

Anthropology of Judaism

Time and Place: Little Hall 113, MWF 3rd period (9:35 – 10:25)
Instructor: Prof. Gerald F. Murray
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Course Objectives: The course will apply the four-field approach of American Anthropology (Cultural Anthropology, Linguistics, Archeology, and Biological Anthropology) to the analysis, interpretation, and / or explanation of selected elements in ancient and modern variants of Judaism. By the end of the semester students will, through knowledge gained in lectures and readings, be able to apply anthropological concepts to analysis of the beliefs, rituals, and laws of traditional Judaism and the modifications which have been introduced by alternative variants in modern Israel, America, and Europe.. This course will complement more conventional courses on Judaism by the application of anthropological tools of analyses, in particular the comparison of Jewish beliefs and practices with those of other religious traditions.

Course content.

In line with the above objectives students will familiarize themselves through readings and lectures with three bodies of information about Judaism.

- the major historical phases in the trajectory from the “patriarchal religion” reported in biblical texts through Temple Judaism, the Babylonian exile and its aftermath, the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism, and its subsequent bifurcation into Ashkenaz and Sephardic traditions and the other more recent divisions and splits.
- the major features of contemporary traditional Judaism, including the annual festival cycle, the rites of passage, the major commandment clusters that define traditional Judaism – including Sabbath observance, dietary restrictions, thrice-daily prayer, Torah-study, laws of sexual purity, and voluntary almsgiving.
- Later, secondary traditions not shared by all Jews but to which many have adhered in the past and / or continue to adhere – kabbalistic concepts of divine emanations, meditation practices, the use of God’s name for magical purposes, beliefs in reincarnation and in the five-layered Jewish soul, demonic possession and exorcism, and the healing powers of holy men, either the Rebbes of Hassidic tradition or the Saints of Sephardic tradition.

Course Requirements.

Exams: There will be four objective in-class exams. Exams will be based both on lectures and on the readings. At least half of the exam questions will come from lectures. The other half may come from assigned readings, including readings that may not have been discussed in class.

Papers. Students with near perfect attendance may substitute one or two 8-page papers for exam 2 or exam 3. Students interested in this paper option should read the “procedures” on the course webpage.

In calculating the final semester average, students may drop the lowest of their first three grades. **The fourth exam will be counted into the final average.** If a student skips an exam without prior authorization, the grade for that exam is 0 and it will not be dropped in the final grade calculation. Attendance adjustments for all four quarters will be factored into the final grade – i.e. there is no dropping of a low attendance score for a quarter. The grading scale is: 90+ = A. 86-89 = B+ 80-85 = B 76-79 = C+ 70-75 = C 66-69 = D+ 60-65 = D 0-59 = E

Attendance. Regular attendance is expected and will be monitored with a sign-in system. A bonus points will be added to the final semester average for perfect attendance in any quarter. That permits a maximum of four bonus points. Points will be subtracted from the final semester average for more than one unexcused absence during each quarter. **Students who miss more than three weeks of classes – i.e. are absent 10 or more times during the semester -- will not receive credit for the course, even if one or more of the absences have been excused.** They should either withdraw from the course or be prepared for an automatic E. Students who receive permission to miss class for a religious, athletic, or personal reason will not lose points for those absences. **But they are still bound by the three-week rule.** For more detail see “procedures” on my website. Students unsure of their ability to meet these attendance requirements should drop this course immediately.

Class procedures. On my website I have posted procedures for:

- Sending me emails.
- Arranging to visit me during office hours.
- Conduct during exams.
- Calculating attendance bonuses or deductions.

You should read these instructions carefully. There are point deductions for violations.

Readings

To be a Jew (310 pages), Hayim Donin. This book is a topic-by-topic practical guide to the practice of traditional Judaism. It focuses (as does Judaism itself) on practices, but gives biblical and philosophical justification for the practices. This will function as the major introduction to contemporary traditional Judaism for the first half of the course. This book will give a useful “crash course” or “refresher course” for students with little knowledge, or with fading knowledge, of traditional Judaism. (No prior knowledge of Judaism is assumed for enrollment in the course.)

