

Department of Religion and Culture  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

JUD/RLCL 3404  
Torah and Tradition:  
Jewish Responses to Contemporary Moral Questions

Spring 2017  
Prof. Samuel J. Kessler  
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Tuesday/Thursday  
11AM – 12:15PM  
MCB 232

Office Hours:  
211 Major Williams  
T/H 12:30-2:30PM

Final Exam:  
10:05AM, Friday, May 5

Life is full of moral questions. Some of these questions are large and obvious, others are small and mundane. How should foreigners be treated? Must I apologize when I feel I am still in the right? What does it mean to honor my parents? May I take another life if my own is in danger? Our responses to the smaller, routine questions often pass by unnoticed, answered through pre-learned principles and normative standards. The larger questions can instigate long periods of self-reflection, moral awakenings, and new motivations for life. Sometimes, our engagement with moral questions occurs on a sliding scale: Should I hold the door open for the person ten steps behind me? Should I hold the door open for a person ten steps behind me who is carrying a heavy package? Should I hold the door open for an elderly person who is ten steps behind me? Should I hold the door open for the President of the United States? At other times, one answer always suffices: Should I murder a noisy neighbor?

Studying the answers to life's most challenging (or apparently simple) moral questions can give us a unique window into the underlying ethics and virtues of a cultural worldview. What errors are harshly punished and what easily forgiven? Who are identified as the weakest and neediest and how are they protected or shunned? How are moral answers created, proved, and taught to future generations?

This course examines Jewish responses to various pressing moral questions from history and today. We begin by learning some of the unique aspects of Jewish philosophical and theological reasoning, and see how past and present Jewish thinkers have (re-)interpreted Biblical scripture in their attempts to answer fundamental questions about the ethical character of human society. The remainder of the course is divided into three units, each of which grapples with specific contemporary moral questions and the ways Jews have tried to answer them. Unit One, "Universal Morality," looks at the problem of evil; the question of slavery; the difficulties of nationalism and universalism; and the relationship between religion and science. Unit Two, "Communal Morality,"

examines difficult issues related to the beginning and end of life; marriage; the role of women in religious and communal life; and the acceptance of homosexuality. Unit Three, “Sexuality,” focuses on Jewish views on pre-marital sex; prostitution; and pornography. The semester ends with a reading of the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, whose author offers neither hope nor closure—but nonetheless counsels forbearance—in the pursuance of a good and meaningful life.

All readings for this course will be available as [PDF documents](#) on Canvas (under “Files”). Readings should be completed before the Tuesday class meeting for the week that they are listed. You are required to bring a copy of the week’s reading to each class period—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.

The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus as needed to best meet the learning objective of this course, 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 on Canvas before 11:00AM on the day they are due or they will be considered late. 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 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 .pdf format only.

You may not contact the professor about 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/>

### Required Texts

All texts for this course will be available via the “Files” tab on Canvas.

### Course Assignments and Expectations

#### *Class Attendance and Participation*

Attendance will be taken throughout the semester. 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 affect your final grade by 2% per absence. If you have more than six unexcused absences you cannot receive a grade higher than a C for the course. Please notify the Instructor 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 alert and attentive during lecture; being engaged and active during discussions and small group activities; respectfully listening when others are speaking; **being involved in the course without texting or checking your phone or email**. Failure to meet these criteria will result in the loss of participation points throughout the semester.

#### *First Paper* (4-5 pages, double-spaced)

For this first paper you will be presented with a list of YouTube videos, each of which records a conversation between two or more contemporary Jewish thinkers. These conversations will all revolve around a central moral question of our time. For this paper, first choose one of these conversations and watch it entirely. (You may need to do this more than once.) Then, your goal in the paper is to describe, analyze, and evaluate both thinkers and their positions: How do they present their respective arguments? What texts, philosophies, or theologies do they bring as proof of their viewpoint? Do their ideas seem to represent a universal morality or a specifically Jewish ethics?

**(Due Thursday, February 16 on Canvas)**

#### *Midterm*

During the midterm you will be presented with a moral question *not* covered by this course. On the exam there will be five quotations taken from Jewish sources, including (but not limited to) Bible, Talmud, medieval philosophy, and contemporary ethics. For the exam, you will need to write an essay that integrates each of these quotations, discussing how different Jewish forms of thought from different time periods would engage with this moral question. You do not need to solve the question or come to a universally acceptable solution. Instead, your role is to reflect on and analyze the various ways Jewish thinkers have gone about answering this question.

**You must bring your own Blue Book to the Midterm Exam.**

**(Tuesday, March 21)**

#### *Second Paper* (6-8 pages, double-spaced)

Your second paper is an opportunity for you to explore in greater depth one of the thinkers we have read over the course of the semester. You must choose one of the authors found on this syllabus, read three to five of her additional works, and write a synthetic paper describing and analyzing her understanding of the moral life.

As part of this assignment you must schedule an individual meeting with the professor to discuss your topic **before Thursday, April 20**. You *must* arrive at the meeting with an outline of your paper, an annotated bibliography of your sources, a thesis statement, and a draft first paragraph. These materials and this meeting are worth 10% of your total Second Paper grade.

