

Introduction to Judaism Syllabus/ Reading List 5785 - 2024-5

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Class will be held on Monday evenings in the synagogue meeting room from 7:00 - 8:30 p.m. Due to the occasionally unpredictable nature of a rabbinic schedule, it may be necessary to cancel some scheduled dates. Every effort will be made to cover the missed material during the semester.

Required reading list:

One One Foot, The Miller Introduction To Judaism Program Course SourceBook (included with class tuition)

Recommended reading list:

Harold Kushner, *To Life! A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking* (1994)

Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: Revised Edition* (2001)

Raymond Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People* (2000)

Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (1988)

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (1951)

Supplemental Introduction to Judaism reading list:

General Jewish Practice:

The Book of Jewish Practice, Rabbi Louis Jacobs; Behrman House
The Book of Jewish Belief, Rabbi Louis Jacobs; Behrman House
It's a Mitzvah, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson; Behrman House
The Jewish Holidays, Rabbi Michael Strassfeld; Harper and Row
Shabbat: The Family Guide to Preparing for and Celebrating the Sabbath, 2nd edition, Dr. Ron Wolfson; Jewish Lights
This is My Beloved, This is My Friend: A Rabbinic Letter on Intimate Relations, Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, Rabbinical Assembly
The Passover Seder, The Art of Jewish Living series, Dr. Ron Wolfson
A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, Dr. Ron Wolfson
The Jewish Dietary Laws, James M. Lebeau
Jewish Dietary Laws, by Samuel Dresner and Seymour Siegel
Jewish Wisdom, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin
The First Jewish Book of Why, Alfred Kolatch
The Second Jewish Book of Why, Alfred Kolatch
The First Jewish Catalog, Rabbi Michael Strassfeld
The Second Jewish Catalog, Rabbi Michael Strassfeld
The Complete Book of Jewish Observance, Leo Trepp

Jewish Thought

Sacred Fragments, Rabbi Neil Gillman
The Death of Death, Rabbi Neil Gillman
Conservative Judaism, Rabbi Neil Gillman; Behrman House
A Jewish Theology, Rabbi Louis Jacobs
Healer of Shattered Hearts, Rabbi David Wolpe
Judaism as a Civilization, Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan
God and the Big Bang, by Rabbi Daniel Matt

Jewish History

Jewish People, Jewish Thought, Robert Seltzer
Wanderings, Chaim Potok
A History of the Jewish People, Solomon Grayzel
History of the Jewish People, Max Margolis and Alexander Marx
A History of the Jewish People, edited by H. H. Ben-Sasson
Jews, God, and History, Max Dimont
A History of the Jewish Experience, Leo Trepp
A History of Zionism, Walter Laqueur

Prayer/Liturgy

To Pray as a Jew, Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin
Service of the Heart, Evelyn Garfiel
Entering Jewish Prayer, Reuven Hammer

Bible

Tanakh, Jewish Publication Society

The Jewish Study Bible, Oxford University Press

The Five Books of Moses, translated by Everett Fox, Schocken

Etz Hayim, Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of *Conservative Judaism*

The JPS Bible Commentary series (includes all five books of Torah, Jonah, and Esther)

The Book of Job, translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin

About the Course

Some students in this course might be serious Jews, involved with Congregation Ahavas Israel or Temple Emanuel or unaffiliated, who would like to fill in a few gaps in their basic Jewish education. Some might be totally unfamiliar with Judaism, may or may not be Jewish, but have heard or read something about Judaism and want to learn more. Others might be committed Christians, interested in learning the Jewish background against which Christianity developed. Still others might be working on conversion to Judaism. All are welcome.

Because of our limited time and the vastness of the material that I would like to cover, we need to begin promptly at 7:00 p.m. I will set aside a few minutes to address questions that have come up in the course of the week, whether from past lessons or from current events. My lectures are designed to be responsive to questions, keeping in mind the Rabbinic admonition, “One who is embarrassed [to ask questions], does not learn.”

Occasionally, the curriculum includes assignments, involving areas of Jewish practice and home rituals. These assignments are primarily for those students looking to deepen their own Jewish commitment or for those seeking conversion. All students, however, should feel free to engage in the special assignments.

All services and programs of the synagogue are open to guests. You may wish to subscribe to the synagogue weekly email (sign up from the website, AhavasIsraelGR.org) to keep track of everything that is happening. Also, feel free to visit our Shabbat service, beginning at 9:30 a.m. on Saturday mornings.

Now, in the immortal words of the 1st century Rabbinic sage Hillel, *Tzei u'Imad*, “Go and learn!”

