

Gender and Sexuality in Judaism • Ithaca College • Spring 2013

JWST/RLST 32300

Friends 102

Tuesday/Thursday 2:35-3:50 p.m.

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Office Hours: Tuesday/Thursday 4:00-5:15, and other times by appointment

Is God male or female? Can women become rabbis? Why are husband and wife supposed to avoid sexual relations during the woman's menstrual period? Why do boys have to be circumcised on the eighth day? Are there gay and lesbian Jews? This course explores what it means to be a Jewish man or woman, and looks at how Jewish gender roles have changed throughout history, as well as how contemporary Jews deal with changes in women's roles and demands for gender equality. We will begin with a short introduction to Judaism and then discuss specific issues in greater depth: what is "gender" and how to study it; traditional roles of men and women in Judaism; the gendered Jewish body; family and sexuality; homosexuality; Jewish feminism; the gender of God; and women's changing religious roles.

Books to purchase (they will also be placed on reserve in the library)

- Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, Schocken, 1995.
- Noach Dzmura, ed. *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, Yale University Press, 1995.
- Miryam Kabakov, *Keep Your Wives Away from Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires*, North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics* (Beacon Press, 2005).
- Susan Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, Oxford, 1996.

There will also be a Course Reader, which will be on sale in Muller 309 from Kenesha Wick.

Topics

1. Introduction to the course: what is "gender"?
2. Women's religion & traditional religious roles of men and women
3. Jewish feminism and changing women's religious roles
4. The gendered Jewish body: Niddah (Menstrual impurity) and Brit Milah (Circumcision)
5. Gender Identity
6. Sexuality
7. God and Gender
8. New Jewish Rituals

Course Requirements

1. Attendance (5%) and participation (10%) in class discussion. This includes asking questions and speaking up during class discussions, participating in small group work (*chevruta*), active

listening to lectures and to classmates, and taking notes. I expect you to come to class having done each day's reading and prepared to say something about it. Grading will be based on attendance, active participation, and sharpness and incisiveness of comments.

Chevruta. In class I will sometimes ask you to read a particular text together with another person, so that you can discuss your own questions about the text and spark each other's ideas. This method is taken from the rabbinic way of studying a text, a method that they called *chevruta* (fellowship). It stems from the idea that learning is acquired best through the active interaction between self, fellow, and text. Your chevruta partner may have different questions than you do, or different answers.

Active Listening. Listening to another person speak is not a passive enterprise. Really to understand another person requires paying attention to his or her words, taking notes on what the other person says, making associations with what you already know, asking questions when you don't understand. This is true when you listen to your classmates in small or large group discussions or to my lectures. I expect you to pay attention in class and learn both from your classmates and from my lectures.

Take notes. Do not expect simply to remember everything said in class. If you are unfamiliar with taking notes for a class, please speak to me.

2. Class kickoff (5%) – once in the semester, together with a partner, you will kick off the class discussion of a particular day. A sign-up sheet will be passed around early in the semester. Instructions on how to do this will be passed out along with the sign-up sheet.

3. Reflection papers on the reading (2-3 pages) due every couple of weeks throughout the semester. Nine are assigned; you must write five of them, three before the midterm and two afterwards (30%). Each assignment will be posted on Sakai, but you should bring the paper with you to class.

First half of semester

Paper #1

- January 24: Reflection paper on Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, pp. 1-36 (this one is required)

Paper #2 – write either on Sered or Heilman

- January 31: Reflection paper on Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*
- February 7: Reflection paper on Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith* (men's and women's roles in Ashkenazic Haredi society in Israel)

Paper #3 – write either on Jewish feminism or on Niddah

- February 12, 14, or 21: Reflection paper on Jewish Feminism
- February 28: Reflection paper on Niddah

Second half of semester

Paper #4 – write either on circumcision or gender identity

- March 21: reflection paper on circumcision
- April 9: Reflection paper on Gender Identity

Paper #5 – write either on sexuality or on God and Gender

- April 18: Reflection paper on Sexuality

- April 30: Reflection paper on God and Gender

4. Synthesis/Research paper (5-7 pages) (20%) on a topic taken from the first half of the course (due Mar. 7); this is the equivalent of a midterm exam. Since it is the equivalent of an exam, no late papers are accepted. The assignment is available on Sakai. The paper should be turned in on Sakai.

