

Department of Religion and Culture
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

JUD/RLCL 2134
Judaism:
History, Culture, Heritage

Fall 2016
Prof. Samuel J. Kessler
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Tuesday/Thursday
12:30-1:45PM
DER 1076

Office Hours:
T/H 2-4PM

Final Exam:
10:05AM, Tuesday, December 13

Judaism is often called a “world religion.” But of that group—which can include traditions as diverse as Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism—it has the fewest adherents (approximately fifteen million) and only a single country where it comprises a majority of the population (Israel). Jews are about two percent of the total population of the United States. Why, then, is Judaism so commonly discussed? Why are its texts so widely known? Why have its people so often been targeted for both plaudit and discrimination?

This course explores the religious and cultural life of the Jewish people. Interweaving three thousand years of history, theology, folklore, philosophy, and literature, it seeks to give students a basic working knowledge of the many foundational texts and ideas that have made Judaism so important in contemporary intellectual and cultural life. The core text for this class is the Koren Sacks Siddur (Ashkenaz). *Siddur* is the Hebrew word for prayer book, and arises from the root *s-d-r*, whose most common translation is “order”. The semester is, therefore, built around understanding the meaning and history of Judaism through how Jews have *ordered* things: liturgical time; communal and individual activities; the language of theological awareness; human and divine governance; and the relationship between human society and nature.

The centuries-long agglomerative construction of the siddur allows for a unique exploration of Jewish history and culture: the siddur places a wide variety of (often divergent) texts, actions, and assumptions alongside one another with little attempt to moderate their differences. The liturgical texts found in the siddur militate against any idea that Judaism begins at Genesis and ends in American or Israeli modernity. In fact, the structure of the siddur belies all forms of linearity. It therefore pushes us into thinking about tradition and belief, theology and practice, geography and nationalism, as all alongside and constitutive one of the other, more like an evolving image than like a pyramid built one block at a time from the past to the present.

Much of the complex, vibrant, exciting culture of Judaism past and present is captured by the texts and ideas present in the siddur. What we come to see, even in the modern and contemporary periods, is that Jews continue to use the siddur-genre (that is, time set aside for community liturgical expression) as a way of embracing their heritage and creating new ideas. Even contemporary Jews who never attend a synagogue or participate in traditional ritual often attempt to use liturgy or liturgical moments (e.g., Friday evening; Passover) as a way of expressing their personal relationship to Judaism (even if often in a confrontational way).

The long history of Judaism is about various interrelated groups using religious and communal expression to say something about their vision of the People of Israel, its history, and its future. The siddur is a ready palimpsest for our investigations of the Jewish cultural heritage. This class will introduce you to this fascinating and complicated people.

All readings for this course will be available as PDF documents on Canvas unless listed below as Required Texts. (All required texts are available at the Virginia Tech University Bookstore, Amazon.com, or through the publisher's website.) Readings should be completed before the Tuesday lecture for the week that they are listed. You are required to bring a printed copy of the week's reading to each class period (although you may bring the texts on a tablet computer but not a laptop computer.) You are responsible for checking your VT email regularly for communications about the course. The [VT Writing Center](#) provides helpful overviews and links for improving your writing. They also have appointment services available to help edit papers or discuss the writing process with a tutor.

[This class has no prerequisites. The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, which can include assignment due dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.]

Guidelines and Policies

Accessibility Resource Policy

Those who qualify under the VT policies and guidelines for reasonable accommodation should alert the professor privately at the start of the semester. Information concerning programs through University ADA Services can be found [here](#).

Assignment Policies

All assignments are to be submitted online before 12:30PM on the day they are due. You will be penalized 10% for each day a paper is late. Papers submitted over one week after the deadline will not be accepted. If you are ill or have a family emergency you must submit papers online before 12:30PM on the due date or speak with the professor as soon as possible.

All assignments must be written in 12-point font, Times New Roman or Garamond, with 1-inch margins. They are to be submitted in .doc formats only.

You may not contact the professor about papers or exams beginning 24-hours prior to their due date.

University Honor Code

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community

agrees to abide by states:

“As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times.”

Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code.

For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit:

<https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>

Honor Code Pledge for Assignments:

The Virginia Tech honor pledge for assignments is as follows:

“I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on this assignment.”

The pledge is to be written out on all graded assignments at the university and signed by the student. The honor pledge represents both an expression of the student’s support of the honor code and an unambiguous acknowledgment that the student has, on the assignment in question, abided by the obligation that the Honor Code entails. In the absence of a written honor pledge, the Honor Code still applies to an assignment.