The Hebrew God (215 pp.), Bernhard Lang. This book compares the God of the Hebrew Bible to the spirit world of other religions of the ancient Near East. The author argues that the God of the Bible is a later monotheistic invention that replaced and censored out earlier Hebrew polytheistic views of the spirit world. We will examine the interesting anthropological parallels and evaluate the strength or weakness of the author's conclusions.

Jewish Magic and Superstition (259 pages), Joshua Trachtenberg. This book, written decades ago, continues to be the best-organized anthropological compendium of folk-religious practices of European Jewry. The topics covered include beliefs in demons, spirits of the dead, magical use of Biblical texts, amulets, protective rituals during pregnancy, and at birth, marriage, and death, folk medicine, dreams, divination, and astrology. The author's use of the terms "magic" and "superstition" indicates his skepticism toward the practices that he discusses. In this sense the book differs from that of Hayim Donin, who fully believes in the sacred nature of the practices that he describes.

Students will also read several articles that will be made available during the semester and online passages from the Scriptures and later Jewish writings.

Lecture topics and readings.

The following dates for the readings are firm, but the scheduling of lecture topics is approximate. To prepare for exams, do the readings for that period plus and take notes on whatever lecture topics have been covered in class during that period. Caution 1: The readings often overlap with the lecture topic for that week, but there is no automatic correspondence. There are also readings that deal with other topics. Caution 2: you may be examined on assigned readings that have not been discussed in class. Readings for a particular week should be completed by the Friday class section of that week. If time permits, we will use Fridays to discuss the readings.

Jan 8 Introduction to the course

Jan 10- 12

Lectures: Judaism and the other Abrahamic religions

Patriarchal religion, temple Judaism, and rabbinic Judaism
The Roman occupation: Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Essenes, and amei haaretz
The split between Christianity and Judaism.
Judaism and the birth of Islam.
Jews as minorities in Christendom and the Islamic world.
Crypto-Jews of Latin America and the Caribbean

Readings:

The Hebrew God: "Introduction." "Appendix II: Ancient Near East"
To be a Jew: Chapter 1: The cornerstones of Judaism
Chapter 2: Halakha: The Jewish way
Chapter 3: The reasons for the commandments

Jan 17-19

Lectures: The languages of Judaism: Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, Ladino.

Hebrew in the Semitic language family

Evolution of the Hebrew alphabet

Rabbinic theories of Hebrew: Sacred power of Hebrew letters

Aramaic, Yiddish, Ladino.

Readings:

The Hebrew God: "Lord of Wisdom" "Appendix I: Names of the Hebrew God"

To be a Jew: Chapter 4: Kindness:

Jan 22-26

Lectures: People of the Book: Torah, Prophets, Writings, and post-Biblical texts

Subdivisions of the Hebrew Bible.

Talmud, Halachah, Kabbalah, Musar

Four ways of reading Torah:

Textual literalism

Pardes: Rabbinic commentary on four levels of meaning

Documentary hypothesis: J, E, P, D.

The search for anthropological parallels

Examples: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's ark. the tower of Babel. .

Readings:

The Hebrew God: "Lord of War"

To be a Jew: Chapter 8: Tefilin, tzitzit and tallit, prayer, blessings

Chapter 9: The synagogue,

Jan 29 – Jan 31

Lectures: The God of Judaism and lesser spirits.

Polytheism, Middle Eastern henotheism, Hebrew monotheism

Patriarchal images of God in the Torah: Warrior, King, Father

Feminine aspects of the Hebrew God: nurturance, shekhinah, wisdom

Talmudic images of God: Judge, divine Accountant and Bookkeeper

Angels in Judaism: Biblical and post-Biblical

The Satan of Judaism: prosecuting attorney or tempter.

The demons of Judaism: congregating in latrines and fingertips.

The zombie (golem) and evil spirit possession (dibbuk) in medieval Judaism.