5. Research paper/project (approximately 10-12 pages, 30%), due May 7, at 5:00 p.m., in my office. This is instead of a final exam. The class of May 2 and the final exam time (Tuesday, May 7, from 7:30-10:00 am) will be devoted to student presentations of your research. A topic statement with bibliography is due on March 21 (the week after the spring break) The assignment for this final project is available on Sakai.

Grade breakdown:

- 5% Topic statement (graded on thoughtfulness of proposal and effectiveness of presentation, as well as substantial nature of bibliography)
- 20% paper (graded on both content/substance and on writing style/skill in execution)
- 5% in class presentation (graded on content and skill in presentation)

6. Extra credit assignments. There will be a number of excellent speakers coming to campus this semester, including one on transgender issues, and a speaker on Jewish feminism, in addition to the film series organized by the LGBT center, and other events that will be announced. I will be letting you know about these events ahead of time and will urge you to attend them. If you attend them, and write a short reflection paper on the event, you will receive extra credit for the course – 1% of the final grade per paper, up to a maximum of three.

Class Policies

1. Standards of Academic Conduct: No plagiarism is permitted on papers. ALL WRITTEN WORK MUST BE YOUR OWN. Please consult the Ithaca College website – http://www.ithaca.edu/attorney/policies/vol7/Volume_7-70104.htm for a complete statement of the Ithaca College policy on academic honesty, including definitions of plagiarism and proper citation of sources. Plagiarism **INCLUDES** copying from another student's paper, or permitting your paper to be used by another student. **I refer proven cases of plagiarism or cheating to the Judicial Affairs office.**

2. Attendance in class is required. Students are expected to attend all classes, and they are responsible for work missed during any absence from class. In accordance with New York State law, students who miss class due to their religious beliefs shall be excused from class or examinations on that day. Any student who misses class due to a verifiable family or individual health emergency, or to a required appearance in a court of law, shall be excused.

Two unexcused absences are permitted. In order not to be penalized for missing additional classes – because of illness, family emergency, or other obligations such as job interviews, team travel, or participation in the Theatre Department's spring week in New York for seniors, you must notify me and provide a written excuse from the appropriate authority.

3. All written work must be done to pass the class.

4. Respect for others in the class is required. This includes:

- Arrive at class on time.
- Turn off your cell-phone before class starts. Do not send text messages or play games on your

cell-phone during class time.

- Do not use your laptop in class unless you are given permission to do so.
- Don't eat noisy food in class (e.g., potato chips). If you must eat in class, please throw away your trash after class.
- Please do not leave the room during class except in case of dire physical need.
- Respect the instructor and your classmates – listen when they speak and avoid whispering or passing notes in class.

5. Students with disabilities: please approach me early in the semester and let me know your needs in terms of papers or exams. Also, please have the Office for Support Services send me a letter with your specific needs. In compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable accommodation will be provided to students with documented disabilities on a case-by-case basis. Students must register with the Office of Academic Support Services and provide appropriate documentation to the College before any academic adjustment will be provided.

6. If you are having personal or family problems, and find it difficult to complete your assignments – please speak to me to set up special arrangements.

Diminished mental health, including significant stress, mood changes, excessive worry, or problems with eating and/or sleeping can interfere with optimal academic performance. The source of symptoms might be strictly related to your course work; if so, please speak with me. However, problems with relationships, family worries, loss, or a personal struggle or crisis can also contribute to decreased academic performance.

Ithaca College provides a Counseling Center to support the academic success of students. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) provides cost-free services to help you manage personal challenges that threaten your academic success and/or well-being.

In the event I suspect you need additional support, expect that I will express my concerns (and the reasons for them) to you and remind you of resources (e.g., CAPS, Health Center, Chaplains, etc.) that might be helpful. It is not my intention to know the details of what might be bothering you, but simply to let you know I am concerned and that help, if needed, is available.

Schedule of Topics & Readings (Subject to change)

January 22 & 24: Introduction to course

Jan. 22: What is gender?

How do you define gender? What do you think Judaism says gender is?