1. All assignments submitted shall be considered “graded work,” and all aspects of your coursework are covered by the Honor Code. All projects and homework assignments are to be completed individually unless otherwise specified.
2. Commission of any of the following acts shall constitute academic misconduct. This listing is not, however, exclusive of other acts that may reasonably be said to constitute academic misconduct. Clarification is provided for each definition with some examples of prohibited behaviors in the Undergraduate Honor Code Manual located at: <https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>
 - A. CHEATING
Cheating includes the intentional use of unauthorized materials, information, notes, study aids or other devices or materials in any academic exercise, or attempts thereof.
 - B. PLAGIARISM
Plagiarism includes the copying of the language, structure, programming, computer code, ideas, and/or thoughts of another and passing off the same as one's own original work, or attempts thereof.
 - C. FALSIFICATION
Falsification includes the statement of any untruth, either verbally or in writing, with respect to any element of one's academic work, or attempts thereof.
 - D. FABRICATION
Fabrication includes making up data and results, and recording or reporting them, or submitting fabricated documents, or attempts thereof.
 - E. MULTIPLE SUBMISSION

Multiple submission involves the submission for credit—without authorization of the instructor receiving the work—of substantial portions of any work (including oral reports) previously submitted for credit at any academic institution, or attempts thereof.

F. COMPLICITY

Complicity includes intentionally helping another to engage in an act of academic misconduct, or attempts thereof.

G. VIOLATION OF UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE, DEPARTMENTAL, PROGRAM, COURSE, OR FACULTY RULES

The violation of any University, College, Departmental, Program, Course, or Faculty Rules relating to academic matters that may lead to an unfair academic advantage by the student violating the rule(s).

Required Texts

- Koren Sacks Siddur: A Hebrew/English Prayerbook, Compact Size (Ashkenaz) [\$18.95]
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* [\$14.00]

Course Assignments and Expectations

Class Attendance and Participation

Attendance will be taken during each class period. If you arrive late and attendance has already been taken, you are responsible for alerting the professor to your presence. Arrivals more than ten minutes after class begins, or continuous tardiness, will be counted as absence. More than two unexcused absences will impact your final grade by 2% per absence. If you have more than six unexcused absences you cannot receive a course grade higher than a C. Please notify the professor as soon as possible for absences related to illness or family emergencies. For more information, the VT Class Attendance Policy can be found [here](#).

Class participation points are based on the following criteria: arriving in class on time; being awake and attentive during lecture; being responsive and active during discussions and small group activities; respectfully listening when others are speaking; and being engaged in the course without checking your mobile devices or non-class related webpages. Failure to meet these criteria will result in the loss of participation points throughout the semester.

Reading Reviews (2 pages, double-spaced)

During the semester you must write three reading reviews of texts from the course. These reviews must demonstrate your comprehension of the text, and should include a one-paragraph summary, an explanation of the text's core thesis or purpose, and a discussion of the historical/religious/cultural/social significance of the text. You must write at least one review before the midterm and a second before Thanksgiving.

First Paper: Online Observation of a Jewish Ritual (4 pages, double-spaced)

For this first paper you will be provided with a page of links to various YouTube videos. You will choose one of these links, watch the Jewish event or ritual it captures, and write a critical response paper. Your paper should include: observations about what actions are occurring; who is participating; how they are participating; and what symbols are being used

to what effect. You might also choose to include your thoughts on how this event is similar or different from religious practices you are more familiar with, and what those similarities or differences tell us about the nature of Judaism and its adherents.

(Due Thursday, September 29, in class)

Midterm

For the midterm exam (which is divided into two parts) you will be given questions based on classroom lectures and your assigned readings. Part One will ask you to define a set of ten terms that featured prominently in the first half of the semester. These might include the names of historical figures, geographical locations, theological concepts, or religious practices. You will be provided with a list of terms prior to the exam. Part Two consists of two essays, asking you to address questions about Jewish life or practice. In each answer you will need to cite specific aspects of Jewish history, theology, and practice.

(Tuesday, October 18)

Second Paper: History of a Jewish Idea (6 pages, double-spaced)

For your second paper you will choose a Big Idea in Judaism (e.g., God, prayer, Jerusalem) and write a paper analyzing three different Jewish arguments or views on this topic. These views can be held by historical or contemporary figures, but they must all come from writers who identify themselves as being within the Jewish tradition. (We will discuss a list of topics and thinkers in class.)

As part of this assignment, you must schedule an individual meeting with the professor to discuss your topic **before November 8**. You *must* arrive at the meeting with an outline of your paper (including your three thinkers and what they believe), a thesis statement, and a draft first paragraph. These materials and this meeting are worth 10% of your total Second Paper grade.

(Due Thursday, November 15, in class)

Final Exam

The final exam will be cumulative vis-à-vis the readings from both halves of the course. Part One will again consist of definitions. For Part Two you will be provided with six quotations, taken from various texts in the course. You will be asked to choose three and write a brief (2-3 page hand-written) essay about what each quotation means, where it comes from, and how it reflects core elements of Jewish history and practice. You will need to reference at least two other (different) texts from the course in each of the three essays.