The mysterious *yetser tov* and *yetser hara* – inclinations to good and evil.

Readings:

The Hebrew God: "Lord of the Animals"

Jewish Magic and Superstition

The spirits of the dead

The powers of good

The war with the spirits

Exam 1: February 2nd

Feb 5 - 9

Lectures: Who is a "Jew"? Matrilineal and patrilineal descent principles.

"Jewish" as an ambiguous adjective: ethnic vs. religious denotations

Anthropology of matrilineal descent for membership in the nation

Patrilineally transmitted internal statuses: Kohen, Levi, Israel.

Converting into Judaism.

The "lost tribes of Israel": Jews from Ethiopia, India, China.

The Jews of Latin America

Anthropological map of contemporary divisions in Judaism

Ashkenazim and Sephardim

Hassidim and mitnagedim

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist

Modern Israel: Charedim and religious nationalists.

Readings:

The Hebrew God: "Lord of the Individual: Personal God"

To be a Jew: Chapter 17: Adoption and conversion

Chapter 13: Days of awe: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur

Feb 13 – 17

Lectures: Evolving authority structures of Judaism: Temple priests (kohanim), the sages (Chazal), synagogue rabbis, and Hassidic rebbes.

Abraham and Moses: rabbinic eyes and anthropological eyes

The priests of the Jerusalem Temple: anthropological comparison with Hindu Brahmins and Roman Catholic priests.

Why animal sacrifice was centralized, and why it has (momentarily?) disappeared from Judaism.

Biblical prophets in anthropological perspective.

The destroyed Temple, the unemployed priesthood, and the growing role of the Rabbi and the Synagogue. The reduced role of the kohen.

The Hassidic Rebbe: charismatic link to God.

Spiritual authority in modern Israel:

Moshiach: Judaism, the Messiah, and the end of the world. .

Readings:

The Hebrew God: "Lord of the Harvest"

To be a Jew: Chapter 16: Birth

Chapter 18: Bar-Mitzvah and Bat-Mitzvah

Feb 19 – 23

Lectures: Kabbalah, Emanations (sefirot), and theories of the Jewish soul

Core kabbalistic concepts: Ein Sof, sefirot, tsimtsum, different universes, Adam Kadmon, Partsufim

Vagueness of scriptural allusions to the soul

From Aristotle to Aquinas: The three layers of the human soul.

Kabbalistic adaptations and elaboration of Greek philosophy: Nefesh, ruach, neshamah.

Addition of two higher levels: Chayah and Yechidah.

Later Kabbalah and Tanya: ethnocentric distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish souls.

From the Torah's "chosen people" with an external mission to quasi-racial Kabbalistic concepts of the inborn spiritual superiority of Jews and the inherently polluted or lower character of the non-Jewish soul.

Readings:

To be a Jew: Chapter 21: Death and Mourning

Other readings to be announced.

Feb 26, Feb. 28

Lectures: Judaism and the afterlife.

Life after death: Sheol of the Tenach

The Zoroastrian connection: Heavenly reward and fiery punishment

Jewish adaptation: Gan Eden, Gehinnom, and the power of Kaddish and Yizkor

Jewish Gehinnom more like temporary Catholic Purgatory than unending Protestant Hell

Kabbalistic theories of reincarnation

Readings:

Jewish Magic and Superstition

The legend of Jewish sorcery

The truth behind the legend

The spirits of the dead

The powers of good

Other readings to be announced

Exam 2: March 2

March 5 – 9

Lectures: The Jewish Sabbath: Core separator: sacred from profane, and observant (shomer shabbat) from less observant or non-observant.

Anthropological origins of the seven-day week.

From sunset to sunset: The structure of Sabbath observance.

You can move furniture but not flick a light switch: Rabbinic logic.

Theological vs. anthropological explanations of the Jewish Sabbath.

Readings:

To be a Jew: Chapter 5: The Sabbath

Jewish Magic and Superstition

The power of evil

Man and the demons

Other readings to be announced

March 10-18 Spring Break

March 19-23

Lectures: Ladder to God: The structure of Jewish prayer.

