

History/Jewish Studies 219: The American Jewish Experience: From *Shtetl* to Suburb
University of Wisconsin, Madison
Fall 2020

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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 with significant Jewish communities in the Ottoman 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 17th 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, 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

One credit is the learning that takes place in at least 45 hours of learning activities, which include time in lectures or class meetings, in person or online, labs, exams, presentations, tutorials, reading, writing, studying, preparation for any of these activities, and any other learning activities. As a 4-credit course, plan to spend at least 180 hours over the course of the semester engaged in this course. In other words, plan to allot an average of at least 12 hours per week for lectures, reading, writing, preparing for discussions, and/or studying for quizzes and exams for this class.

Readings

All assigned readings will be available on Canvas.

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.

Required to take weekly quizzes and post in weekly discussion boards. 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 board post is due. The lowest quiz score will be dropped, as will the lowest discussion grade.

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.

Extensions may be granted for medical reasons and emergencies. Requests should be submitted no less than 24 hours prior to due date of assignments

Assignments

Discussion Board: 15%

Quizzes: 10%

First Paper (3 pages) due: Sept. 25: 15%

Second Paper (5 pages) due: Oct. 30: 25%

Final Paper (8 pages) due: Dec. 16: 35%

Weekly Schedule

Sundays @ 12:00 a.m. All readings made available.

Mondays @ 5:00 p.m. All lectures made available; discussion boards open.

Wednesdays @ 5:00 p.m. Must submit first discussion post; quiz opens.

Fridays @ 5:00 p.m. Discussion boards close; responses must be posted.

Saturdays @ 11:59 p.m. Weekly quizzes due.

Usage of Audio Recorded Lectures Statement

Lecture materials and recordings for “The American Jewish Experience” are protected intellectual property at UW-Madison. Students in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in this class. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, you are not authorized to record my lectures without my permission unless you are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability requiring accommodation. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities. Students are also prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor’s express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitutes copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university’s policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct.

Lectures and Reading

Week 1 (Sept. 2-4): Introduction

Mark Oppenheimer, “Reclaiming ‘Jew’,” New York Times (April 22, 2017)

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

Week 2 (Sept. 9-11): Becoming Citizens: Jews in Early American History

Sept. 7: Labor Day

David Sorkin, “Is American Jewry Exceptional? Comparing Jewish Emancipation in Europe and America,” American Jewish History (Sept. 2010), pp. 175-200

Documents:

*Maryland Constitution, Restricting Officeholders to Christians (1776)

*The Constitution of the United States of America (1789)

*The First Form of the "Jew Bill" (1819)

Week 3 (Sept. 14-18): The Americanization of Judaism

Shari Rabin, Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America (New York Univ. Press, 2017), pp. 1-30, 57-99

Document:

*Conference of Reform Rabbis, The Pittsburgh Platform (1885)

Week 4 (Sept. 21-25): The Great Migration

First paper due: Sept. 2

Gerald Sorin, A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920 (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 69-108

Aviva Ben-Ur, Sephardic Jews in America (New York Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 1-50

Document:

*Minnie Goldstein, "Success or Failure?" (memoir, 1942)

Week 5 (Sept. 28-Oct. 2): Immigrants in Revolt

Class cancelled on Monday, Sept. 28 for Yom Kippur

Tony Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York (Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 69-124

Document:

*Abraham Shiplacoff, "The Prophet Karl Marx" (c. 1910)

Week 6 (Oct. 5-9): Yiddish Culture

Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made (Simon & Schuster, 1976), pp. 518-551

Documents:

Letters to the "Bintl Brief" advice column (1906, 1909, 1920)

Week 7 (Oct. 12-16): Jewish Nationalism and American Pluralism

Noam Pianko, "'The True Liberalism of Zionism': Horace Kallen, Jewish Nationalism, and the Limits of American Pluralism," American Jewish History (Dec. 2008), pp. 299-329

Document:

*Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot" (excerpt, 1915)

Week 8 (Oct. 19-23): Blacks and Jews, Racism and Antisemitism

Eric L. Goldstein, The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity (Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 35-85, 119-137

Document:

*Louis Michel, "If I Were a Colored Man What Would I Do?" (1919)

Week 9 (Oct. 26-Oct. 30): Jews and Popular Entertainment

Second paper due: Oct. 30

Lary L. May and Elaine Tyler May, "Why Jewish Movie Moguls: An Exploration in American Culture," American Jewish History (Sept. 1982), pp. 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 10 (Nov. 2-6): Tradition Renewed

Jonathan Sarna, American Judaism: A History (Yale Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 208-271
Ben-Ur, Sephardic Jews in America, pp. 51-80

Document:

*Mordecai Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of Judaism" (1920)

Week 11 (Nov. 9-13): Depression, War, Holocaust

Steven Norwood, "Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Antisemitic Violence in Boston and New York during World War II," American Jewish History (June 2003), pp. 233-267.

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

Documents:

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

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

Week 12 (Nov. 16-20): The Struggle for Israel

Aaron Berman, Nazism, the Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948 (Wayne State Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 151-180

Documents:

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

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

Week 13 (Nov. 23-25): Contentment and Its Costs in Post-War America

Note: class cancelled on Nov. 27 for Thanksgiving.

Rachel Kranson, Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2017), pp. 1-16, 44-96

Documents:

*Arthur Hertzberg, "America Is Galut," (1964)

*"Thirteen Years" (short film, 1971)

Week 14 (Nov. 30-Dec. 4): Crisis and Community in the 1960s and Beyond

Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century (Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 205-255

Documents:

*"Anti-Semitism and Black Power," letters to the editor of *Freedomways* by James Baldwin and Ossie Davis (1967)

*Ellen Willis, "The Myth of the Powerful Jew" (1979)

Week 15: (Dec. 7-9): Diversity, Fragmentation, Polarization: Jews in the Twenty-First Century

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

Documents:

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

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

Final Paper Due: Dec. 16 @ 5:00 p.m.