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Session One - Torah: Our People's Story

November 18, 2024

Recommended reading:

Telushkin, Chapter 1-30

Overview of the Torah: its basic narratives, personalities, and themes. Exploration of the concept of *brit* (covenant) as a basic motif of the Torah. Building classroom community and reviewing administrative and learning requirements.

Students will:

- Begin to build a classroom community.
- Understand class expectations and goals.
- Be introduced to the basic narratives, personalities, and themes of the Torah.
- Understand the concept of “*brit*” as an overarching theme of the Torah, and as an entrance point to understanding what it means to be Jewish.

Note: No class next week because of the citywide Interfaith Thanksgiving Service at Westminster Presbyterian Church, 47 Jefferson Ave SE, 7:00 p.m.

Session Two - Ancient Israel: Kings, Priests, and Prophets December 2, 2024

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 3-48

Telushkin, Chapters 31-63

Scheindlin, 1-49

Overview of the Hebrew Bible and the ancient history (Conquest of Canaan to Babylonian Exile) of the Jewish People. Discussion of the ways that the Bible is used in Jewish liturgical life. Examination of selected texts and concepts from Nevi'im and Ketuvim.

Students will:

- Explore the basic structure of the Tanakh, with an emphasis on understanding the different kinds of literature represented (history, prophecy, wisdom, poetry).
- Survey the ancient history of the Jewish People from 1200 BCE – 539 BCE.
- Understand the way that the Tanakh is read in Jewish liturgical life (haftarot and megillot)

Note: No class for the next two weeks, December 9 and 16, because I will be in Israel at a Rabbinic convention.

Session Three - Two Jews . . . Three Opinions

December 23, 2024

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 49-86

Telushkin, Chapters 116-117, 120-121, 208-211, 222, 225-229

Understanding the varieties of Jewish-ness — including exploration of geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity. Development and ideology of the modern Jewish denominations. Introduction of the concept of mitzvah and halakha as a lens to examine the philosophic underpinnings of Jewish religious diversity.

Students will:

- Explore some of the basic groupings within the Jewish People — including groupings based on geographic, linguistic, and cultural background.
- Understand the different Jewish denominations, their philosophical and historical underpinnings, and the practical differences between them in practice.
- Gain an appreciation for religious pluralism as a key Jewish religious value.
- Reflect on where they fit in the diverse Jewish People.

Session Four - Sacred Days: The Festivals of the Year December 30, 2024

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 87-142

Telushkin, Chapters 296-319

Greenberg, Chapter 1: "The Holidays as the Jewish Way"

Overview of the narratives, rituals, and themes of the major Jewish holidays, including: the Shalosh Regalim, the High Holy Days, Hanukkah, Purim, and Tisha b'Av. Emphasis on the way s that the Jewish calendar conveys Judaism's core teachings and values.

NOTE: Some holidays, including Passover, the High Holy Days, and the Shabbat will each be given their own complete session. Emphasis will be given in this class on Shavuot, Sukkot, Hanukkah, Purim, and Tisha b'Av.

Students will:

- Learn to name the major holidays of the Jewish calendar and articulate their
- important most important stories, themes, and observances.
- Understand that the Jewish holidays are not just discrete celebrations, but form an
- experiential, annual curriculum that conveys the Jewish People's major narratives,
- beliefs, and concepts.
- Experience a few of the rituals involved with holiday observances.

Session Five - Shabbat: A Cathedral in Time January 6, 2025

Recommended reading:

Heschel, *The Sabbath* [You likely will not be able to read the entire book for this session (even though it is fairly short), but if you can access even just the prologue or chapter one, you'll be hooked!]

Exploration of the practice of Shabbat, from its origins in the Ten Commandments to its contemporary observance. Overview of the principles of *shmirat* Shabbat, emphasizing helping students determine how to begin incorporating elements of Shabbat observance into their lives. Examination of the meaning and practice of Shabbat rituals in the home.

Students will:

- Understand the basic concepts, vocabulary, traditions, and practices that characterize a traditional Shabbat observance.
- Gain an appreciation for the meaning and value of Shabbat and think about how they will incorporate Shabbat into their own lives.
- Practice some Friday night Shabbat rituals and gain the skills to be able to observe Shabbat in their own homes.

Session Six - Prayer: Keva and Kavanna

January 13, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 197-214

Telushkin, Chapters 337-339, 341-352

Exploration of the mechanics and meaning behind Jewish prayer. Focus on the general rubrics of the prayer service, *keva/kavanna*, ritual garb and symbols, and comfort in the synagogue environment. Building familiarity with basic prayers and blessings—including Sh'ma, Amidah, Kaddish, and the basic blessing formula.

