

History/Jewish Studies 219: The American Jewish Experience: From *Shtetl* to Suburb

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Fall 2019

Humanities 1651

M-W-F: 1:20-2:10

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Course Description

A century and a half ago, the United States was a backwater of the Jewish world, then centered in Europe. (There were significant Jewish communities in the Ottoman Turkish Empire and elsewhere in the world.) Yet, by the 1950s, the United States became home to the largest Jewish community in modern history. Why did millions of Jews come to the United States? How has life in a liberal political and capitalist economic order shaped the Jewish experience in America? In turn, how have Jews influenced American culture, politics, and society? This course surveys the history of American Jews from the 18th century to the 21st century. Using Jews as the primary, though not only, case, the course examines themes in the history of immigration, race, and assimilation. By examining processes of cultural integration and differentiation of Jews in United States society, the course attempts to address broad questions about the nature of American national identity. Topics include patterns of politics, social mobility, Jewish culture in Yiddish and English, inter-ethnic group relations, gender and sexuality, religion, and problems in community building. The course combines lectures, in-class discussions, film, and audio recordings. Readings consist of secondary and primary sources.

Learning Outcomes

A major objective of this course is the development of critical analytical skills, that is, the ability to formulate and examine questions as they relate to the course topics. As students of history, we will not seek to determine who was “right” or “wrong.”

Although such considerations are surely relevant in determining personal convictions, they do not necessarily help us to understand historical events, processes, and phenomena. Instead, we will ask why people thought and behaved as they did, especially in regard to processes of adaptation to an American society crosscut by religious, racial, gender, and class differences and hierarchies. What did it mean to become “American” across time and place? A starting premise of this course is that Jews make an illuminating case through which to explore this question. For historical reasons explored in this course, Jews have experienced, to an unusual degree, divergent trajectories of cultural assimilation *and* differentiation, social integration *and* segregation, economic advancement *and* poverty, and sympathy *and* anti-semitism. Finally, the history of Jews cannot be understood in isolation from other ethnic, racial, and religious groups. (As we will see, Jews have been understood by others and have understood themselves as an ethnicity, race, and religious community—sometimes all at once—throughout their history in the United States.) In lectures and readings, this course will examine Jews within a comparative framework involving minority and majority groups with whom Jews interacted. In this regard, the course works on two levels: as a course on Jews in all their internal diversity and a course on American diversity with its attendant inequalities and shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

Credit Policy Statement

This 4-credit course has 4 hours of group meetings per week (each 50-minute segment of lecture and discussion counts as one hour according to UW-Madison's credit hour policy). The course also carries the expectation that you will spend an average of at least 2 hours outside of class for every hour in the classroom. In other words, in addition to class time, plan to allot an average of at least 8 hours per week for reading, writing, preparing for discussions, and/or studying for quizzes and exams for this class.

Books

The following books are available for purchase at the University Bookstore.

Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Yale Univ. Press, 2004).

Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992).

The required course packet is available for purchase at the Social Science Copy Center (6120 Social Science Bldg.).

= scholarly articles in course packet

* = primary documents in course packet

Course Requirements

Attainment of knowledge is a central goal of this course. This requires mastery of the information in the readings, lectures, and other course materials, in addition to the concepts that help us understand that information.

You are required to attend lectures and discussion sections. Failure to participate actively in the discussions will result in a failing grade for participation (see below). The assigned reading should be completed before your discussion section. Your TAs may give you brief assignments for sections.

Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course and disciplinary action. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please consult with the teaching assistant or me.

Computers or any other electronic devices are **not** permitted during lectures and discussions. Students who use these in class—even once—will receive a failing grade for participation, with or without notification from us.

An in-class midterm exam, two paper assignments (3-pages in length each), and a final exam are required.

Participation and attendance: 20%

First Paper (Oct. 11): 10%

Midterm exam (Oct. 21): 25%

Second Paper (Nov. 15): 15%

Final exam (Dec. 16 @ 2:45-4:45): 30%

The Kutler Lectures:

Established by the renowned University of Wisconsin historian, the late Stanley Kutler, these annual lectures bring leading scholars of American Jews to Madison to present two lectures. Attendance is mandatory. This year's Kutler Lecturer is Professor James Loeffler (Univ. of Virginia).

Lecture 1: October 2, 7:00 p.m.

"Blind Justice: Jews and Hate Speech in the American 1950s" (Pyle Center)

Lecture 2: October 3, 4:00 p.m.

"Beyond the Law: Jews and Antisemitism in the Global 1960s" (Pyle Center)

Lectures and Reading

Week 1 (Sept. 4-6): Introduction

Jonathan Sarna, American Judaism: A History, pp. xiii-30.

Week 2 (Sept. 9-13): Becoming Citizens: Jews in Early American History

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 31-61.

Course Packet:

- *Maryland Constitution, Restricting Officeholders to Christians (Nov. 11, 1776).
- *New York Constitution, Making New the First State to Emancipate Jews (April 20, 1777).
- *The Constitution of the United States of America (1789).
- *Address of the Newport Congregation to the President of the United States of America (Aug. 17, 1790).
- *Pres. George Washington to the Newport Congregation (1790).
- *The First Form of the "Jew Bill" (1819).

Week 3 (Sept. 16-20): The Americanization of Judaism

Class cancelled: Sept. 16.

