

Rabbinical School
RB-JTHT-538– Modern Jewish Thought
Rabbi David B. Starr
2 graduate credits
Spring Semester 2018-19
Wednesdays, 10:45-12:30

Contact Information:

Phone: 617-510-4429

Email: thedavidstarr@gmail.com

This seminar explores the radical change in Jewish life and thought wrought by the great events and processes that we associate with the notion of being modern. Those included the emergence of new kinds of politics and states, the rise of industrial capitalism and its impact on the ways that people worked and lived, and the intellectual and cultural consequences of disciplines like science and history, all of which challenged traditionalist assumptions about the nature of truth.

Many of these encounters between Jewish values and behavior first arose in Central and Western Europe. But modernity happened everywhere, including in the Jewish cultural and demographic heartland of Eastern Europe. The geographic range of our course thus enables us to grapple with the idea and reality of “multiple modernities” that characterized European Jewry in this period.

This class focuses mainly on Jewish intellectual ideas while not ignoring the social, political, and economic transformation of the Jewish community. We will also place the changes going on in the Jewish community within the broader context of modern history.

Required Books to Purchase:

Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* [HJBR]

Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World* [2nd or 3rd edition] [JMW]

All required readings will be posted to Schoology unless they are from the required books, or I have provided an internet link or I have indicated the book is available on-line through Hebrew College library portal.

Requirements:

(1) Attendance at seminar, (2) active and informed participation in seminar, (3) introducing the subject of the weekly seminar one time during the semester, which asks that you lead off the class via an idea that you have regarding that week’s subject and a leading question to start our

classroom conversation, (4) completion of written assignments. These consist of three weekly briefs, and a final assignment. The weekly briefs should run approximately 300 words and be analytical in nature, focused on some aspect of that week's reading. They are due by 9:00 p.m. on the eve of the following week's class discussion.

Final Assignment:

This class focuses broadly speaking on the tension between modernity and tradition. The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, autonomy and universality clashed with traditional Jewish approaches to authority and practice. All post-Enlightenment Jewish thinkers [including us] balance the competing and to some degree exclusive demands of modernity and tradition.

Utilizing the readings and class discussion, as well as any outside sources you wish to bring, please respond to this central tension in 8-10 pages. Include an analysis of at least one of the thinkers we studied in class and how they addressed this tension. This paper will be due the last day of class.

February 6 The Heretic: Spinoza

- a. Introduction, HJBR
- b. Spinoza JMW
- c. Michael Meyer, "Where Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin," in *Judaism Within Modernity: Essays on Jewish History and Religion*

February 13 Mendelssohn: Modern Judaism and the Invention of Jewish Religion

- a. JMW Mendelssohn selections
- b. HJBR chapter 1

February 20 Emancipation

- a. **Section III, JMW especially The Assembly of Jewish Notables**, "Answers to Napoleon," (1806);
- b. **Paula Hyman**, "The Napoleonic Synthesis," in *The Jews of Modern France*, pp. 37-52 [available as e-book through the library portal]
- c. Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, "The Thorny Area of Marriage: Rabbinic Efforts to Harmonize Jewish and French Law in Nineteenth-Century France," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring - Summer, 2007), pp. 59-72

February 27 Religion as History: Reform and the Invention of Orthodoxy

- a. S.R. Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal: Selected Essays from the Writings of S.R. Hirsch* [excerpts]
- b. Ismar Schorsch, "Zacharias Frankel and the European Origins of Conservative Judaism," in *From Text to Context*, pp. 255-265

- c. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform*
- d. Section IV, JMW
- e. HJBR, chapter 2

March 13 Religion as Reason and the Separation of Religion from Politics

- a. Hermann Cohen
- b. Joseph Soloveitchik
- c. Yeshayahu Leibowitz
- d. HJBR, chapter 3

March 20 Religion as Experience: the Existentialism of Buber and Rosenzweig

- a. Rosenzweig letter to Buber, “The Builders: Concerning the Law”
- b. HJBR, chapter 4

March 27 Jewish Religion after the Holocaust

- a. Fackenheim
- b. Z.Y. Kook
- c. Levinas
- d. HJBR, chapter 5

April 3 The Emergence of the Jewish Individual: Eastern Europe

- a. Hasidism
- b. Maimon
- c. Yeshiva Culture
- d. JMW, vii
- e. HJBR, chapter 6

April 10 The Invention of Jewish Culture

Required Reading:

- a. Skim Gordon’s epic poem, *kotzo shel yud/The Tip of the Yud* – Hebrew and English translation in Stanley Nash, “Kotso shel yud,” *CCAR Journal* 53,3 (2006) 107-188
- b. Mendele
- c. Sholom Aleichem
- d. Peretz
- e. HJBR, chapter 7

April 17 The Birth of Jewish Nationalism

- a. Smolenskin
- b. Ginsberg
- c. Berdichevski
- d. HJBR, chapter 8

May 1 A New Jew?

- a. Gordon
- b. Buber

May 8 Jewish Religion in the United States

- a. HJBR, chapter 9

May 15 Judaism With Without Beyond Religion

- a. HJBR, Conclusion