Anthropology of prayer: communications with invisible sources of power.

The Siddur: the Jewish prayer book.

Varieties of Jewish prayer:

The quintessential Jewish prayer: prayers of praise

Prayers of tribulation

Prayers of petition

Prayers of contrition

Prayers of thanksgiving

Obligatory daily prayers

Structure of shacharit: the morning prayer service

High points: the Shma Israel and the Amidah

Songs of power: the Psalms (tehilim)

Internal divisions

Feminization of the Psalter: tehilim for the women, Gemara for the men

Readings:

Jewish Magic and Superstition

“In the name of...”

The Bible in magic

Other readings to be announced

March 27 - 29

Lectures: The Jewish festival cycle (the Chagim).

Anthropological background to the 12-month year

Lunar calendars and solar calendars

Mesopotamian background to the names of Jewish months.

The agro-pastoral origins of the festivals of Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost), and Sukkot (Tabernacles)

Urbanization and the transformation and redefinition of festivals: from agro-pastoral festivals to nationalist festivals celebrating core historical events. .

Christmas trees and Chanukah bushes: Assimilationist pressures and the Americanization of the Jewish festival of lights.

Readings:

To be a Jew: Chapter 10: The major festivals

Chapter 11: Passover

Chapter 12: Shavuot

Chapter 14: Sukkot

Chapter 15: Post Biblical holidays and fast days

Other readings to be announced

Exam 3: March 30

April 2 Erev Pesach

Lectures: Judaism and food

- The evolution and disappearance of animal sacrifice
- Pork, shellfish, and other food taboos
- The home: kitchen and table as substitutes for the destroyed temple
- Laws surrounding meat, bread, and wine
- Obligatory prayers before and after eating
- Special Passover laws
- Anthropological theories surrounding Jewish food taboos

Readings:

- To be a Jew:* Chapter 6: The dietary laws
- Jewish Magic and Superstition*
 - The magical procedure
 - Amulets

April 4 Second day of Pesach. No class

April 6

Lectures: Judaism, sexuality, and family.

- The first divine commandment: *pru urevu* (be fruitful and multiply)
- Courtship procedures
- Elements of the marriage ritual
- Judaism and divorce
- Judaism and homosexuality
- Judaism, contraception, and abortion.

Readings:

- To be a Jew:* Chapter 7: Family life
- Chapter 19: Marriage
- Chapter 20: Divorce Proceedings
- Jewish Magic and Superstition*
 - Nature and man

April 9 - 13

The adaptation of Judaism to America

- Assimilationist pressures and responses.
 - Diluted Sabbath observance
 - Relaxed food laws
 - Intermarriage
 - Anthropological background to matrilineal descent.
 - Rules of religious endogamy and the prohibition of intermarriage.
 - Arguments for bilateral affiliation (often mislabeled as “patrilineal descent”) among intermarried American Jews.

Reform and Conservative variants of Jewish observance.

The Orthodox response

Yeshivas and the Art-Scroll phenomenon

Chabad-Lubavitch: Brooklyn/Queens as a center for world outreach to Jews

Readings:

Jewish Magic and Superstition

Medicine

Divination

Other readings to be announced

April 16 – 23

Lectures: Judaism in modern Israel.

Judaism and the Israeli army

Religious divides in Israel

Jews vs. Muslims

Religious Jews vs. Secular Jews

Charedim (black hat yeshiva world) vs. Datiim Leumim (Religious Zionists)

Disputed territories and Jewish population expansion

Establishment and eventual expulsion of Jewish farming communities from Gaza: Causes and consequences, myths and realities.

“Settlers” and “settlements” – a conceptual and linguistic dilemma

“Right wing extremists”, “religious fanatics” -- epithets as substitute for analysis

Underlying tensions between religious and secular Jews.

Readings:

Jewish Magic and Superstition

Dreams

Astrology

Other readings to be announced

Fourth Exam: April 25