**(Due Wednesday, May 3 at 11AM on Canvas)**

Grading

Attendance and Participation	20
First Paper	25
Midterm	25
Second Paper	<u>30</u>
	100

ScheduleWeek 1: January 17-19

Introduction: Jewish Forms of Thinking

*Readings* (for Thursday)

- Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on Jewish Theology," pp. 261-297

*Forms of Jewish Reasoning*Week 2: January 24-26

A Different Bible: Introducing Rabbinic Methodology

*Readings*

- David Stern, "Midrash and Jewish Interpretation," pp. 1863-1875
- BT *Bava Kamma* 83b
- Ethan Tucker, "Moral Revolution or Complex Application?"
- David M. Feldman, "The Structure of Jewish Law," pp. 3-18

**\*No class Thursday, January 26**Week 3: January 31-February 2

Reasoning Toward Truth: Jewish Philosophy

*Readings*

- Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 19-44
- Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, pp. 1-30

**\*Evening lecture: Thursday, February 2 by Jodi Magness at 7PM (+1% extra credit)**Week 4: February 7-9Responsa Culture: *She'elot u'tshuvot* as a Modern Methodology*Readings*

- Joshua Berman, "What Is This Thing Called Law?" pp. 1-17
- Solomon Freehof, *A Treasury of Responsa*, selections

*Universal Morality*Week 5: February 14-16

After Evil: Post-Holocaust Theology

*Readings*

- Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, "Interpreting the Holocaust for Future Generations," pp. 18-40
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," pp. 117-134

**(First Paper Due: Thursday, February 16 on Canvas)**Week 6: February 21-23

"From the House of Bondage:" Slavery Past and Present

*Readings*

- Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 15

- David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, pp. 131-138, 168-177
- Ethan Tucker, “From Slavery to Slavery,” <https://www.mechonhadar.org/torah-resource/slavery-slavery>
- Benjamin Scolnic, “Deuteronomy as the Intellectual Foundation of Conservative Judaism”

Week 7: February 28-March 2

This Land: Nationalism (*Medinat Yisrael*) and Universalism (*Tikkum Olam*)

*Readings*

- Yoram Hazony, “On the National State, Part 1”
- Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*, pp. 1-34
- Daniel Gordis, “The Night Ahad Ha’am Could Have Declared Victory”

**\*Spring Break March 6-10***Communal Morality*Week 8: March 14-16

Beginnings and Endings: Contraception, Abortion, and Euthanasia

*Readings*

- Shmuley Boteach, *Kosher Sex*, pp. 1-13, 45-50, 59-66, 105-112
- USCJ, “The Abortion Controversy”
- Daniel Eisenberg, “Abortion in Jewish Law”
- David Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law*, pp. 169-175, 227-248
- Rachael Biale, “Abortion in Jewish Law”
- Fred Rosner, “Euthenasia”
- Byron Sherwin, “A View of Euthanasia”

Week 9: March 21-23

Love and Relationships: Family Values

*Readings*

- Jennie Rosenfeld, *The Newlywed’s Guide to Physical Intimacy*, pp. TBD
- Elliot Dorff, *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself*, pp. 127-154

**(Midterm Exam: Tuesday, March 21)**Week 10: March 28-30 (*Interlude: A Brief Return to “Universal Morality”*)

Finding Meaning: Science, Religion, and Technology

**\*March 30—Special Guests: Dr. Peter Saulson (Syracuse University) and Rabbi Dr. Shai Held (Mechon Hadar)**

*Reading*

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man*, pp. 50-80

**\*Evening lecture: Wednesday, March 29 by Peter Saulson (+1% extra credit)**

**\* Evening lecture: Thursday, March 30 by Shai Held (+1% extra credit)**

Week 11: April 4-6

## Gender Roles and Social Life: Redefining Women in Religious Practice

*Readings*

- Ethan Tucker, “Equality Without Adjuncts? Confronting the Limits and Challenges of Gender Egalitarianism”
- Devorah Heshes, *The Moon’s Lost Light*, pp. 1-33

Week 12: April 11-13

## Making Intellectual Space for Homosexuality

*Readings*

- Avi Weiss, “Why I, as an Orthodox Rabbi, Support Legalizing Same-sex Marriage”
- “Statement of Principles” by select Orthodox Rabbis
- Conservative Movement, “Homosexuality, Human Dignity, and Halakhah”
- Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men*, pp. 217-252

**\*No Class April 11: Passover***Sexuality*Week 13: April 18-20

## Human Urges: Premarital Sex and Prostitution

*Readings*

- The Joy of Text, “The Premarital Episode,”
  - <http://jpmedia.co/what-happens-outside-of-marr/>
- Matt Plen, “Sex and the single Jew”
- Daas Torah, “Non-Jewish Prostitutes”

Week 14: April 25-27

## Imagining Bodies: Is There a Place for Pornography?

*Readings*

- The Joy of Text, “The Pornography Episode,”
  - <http://jpmedia.co/the-pornography-episode/>
- Joshua Lambert, “My Son, the Pornographer”
- Arielle Pardes, “Who Is Watching All the Porn Marketed to Orthodox Jews?”
- Nathan Abrams, “Jews in the American Porn Industry”

Week 15: May 2

## Searching for Questions, Evaluating Answers

- Ecclesiastes

**(Second Paper Due: Wednesday, May 3 at 11AM on Canvas)**

“They said: They do not receive the reward as one who is commanded [to perform righteous actions] and performs [them], but [rather] as one who is not commanded [to perform righteous actions] and performs [them]. As Rabbi Hanina says: [One who is] commanded and performs is greater than [one who] is not commanded and performs.”

--Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 38a