Handouts: Genesis 1-3; the story of Lilith; reflection paper assignment for Thursday's reading.

Jan. 24: Gender Studies

Read: Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, pp. 1-36. If you have not yet bought the book, this reading is available on the Sakai site for the course in the Resources section.

Reflection paper due in class.

Questions for the classes on *Women as Ritual Experts* will also be handed out.

January 29 & 31, February 5 & 7: Traditional Jewish Communities: "Men's Judaism" and "Women's Judaism"

An examination of the different religious emphases for women and men in contemporary traditional communities

January 29 & 31

Women's traditional roles in Sephardi/Mizrachi Jewish society

How do men's and women's roles differ? What do women value religiously, as compared to men's religious values? And how do women regard men's religiosity? This reading will also serve as an introduction to key Jewish religious concepts, beliefs, and practices.

Read: Susan Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts* (all).

Reflection paper due in class on Jan. 31.

Questions for the classes on men's and women's roles in Ashkenazi Haredi society will be handed out.

February 5 & 7

Men's & women's roles in Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox society (Me'ah She'arim, Jerusalem)

What are men's and women's different roles in ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) society, and especially, how is sexuality organized?

Reading: In the Course Reader, pages 1-54: Chapters 1, 2, 7, 18, and 21 of *Defenders of the Faith*, by Samuel Heilman.

February 5 Introduction to ultra-Orthodox Society

Read (these are in the Course Reader, pp. 1-26):

Chapter 1: "Mikveh: Taking the Plunge";

Chapter 2: "Who are the Haredim?" (This chapter describes the Haredi community and its history in Europe, Israel, and the United States);

Chapter 7: "This Is Who We Are"

February 7 Men's and Women's Roles

Read (these are in the Course Reader, pp. 27-54):

Chapter 18 (pp. 277-290): "Passages: Matchmaking, Betrothal, and Wedding"

Chapter 21 (pp. 313-350): "The Triumph of Sex"

Questions for the classes on feminism will be handed out today.

Reflection paper due today on Haredi society.

February 12-21 Feminist critique of traditional Judaism

We will examine the contemporary Jewish feminist movement and its chief concerns. How can Judaism be revisioned from a feminist perspective? Is there a place for men in the feminist movement?

February 12 What is Jewish feminism?

What does Judith Plaskow identify as the chief tasks of a Jewish feminism? What changes in Jewish life does feminism entail?

Read:

Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith*, selections. pp. 35-39, 31-32, 56-80.

February 14 Jewish men and feminism

What do these authors think should be the attitude of men towards Jewish feminism? How does the feminist critique of masculinity/femininity affect the male writers' views of their own masculine identity?

Read:

Judith Plaskow, "About Men," pp. 143-146 in *Coming of Lilith*. **See next page for the rest of the assignment.**

In the Course Reader, pp. 55-65: Jeffrey K. Salkin, "Search for My Brothers: Jewish Men in a Gentile World"; Michael S. Kimmel, "Judaism, Masculinity, and Feminism," Harry Brod, "Toward a Male Jewish Feminism."

February 19 & 21 Women's changing religious roles

Is woman's place in the public or private sphere? We will examine the issues of women's participation in Torah study and liturgical leadership, feminism, and Orthodoxy and feminism.

Read:

February 19: Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, 10-43 ("Women and the Mitzvot").

Judith Plaskow, *Coming of Lilith*, pp. 128-133, 157-162.

February 21:

In Course Reader, pp. 66-88: Bonna Haberman, on the Women of the Wall in Jerusalem – "Drama in Jerusalem."

Peggy Cidor, "For the sake of righteous women" – on the ordination of Haviva Ner-David as an Orthodox female rabbi

Other online articles may also be assigned

February 21: Reflection paper due on feminism.

Questions for the classes on Niddah will be handed out on February 21.

February 26-March 21: *The Gendered Jewish Body: Niddah and Brit Milah*

How does Judaism make meaning out of the physical differences between women and men? We will examine two paradigmatic issues, *niddah* (the laws of menstrual impurity) and *brit milah* (circumcision) and see how they have been used to form religious meaning in Judaism. We will also examine contemporary thinking on these two issues.