Students will:

- Become familiar with the basic elements of the Jewish prayer service, including the layout of the synagogue, the use of ritual items, the structure of the prayer service, and some of the key Jewish prayers including Sh'ma, Amidah, and Kaddish.
- Learn about the practice of saying “Brakhot” and recognize and use the “Baruch ata...” formula.
- Discuss the meaning and place of prayer in their personal, spiritual lives and explore ways to connect their personal understanding of prayer with their Jewish consciousness.

Session Seven - Passover: Exodus and Us

January 20, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 124-129

Greenberg, Chapter 2: “Judaism as an Exodus Religion”

Study of the Passover narrative, emphasizing its importance to shaping Jewish identity and values. Examination of the Passover dietary laws. Experiential study of the rituals of the Passover Seder.

Students will:

- Understand the Passover narrative and its significance for shaping Jewish identity and ethics.
- Become familiar with the basic laws on what can and cannot be eaten on Passover and how to prepare a home for Passover.
- Practice the rituals of the Seder, so that they can feel comfortable participating fully in Seders and take personal ownership over this ritual.

Session Eight - God Wrestling

January 27, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 143-180

Telushkin, Chapters 257, 268, 292-294

Jewish approaches to theology, with emphasis on the concept of “wrestling with God” and a variety of ways of understanding God. Exploration of selected Jewish texts about God from the Bible, rabbinic literature, and the prayer book. Opportunity for developing and articulating a personal theology.

Students will:

- Understand that “wrestling with God” is an essential part of Jewish theology.
- Explore diverse ways that the Jewish Tradition has described God.
- Clarify their personal beliefs about God and make connections between those beliefs and Jewish “God-language.”

Session Nine - The Rabbinic Revolution

February 3, 2025

Recommended reading:

Telushkin, Chapters 64-84

Scheindlin, 51-69

Overview of the development of Rabbinic Judaism and how it is distinct from earlier Biblical Israelite religious practice. The historical context of the late-Second Temple Period and the existential challenge posed by the destruction of the Temple. Examination of illustrative examples of rabbinic literature, particularly how rabbinic texts adapt, expand, and update Biblical concepts.

Students will:

- Become familiar with the history of the Second Temple Period and Rabbinic Period (515 BCE – 500 CE)
- Explore the different types of rabbinic literature and understand the ways in which the Rabbis changed the Jewish Tradition to create the form of Judaism that we practice today.
- Study a few representative rabbinic texts to understand some of the central concepts guiding the Rabbinic project.

Session Ten - Days of Awe

February 10, 2025

Recommended reading:

Telushkin, Chapters 285-288

Greenberg, Chapter 6: “Rebirth and Renewal: The High Holy Days”

Exploring themes and observances of the High Holy Day period—from Rosh Hodesh Elul through Yom Kippur, emphasizing the practice of teshuvah. Study of key symbols, prayers, and what to expect from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services.

Students will:

- Understand the High Holy Days not just as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but as an entire period of the year dedicated and personal and communal renewal.
- Explore the concept of *teshuvah* and gain an in-depth understanding of its process.
- Become familiar with some of the major observances, symbols, and prayers of the High Holy Days and increase comfort in attending HHD synagogue services.

Session Eleven - Jews + Food

February 17, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 49-60

Telushkin, Chapters 276 & 336

Exploration of the practice of kashrut—its basic rules and concepts and how to practically apply them to daily life. Emphasis on a developmental approach to taking on Jewish eating practices. Also, study the practice of brakhot before and after eating.

Students will:

- Understand the basic concepts, vocabulary, and practices of kashrut observance.
- Gain an appreciation for the meaning and value of kashrut.
- Consider how they will incorporate kashrut into their own eating practice.
- Understand the use of food blessings and practice them.

Session Twelve - Under Crescent and Cross

February 24, 2025

Recommended reading:

Telushkin, Chapters 85-115

Scheindlin, 71-121

Overview of Jewish history from the end of the Talmud Period until the dawn of the Modern Period. Focus on the contributions of Rashi, Rambam, and Joseph Karo. Overview of the development of Kabbalah, including a basic discussion of the Zohar and the Tsfat/Lurianic tradition. Emphasis on the question: What role do the contributions of the Middle Ages—literary, halakhic, and mystical play in contemporary Judaism?

Students will:

1. Become familiar with the basic history of the Jewish Middle Ages (500 CE – 1789 CE), with particular emphasis on the major personalities of Rashi, Rambam, and Karo and how their thought influences modern Judaism.
2. Explore the history of Kabbalah and understand the role that Kabbalah has played in shaping Jewish notions of God.
3. Study a few representative texts from this period to continue to develop their ability to read and understand Jewish primary sources.