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 62-207.

Course Packet:

- *Conference of Reform Rabbis, The Pittsburgh Platform (1885).
- *Solomon Schechter, "Catholic Israel" (1896).
- *The Orthodox Jewish Congregational Union of America (1898).

Week 4 (Sept. 23-27): The Great Migration

Gerald Sorin, A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 1-108.

Course Packet:

- *Bella Spivak, Streets: A Memoir of the Lower East Side (1922), pp. 3-42.
- *"When Spanish Is No Longer a Jewish Language: Immigrant Encounters on the Streets of New York City" (1928).

Week 5 (Oct. 2-Oct. 4): Immigrants in Revolt

Note: Class cancelled on Monday, Sept. 30, for Rosh Hashana.

Kutler Lectures on Oct. 2 (7:00 p.m.) and Oct. 3 (4:00 p.m.). Attendance mandatory.

Sorin, A Time for Building, pp. 109-135, 191-218.

Course Packet:

- #Tony Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 69-124.
- **Di nyu-yorker yidishe folkstsaytung*, "Strong, Firm, and Correct Propaganda" (1886)
- *Lucy Robins Lang, "Rebellion Raged within Me" (memoir, 1948).

Week 6 (Oct. 7-11): The Renaissance of Yiddish Culture

Note: class cancelled on Oct. 9 for Yom Kippur.

Course Packet:

#Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), pp. 417-496.

#Benjamin Harshav, The Meaning of Yiddish (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), pp. 161-186.

*Ed., "Gentiles and Yiddish Literature," *In Zikh* (July 1923).

Week 7 (Oct. 14-18): Jewish Nationalism and American Pluralism

Sorin, A Time for Building, pp. 219-235.

Course Packet:

#James Loeffler, "Nationalism without a Nation? On the Invisibility of American Jewish Politics," Jewish Quarterly Review, vol. 105, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 367-398.

*Chaim Zhitlovsky, "Our Future in America" (1915).

*Louis Brandeis, "Zionism Is Consistent with American Patriotism" (1915).

Week 8 (Oct. 21-25): Best of Times, Worst of Times

Midterm Exam: Oct. 21

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 208-271.

Course Packet:

#Jonathan Pollack, "Jewish Problems: Eastern and Western Jewish Identities in Conflict at the University of Wisconsin, 1919-1941," American Jewish History (June 2001): 161-180.

Week 9 (Oct. 28-Nov. 1) Depression, War, and the Holocaust

Course Packet:

#Howard Sachar, A History of the Jews in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 465-562.

*Rev. Charles Coughlin, "Persecution—Jewish and Christian" (Nov. 20, 1938).

*Rabbi Stephen Wise, "Coughlinism, Jews and America" (Dec. 4, 1938).

*Charles Lindbergh, Des Moines Speech (Sept. 11, 1941).

Week 10 (Nov. 4-8): American Zionism and the Struggle for Israel

Course Packet:

#Aaron Berman, Nazism, the Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948 (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 11-14, 135-180.

*American Council for Judaism, "Statement of Policy" (1944).

*Rabbi Hillel Silver, "Zionism: What It Is—What It Is Not" (1944).

*Alexander Bittelman, "Israel and the Struggle for Peace and Democracy" (1948).

*David Ben-Gurion and Jacob Blaustein, "An Exchange of Views" (1950).

Week 11 (Nov. 11-15): Jews and Entertainment

Paper Due: Nov. 15.

Course Packet:

#Lary L. May and Elaine Tyler May, "Why Jewish Movie Moguls: An Exploration in American Culture," American Jewish History (Sept. 1982): 6-25.

#Jonathan Karp, "Blacks, Jews, and the Business of Race Music, 1945-1955," in Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism, ed. Rebecca Kobrin, (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 141-167.

Week 12 (Nov. 18-22): Contentment and Its Costs in Post-War America

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 272-333.

Course Packet:

#Kirsten Fermaglich, A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2018), pp. 45-100.

*Arthur Hertzberg, "America Is Galut," *Jewish Frontier* (1964).

Week 13 (Nov. 25-27): Crisis and Community in the 1960s and Beyond

Note: class cancelled on Nov. 29 for Thanksgiving. All sections cancelled this week.

Course Packet:

#Rachel Kranson, Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2017), pp. 68-96, 138-164.

*Aviva Cantor Zuckoff, "Oppression of America's Jews" (1971).

Week 14 (Dec. 2-6): Diversity, Fragmentation, Polarization: Jews in the Twenty-First Century

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 333-374.

Course Packet:

Samuel G. Freedman, Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 227-274

*Rabbis Joel Roth and Akiba Lubow, *A Standard of Rabbinic Practice Regarding Determination of Jewish Identity* (1986).

*Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, "Letter to the Faculty Assembly of the Jewish Theological Seminary" (1983).

*Haviva Ner-David, "Breaking the Glass Mehitza" (2004).

*Camille Shira Angel, "Rabbi's Welcome" and Selections (2009).

Week 15: (Dec. 9-11): Conclusions

Mark Oppenheimer, "Reclaiming 'Jew'," The New York Times, April 22, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/22/opinion/reclaiming-jew.html>

Final Exam: Dec. 16 @ 2:45-4:45. Location to be announced.