Feb. 26: Niddah or "menstrual impurity" in Jewish law

How do the Bible and rabbinic literature define *tumah* (usually translated as "impurity"? What is the effect of menstrual impurity on women and men? How are the laws of niddah performed in everyday life?

Read:

Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, pp. 147-174.

In the Course Reader, pp. 89-90: Leviticus chapters 12, 15.

Feb. 28: Niddah and women's connection to the sacred

How have the laws of niddah affected women's contact with the sacred (the Temple, prayer, the synagogue)?

Read:

In the Course Reader, pp. 91-97: Shaye Cohen, "Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta."

Reflection Paper on Niddah due in class.

March 5: Niddah practices in contemporary Jewish life

As you read these four articles, consider which arguments you find the most persuasive, and be prepared to come to class and argue for your position. Is following the laws of niddah valuable for contemporary women, or is it just giving in to ancient ideas of women's uncleanness?

Read:

In the Course Reader, pp. 98-124:

Danya Ruttenberg, "Blood Simple: Transgender Theory Hits the Mikveh"

Blu Greenberg, "In Defense of the 'Daughters of Israel': Observations on Niddah and Mikveh"

Rachel Adler, "Tumah and Taharah," and "In Your Blood, Live: Re-visions of a Theology of Purity."

Web sites on Niddah that you can also consult:

On Reform Jews and the mikveh:

1. Jane Solomon, "Reform Jews Rediscover the Mikveh," *Reform Judaism* (1996)
<http://www.reformjudaismmag.net/396mb.html>
2. Jane Solomon, "Entering the Mikveh," *Reform Judaism* (1996)
<http://www.reformjudaismmag.net/396js.html>
3. Elliot M. Strom, "A Mikveh of Our Own," *Reform Judaism* (1999):
<http://www.reformjudaismmag.net/599es.html>.

Thursday, Mar. 7 – Synthesis/Research Paper due ON SAKAI – NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED!!

March 7: No class.

March 11-15: Spring Break, no classes.

March 19, 21: Circumcision: biblical origins, rabbinic meanings, and contemporary interpretations.

Questions on circumcision are available on Sakai. Circumcision paper is due on March 21.

March 19: Biblical rules and the symbolic significance of circumcision.

What are the biblical rules of circumcision? Why should it be practiced? What is the ritual of circumcision, and how did the rabbis develop it? Why is the blood of circumcision pure while menstrual blood is impure?

Read:

In the Course Reader, pp. 125-146:

Bible: Genesis chapter 17; Exodus 4:24-26, 12:43-49; Leviticus 12:1-5

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Fruitful Cut: Circumcision and Israel's Symbolic Language of Fertility, Descent, and Gender."

March 21: Circumcision practices in the contemporary world

Should Jews still circumcise their sons? What are the reasons given by advocates and opponents? What about the recent evidence that circumcision can diminish the risk of transmitting HIV?

Read:

In Course Reader, pp. 147-176:

Michael S. Kimmel, "The Kindest Un-Cut"; David Zaslow, "Circumcision and *Brit*"; Jon D.

Levenson, "The New Enemies of Circumcision"; Articles on Circumcision and AIDS prevention

Response paper on circumcision due today.

Questions on gender identity will be handed out today.

Take a look at these pro and con websites about circumcision:

Pro:

milah.net - a Jewish pro-circumcision site, from a *mohel*)

mohel-circumcision.co.uk - another site from a *mohel*, in Britain)

aish.com/jl/1/48959461.html – "Bris Milah: Beautiful or Barbaric?"

Anti:

cirp.org/library/cultural/maimonides - Maimonides on circumcision

cirp.org/pages/cultural/bris_shalom.html - alternative to circumcision ceremony

jewishcircumcision.org - a Jewish anti-circumcision web site

jewishcircumcision.org/spectator.htm - article by a Jewish man who opposes circumcision

Some more online articles about circumcision:

Lisa Braver Moss, "Circumcision: A Jewish Inquiry":

interfaithfamily.com/life_cycle/pregnancy_and_birth_ceremonies/Circumcision_A_Jewish_Inquiry.shtml

Mark Washofsky, "Why Reform never abandoned circumcision":

reformjudaismmag.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=1390

Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, "Blood and Men": ritualwell.org/ritual/blood-and-men

Rabbi Julie Greenberg, "Cutting and Covenant: How I decided whether or not to circumcise my sons":

ritualwell.org/blog/cutting-and-covenant-how-i-decided-whether-or-not-circumcise-my-sons-rabbi-julie-greenberg

March 26 No class: First Day of Passover

March 28-April 9: Gender Identity

Is gender identity always split between male and female? Challenges to traditional ideas of gender identity from transgendered, transsexual, and intersexed people.

