

Introduction to Jewish Thought

Instructor: Yaniv Feller (yfeller@ufl.edu)

Meeting Times: MWF 1:55-2:45pm, Matherly 105

Office Hours: Friday 3-4pm or by appointment

Course Description: What can the Bible teach us about politics? Are reason and faith compatible? What is the meaning of religious law in the modern world? We will examine these and other philosophical questions by reading canonical Jewish thinkers from the medieval philosopher Maimonides, through modern philosophers such as Spinoza and Martin Buber, and all the way to contemporary feminist theology. Special attention will be given to Jewish minority status and the conversation between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophy. No prior knowledge or experience with philosophy is required, just the desire to read closely and learn together.

Course Outcomes: By the end of this course, you will

- Become acquainted with major Jewish thinkers
- Learn to critically examine the intertwining of religion and reason
- Develop and execute a research paper that tackles philosophical questions
- Assess arguments and counterarguments and be able to
- Enhance your oral and writing skills on difficult subjects within an academic setting

Required Texts

- Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, translated by Allan Arkush.
- Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann. Please use this translation rather than the older Gregor Smith one.

Methods of Evaluation

Active Participation (10%): This is a discussion-based class. Coming to class, having done the readings and ready to discuss them, is essential for your success in this course, and for the enjoyment of all of us. If you cannot make it to class because of a valid reason (religious observance, illness etc.) please let me know as soon as possible. Other than that, you are allowed to miss one class “no questions asked.”

Brief Papers (8x2.5%=20%): For all the Roman numbered units (I-VIII), you are required to submit one response (and one response only) per unit. That is to say, one for unit I, a second for unit II etc. Each response should be about a page or two and contain the following elements: A) Copy/quote one sentence from the reading that you found especially difficult or central to an

understanding of the text and thinker as a whole. B) In one or two paragraphs, explain why this sentence is important for the understanding of the text as a whole. For that, of course, you will need to identify what you think is the main problem the author describes and/or what solution they offer. C) In one final paragraph, raise a question of the text or quote: Something that remains unclear or stands in relation (e.g. complements/complicates/contradicts) with other readings. **Date:** the day of class, 9am

Midterm Exam (20%): A short, 50-minutes in class exam covering all our readings and class discussions up to that point. **Date:** Feb. 17 during class.

In Dialogue (20%): For this assignment, you will stage a written dialogue between two thinkers of your choice. Topics might include the validity of Jewish law, or different dialogical philosophies. You will use the dialogue form to present each thinker's view, and how an imagined conversation between them might look like. **Date:** Apr. 19, 23:55

Final Exam (30%): Covering all of the class materials and discussions. **Date:** May 4, 3-5pm, **Place:** TBD

Bonus Events (1% up to three times): You are welcome to attend and then write a one or two page response on selected bonus events that will be announced in advance. You should offer a brief summary of the topic discussed followed by one point you found compelling, and then one question you had after the event. Events will be mentioned in class as they approach. **Date:** no later than one week after the event.

Numerical Grading Scale:

A	93-100	A-	90-92		
B+	87-89	B	83-86	B-	80-82
C+	77-79	C	73-76	C-	70-72
D+	68-69	D	63-67	D-	60-62
E	<60				

Grading Criteria is as follows:

- A-range – 90s – Excellent – Full command and facility with material with the ability to place it within larger historical/literary context and to make arguments based upon it.
- B-range – 80s – Very Good and Good – Solid understanding of material but without complete facility or ability to make arguments based on it.
- C-range – 70s -- Fair – Some understanding of major themes, lack of command with detail, or some understanding of detail but lack of contextual understanding.
- D-range – 60s -- Poor – Enough factual understanding to pass, but little to no contextual clarity.
- F-range – Fails – Lack of university level quality.

For the grading policies of the University of Florida in general, follow this link:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/> (Links to an external site.)

Late Submission Policy: No late submissions will be accepted for response papers or bonus events. There is enough flexibility built into the assignment. For all other assignments, a penalty of a third letter grade will be assigned for each day past the deadline, including weekends. Please do reach out if you have any medical or other concerns and we will find a solution!

Course Policies

Academic Integrity: The University of Florida Student Honor Code is located at this link: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php> (Links to an external site.). UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The Honor Code (<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honorcode/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or TAs in this class.

Accessibility: All students are welcome in this course. Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

Office Hours and E-Mail: Please feel free to talk to me about the class materials and any other concerns you might have. Meetings, either in-person or via Zoom, are preferable to email. If you cannot make it to the office hours, you can schedule a meeting using this link:

<https://calendly.com/yfeller-1/30min>

In the case of email, please use your university email account (other accounts may land in the spam folder) and include a topic-line, your name, and the question(s) you have. I try to respond quickly, but note that emails will receive a reply within two working days. This means that if you send me an email on



the weekend, or if you send a request for extension in the last minute, they might be answered only later, and the penalty incurred will be implemented.

