	R	Welcome and Introduction	(Start reading Goldstein)
26-Aug	T	American Jews: Yesterday and Today [INTERVIEW PAPER PART 1 ASSIGNED]	Finish watching Schama, <i>The Story of the Jews</i>
28-Aug	R	A Sociological Primer on Jewish Religion	Sarna, "American Judaism in Historical Perspective"
Modernity and American Jews			
2-Sep	T	Ruptured History	Shandler <i>Adventures in Yiddishland</i> , pp 1-18; Kugelmass, "Green Bagels"
4-Sep	R	Ruptured Authority	Cohen & Eisen, "The Sovereign Self" (ch. 2 in <i>The Jew Within</i>)
Insider/Outsider: Claiming a Place as Americans			
9-Sep	T	"Christmastime for the Jews" [INTERVIEW PAPER PART 1 DUE; ARCHIVES PAPER AND INTERVIEW PAPER PART 2 ASSIGNED]	Plaut, 13-4, 29-35, 65-91, 104-114, 115-30
11-Sep	R	"Judaism teaches democracy": The Cult of Synthesis	Wenger, p 1-3 and Chapter 1
16-Sep	T	Celebrating America, as Jews	Wenger, Chapter 2
18-Sep	R	Ethnicity and Assimilation	Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity"
23-Sep	T	Consumerism and Cultural Reinvention	Joselit, "Kitchen Judaism" pp. 171-193
25-Sep	R	No Class – Rosh Hashana	
30-Sep	T	Jews and Race	Goldstein, Introduction; Ch. 1 pp. 11-22; Ch. 2
2-Oct	R	Jews and Race	Goldstein, chs. 3 & 4
7-Oct	T	Jews and Race	Goldstein, chs. 5,6,7
9-Oct	R	Jews and Race	Goldstein, ch. 8; Epilogue
14-Oct	T	Interfaith Marriage [INTERVIEW PAPER PART 2 DUE]	Plaut ch. 6; Mayer, pp. 23-25, 29-32, 164-66 in <i>Love and Tradition</i> ; Fishman pp. 73-76 in <i>Double or Nothing</i> ; McGinity pp. 186-195 in <i>Still Jewish</i>
16-Oct	R	No Class – Fall Break	
Local/Global: Acting as a Diaspora			
21-Oct	T	Holocaust memory	Selections on OAK
23-Oct	R	Mid-Term Exam	
28-Oct	T	Israel connections	Sasson, Introduction, Chs. 1 & 2. (Ch. 3 is also recommended)
30-Oct	R	Israel connections	Sasson, chs. 5 & 6
4-Nov	T	Israel connections	Kelner, ch. 5 "Collapsing Distance," <i>Tours That Bind</i>
6-Nov	R	Soviet Jewry	Watch <i>Refusenik</i>
Tradition/Change: Forging an American Religion			
11-Nov	T	Jewish Feminism: Traditionalizing	Freedman, "Judaism & Gender" and ch. 3 "Los Angeles," pp115-161 in <i>Jew vs. Jew</i>
13-Nov	R	Fall and Rise of Orthodoxy	Heilman, selection from <i>Sliding to the Right</i>
18-Nov	T	Enclave Strategies [ARCHIVES PAPER DUE]	Benor ch. 3
20-Nov	R	More than just religion	Benor, ch. 4 & pp 156-67 in ch. 7
Thanksgiving Break			
2-Dec	T	Your Choice	TBD
4-Dec	R	Last Day	Watch <i>The Jewish Americans</i>