March 28: Theory, modern and ancient

Read:

Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, pp. 80-96

Charlotte Fonrobert, "Regulating the Human Body: Rabbinic Legal Discourse and the Making of Jewish Gender," in *Keep Your Wives Away from Them*, pp. 99-125.

April 2: Between the Sexes

Read:

Noach Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 155-166, 170-181.

Reuben Zellman and Elliot Kukla, "Created by the Hand of Heaven: Making Space for Intersex People," in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 182-186.

April 4 & 9: Living transgender/transsexual

Read:

Joy Ladin, "In the Image," in *Keep Your Wives Away from Them*, pp. 141-149.

Chav Doherty, "The Trayf Jew," in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 12-22.

Beth Orens, "Crossing the Mechitza," in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 43-47.

Ri J. Turner, "Queering the Jew and Jewing the Queer," in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 48-59.

Tucker Lieberman, "Hearing Beneath the Surface: Crossing Gender Boundaries at the Ari Mikveh," in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 102-107

April 9: Reflection paper on Gender Identity due.

Questions on sexuality will be handed out today.

April 11, 16, & 18 Sexuality

April 11: Heterosexuality and its discontents in traditional Judaism

How does traditional Judaism organize heterosexual desire? How does contemporary Jewish feminism challenge tradition and propose a new Jewish sexual ethics?

Read:

Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, chapter 5 (“Sexuality and Marital Relations”)

Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith*, pp. 178-192 (“Sexual Orientation and Human Rights”), and pp. 193-205 (“Authority, Resistance, and Transformation”).

April 16 Being a Jewish Lesbian (according to the rabbis)

Read:

Elaine Chapnick, “Women known for these acts’ Through the Rabbinic Lens: A Study of *Hilchot Lesbiut*,” in *Keep Your Wives Away from Them*, pp. 78-98.

April 18 Lesbian and Gay Jews: personal stories

Naomi Seidman, “Love in the Women’s Section,” in *Keep Your Wives Away from Them*, pp. 30-35.

Devorah Miriam, “Jerusalem Voices,” in *Keep Your Wives Away from Them*, pp. 36-44.

Miryam Kabakov, “I Will See You on the Way Out,” in *Keep Your Wives Away from Them*, pp. 45-50

In Course Reader, pp. 182-185: Steve Greenberg, “A Gay Orthodox Rabbi,” in *Queer Jews*, pp. 36-43

Reflection paper on sexuality due today.

Questions on God and Gender handed out today.

April 23, 25, and 30 God and Gender

April 23: Feminist challenge to the traditional God

Read:

Judith Plaskow, *Coming of Lilith*, pp. 121-123 (“God: Some Feminist Questions”); 124-127 (“It is Not in Heaven: Feminism and Religious Authority”), 134-137 (“Facing the Ambiguity of God”).

April 25: Transing God

Read:

Joy Ladin, “The God Thing,” in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 68-81.

Judith Plaskow and Elliot Kukla, “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 134-140.

Julia Watts-Belser, “Transing God/dess: Notes from the Borderlands,” in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 235-240.

April 30: New Jewish Rituals

Read:

Catherine Madsen and Joy Ladin, “Ritual for Gender Transition (Male to Female),” in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 85-92.

Aaron Devor, “Narrow Bridge,” in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, pp. 93-97.

In Course Reader, pp. 186-190: Jane Litman, “Kol Sason v’Kol Simcha, Kol Kalah v’Kol Kallah: Same-gender weddings and Spiritual Renewal,” in *Queer Jews*, pp. 111-118.

Reflection paper on God and Gender due today.

May 2 (regular class time) & May 7 (7:30-10:00 am): Student Presentations of projects (there is no final exam)