Academic Resources:

E-learning technical support, 352-392-4357 (select option 2) or e-mail to Learningsupport@ufl.edu. <https://lss.at.ufl.edu/help.shtml>.

Teaching Center, Broward Hall, 392-2010 or 392-6420. General study skills and tutoring. <http://teachingcenter.ufl.edu/> (Links to an external site.)

Writing Studio, 302 Tigert Hall, 846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers. <http://writing.ufl.edu/writing-studio/>

Classroom Etiquette: We, as students and faculty, have a shared responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, color, culture, religion, creed, politics, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and gender expression, age, ability, and nationality.

Religion is a sensitive topic for many people. You may come from a faith tradition, or you may not. The focus of our class is on fostering critical learning and emphatic listening. We are here together to learn more, so any question that comes from an honest desire to learn is a good question. Our goal is to explore and learn, but not to judge either each other's traditions, or ignorance about them. You do not ever need to volunteer anything about your own beliefs, traditions, or practices (or lack thereof) but if you do, make sure that you speak in the first person, thereby making clear that you are representing yourself and not an entire tradition in the discussion.

Schedule

What Is Jewish Philosophy Anyway?

Jan. 9: Syllabus

Jan. 11: Leon Roth, "Is There a Jewish Philosophy?"

Jan. 13: David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, intro

Jan. 16: NO CLASS (MLK Day)

I. The Bible as Political Philosophy

Jan. 18: Gen. 9:1-17; 15:1-15; Ex. 19-22

Jan. 20: Deuteronomy 17:14-20; 1. Samuel 8-10; Tzvi Novick, "The Problem of Monarchy," *An Introduction to the Scriptures of Israel*, 77-87

Jan. 23: David Novak, "The Covenant Reaffirmed," *The Jewish Social Contract*, 65-77

Jan. 25: Ecclesiastes

II. The Rabbis as Philosophers

Jan. 27: Michael Fishbane, "Law, Story, and Interpretation: Reading Rabbinic Text," *The Jewish Political Tradition*, Vol. 1, xxxix-lv

Jan. 30: Zoom class - guest lecture: Prof. Benjamin Schwarz (Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

MAKE-UP CLASS: Jan. 31, 5pm: Mark Oppenheimer, "Whoa, where did this come from?"

The Antisemitism of 2022 and Its Origins" (Graham Center)

Feb. 1: Daniel Boyarin, "A Home in Babylonia: The Talmud as a Diasporist Text," *A Travelling Homeland*, 33-53.

III. Prophecy and Maimonides

Feb. 3: Christine Hayes on the prophet Amos

Feb. 6: Guest Lecture: Prof. Ali Mian on Maimonides in his cultural setting

Feb. 8: Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I.1-20

Feb. 10: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of The Torah, 7-8; *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II.360-375

IV. How Judaism Became a Religion?

Feb. 13: Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 13-30 (until II.6)

Feb. 15: Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*, 43-68

MAKE-UP CLASS, Feb. 16, 5pm: Courtney Bender, TBD

Feb. 17: **Midterm**

V. Enlightenment

Feb. 20: Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 33-75

Feb. 22: Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 77-104

Feb. 24: **NO CLASS**

Feb. 27: Visit to the Price Judaica Library and meeting with Dr. Rebecca Jefferson

Mar. 1: Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 104-139

VI. Dialogical Philosophy

Mar. 3: Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, chp. 8

Mar. 6: Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, First Part, 53-85

Mar. 8: Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 87-122

Mar. 10: Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 123-168

Mar. 13-17: SPRING BREAK. YAY!!!

Mar. 20: Zadie Smith, "Buber and Bieber"

Mar. 22: Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 187-196, 227-231

Mar. 24: Gustav Landauer, "Through Separation to Community," in *Revolution and Other Writings*, 94-108

VII. The Law in Modern Times

Mar. 27: Martin Buber, "Herut: On Youth and Religion," 149-176

Mar. 29: Franz Rosenzweig, "The Builders," 72-94

Mar. 31: Leo Baeck, "Mystery and Commandment," *Judaism and Christianity*, 171-188

Apr. 3: Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind*, 85-102

Apr. 5-7: PASSOVER (No class)

Apr. 10: Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Religious Praxis," *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, 3-29

Apr. 12: Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah*, 49-60, 145-162

Apr. 14: Guest lecture: Prof. Rachel Gordan on Blu Greenberg

VIII. Responses to the Holocaust

Apr. 19: Jean Amery, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew." In Dialogue
Assignment Deadline

Apr. 21: Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering"

Apr. 24: Emil Fackenheim, (selected texts, read until "Rupture & Historicity")

Apr. 26: Concluding Discussions

May 4: **Final Exam** (3-5pm, place TBD)