The final exam will be at 10:05AM, Tuesday, December 13

Grading

Class Attendance and Participation	5
Reading Reviews	15
First Paper	15
Midterm	20
Second Paper	20
Final Exam	<u>25</u>
	100

Schedule

Week 1: August 23-25

Introduction: The *Siddur* as Guide to Jewish Culture and Practice

Reading (for Thursday)

- Jonathan Sacks, "Introduction," in KSS, xv-xlii

Week 2: August 30-September 1

Between Earth and Heaven: The Structure of Jewish Time

Readings

- Genesis 1-2 (Canvas)
- Leviticus 23 (Canvas)
- Numbers 28-29 (Canvas)
- Mishna *Rosh Hashana* 1, 2:9 (Canvas)
- Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, pp. 5-26 (Canvas)

Week 3: September 6-8

"And there was evening and there was morning" (Part 1): The *Shema*

Readings

- KSS pp. 242-252
- Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, pp. 131-148 (Canvas)
- Mishna *Berakhot* 1 (Canvas)

Week 4: September 13-15

Land and Nation: Exodus, Jerusalem, Israel

Readings

- KSS, pp. 78-84, 100, 122, 974-992
- Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, pp. 23-51 (Canvas)
- Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC - 1492 AD*, pp. 104-14 (Canvas)

Week 5: September 20-22

Torah: God's Word, Israel's Constitution

Readings

- Deuteronomy 4-6 (Canvas)
- KSS, pp. 498-506, 530-534
- Marc Zvi Brettler, "The Canonization of the Bible" (Canvas)
- Jordan S. Penkower, "The Development of the Masoretic Bible" (Canvas)

***Tuesday, September 20: Meet at VT Hillel**

Week 6: September 27-29

The Rabbis: Finding Solutions, Building Communities

Readings

- KSS, pp. 640-652 (*Pirkei Avot*)

- Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud*, pp. 20-32 (Canvas)
- Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides*, 1-6 (Canvas)
- Elie Wiesel, *Rashi*, 32-62 (Canvas)

Week 7: October 4-6

Note: No class on October 4: *Rosh Hashanah

The Sabbath: A Palace of Time

Readings

- KSS, pp. 318-324, 328-330, 374, 382
- Heschel, *The Sabbath*

Week 8: October 11-13

“And there was evening and there was morning” (Part 2): The *Amidah*

Readings

- KSS pp. 108-134
- Mishna *Berakhot* 4 (Canvas)
- Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 28b-30a (Canvas)

Week 9: October 18-20

Exile Near and Far: Babylon, Rome, Europe, and the Arab Lands

Readings

- Psalm 137 (KSS, pp. 974)
- *Lamentations* 1 (Canvas)
- Kinot (Canvas)
- André Aciman, *Out of Egypt*, pp. 3-39 (Canvas)
- Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews of Baghdad*, pp. 1-8 (Canvas)

(Midterm Exam: Tuesday, October 18)

Week 10: October 25-27

Jewish Families: Gender Roles and Memory Traditions

Readings

- KSS, pp. 372, 378
- *Deuteronomy* 11 (Canvas)
- Jonathan Boyarin, *Jewish Families*, pp. 17-62 (Canvas)
- Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Canvas)

***Guest lecture: Thursday, October 27 by Maya Benton (+1.5% extra credit)**

Week 11: November 1-3

The Rabbinic Imagination: Folktales, Mythology, and Storytelling as Theological Expression

Readings

- Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 53b-54b (Canvas)
- David Stern, “Midrash and Jewish Interpretation” (Canvas)

***Guest lecture: Monday, October 31 by Aimee Pozorski and Maren Scheurer (+1.5% extra credit)**

Week 12: November 8-10

***Note: Election Day, November 8: VOTE!**

Disruption and Re-Consecration (Part 1): Hasidism and the Haskalah

Readings

- Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Poland*, pp. 3-23 (Canvas)
- Gershon Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 21-31 (Canvas)
- Jonathan Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity*, pp. 1-23 (Canvas)

(Last day for Second Paper meeting: Tuesday, November 8)

Week 13: November 15-17

Disruption and Re-Consecration (Part 2): Zionism, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel

Readings

- Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, pp. 85-97 (Canvas)
- Conservative Mahzor, *Eleh Ezkera* (Canvas)
- Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Canvas)

(Second Paper Due: Tuesday, November 15, in class)

***Thanksgiving Break: November 21-25**

Week 14: November 29-December 1

Judaism in the United States

Reading

- Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*, xiii-xx, 356-374 (Canvas)

Week 15: December 6

Between Religion and Culture

Readings

- Mark Oppenheimer, “Learning Judaism as a Native Language Requires More Than Synagogue Once a Year” (Online)
- Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” pp. 1-13 (Canvas)

Final Exam: 10:05AM, Tuesday, December 13

“Rabbi Yishmael [son of Rabbi Yohanan ben Beroka] said: One who learns in order to teach will be given the opportunity to learn and teach. One who learns in order to do will be given the opportunity to learn, teach, keep, and do.” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:6)