Session Thirteen - The Greatest Blessing

March 3, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 226-230

Telushkin, Chapters 326-328, 330

Study of Jewish rituals for sanctifying relationships, with an in-depth focus on marriage rituals. Discussion of mikvah— for conversion, lifecycle rituals, and taharat ha-mishpacha. Exploration of Jewish ethics around intimate relationships and sexuality. Discussion of inclusion of LGBTQ Jews in contemporary Jewish life.

Students will:

- Consider the ways that Jewish ethics can inform a contemporary understanding of interpersonal relationships and sexuality.
- Explore Jewish marriage rituals and be able to identify and understand the meaning behind the steps of a Jewish marriage ceremony.
- Become familiar with mikvah and understand its uses.

Session Fourteen - From Generation to Generation

March 10, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 215-226; 230-236

Telushkin, Chapters 277, 295, 324-325

Exploration of the rituals and meaning behind Brit Milah and Simḥat Bat, with a discussion of the significance of circumcision both for infants and for converts. Choosing a Jewish name, again focusing on both infants and conversion. Jewish parenting and different modes of Jewish education (both formal and informal). The significance of the B'nai Mitzvah ceremony.

Students will:

- Understand the basic concepts, vocabulary, and practices related to ceremonies for new Jewish babies, including reflecting on the subject of circumcision and its significance.
- Understand the different modalities of Jewish education and the b'nai mitzvah ceremony.
- Consider ways to integrate Jewish ritual and content into the life of their current/future family.

Note: Join us for a Purim service and celebration this coming Thursday night, March 13. The service will begin at approximately 7:00 p.m.

Session Fifteen - Life's Hard Times

March 17, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 236-241

Telushkin, Chapters 278-280, 332-334

Understanding Jewish practices toward illness and healing, particularly the mitzvah of bikkur holim. Exploration of Jewish ethics regarding end-of-life, including questions about life support, autopsy, organ donation, etc. Overview of funeral and burial practices and mourning practices including shiva, shloshim, and yarhtzeit. Jewish views on the afterlife.

Students will:

- Learn and discuss the Jewish value of bikkur holim.
- Understand the basic concepts, vocabulary, and practices related to kavod ha-met (honoring the dead) and nichum avelim (comforting mourners) in Jewish life.
- Reflect on issues of medical ethics at end-of-life through a Jewish framework.

Session Sixteen - Hatred and Heroism

March 24, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 259-277

Scheindlin, 199-215

Telushkin, Chapters 240-246, 185-201

History of anti-Semitism, from Biblical stories (Purim & Hanukkah), to Jews under Christian and Muslim rule, to the advent of racial anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Holocaust survivor testimony and discussion of Jewish responses to the Holocaust.

Students will:

- Become familiar with the history of anti-Semitism from antiquity to modernity.
- Consider what it means to identify with the Jewish community, given its history of persecution.

Note: I will pass out 100 Basic Judaism review questions at the end of class today. At the end of the final two class sessions there will be time to go over some of the answers.

Session Seventeen - Israel: A Great Dream

March 31, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 243-257

Telushkin, Chapters 133-184

Scheindlin, 217-248

The significance of Israel in Jewish life and thought. Historical survey from Herzl through the founding of the State of Israel, with an emphasis on understanding the meaning and varieties of Zionism. Overview of Israeli geography and key sites. Focus on understanding the connection between American Jews and Israel, including the question of how we are to understand and respond to Israel's domestic and international struggles.

Students will:

- Understand the concept of Diaspora and the ways that Jewish ritual maintained the connection to the Land of Israel while living abroad.
- Learn the origins of the Zionist Movement and understand how its leaders attempted to translate the dream of Israel into the reality of the State.
- Discuss some of the significant incidents in the timeline of the creation and the history of the State of Israel, particularly those that continue to impact contemporary Israel.

Note: There will be time to ask questions about the 100 Basic Judaism review questions.

Session Eighteen - The Jewish Mission to Heal the World

April 7, 2025

Recommended reading:

Kushner, 293-304

Telushkin, Chapter 291

Closing the class with an exploration of three big concepts-- *Tzelem Elohim*, *Tzedaka*, and *Tikkun Olam* — which serve as the foundational principles of Judaism.

Students will:

- Gain a sense of reflective closure for the class experience.
- Review key concepts and provide answers to both logistical and content questions.
- Explore the values of *Tzedakah*, *Tzelem Elohim*, and *Tikkun Olam* as a framework for developing a sense of Judaism's purpose.
- Articulate what Judaism means to them at this point in their journey, and reflect on their next steps.

Note: There will be time to ask questions about the 100 Basic Judaism review questions.