

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

Moss Humanities Building 1111

MWF 1:20-2:10

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Fall 2023

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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. Yet, by the 1950s, the United States became home to the largest Jewish community at that time. 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 the United States? 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, ethnicity, and religion. Topics include patterns of political activity, social mobility, processes of integration and exclusion, Jewish culture, 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 and information as they relate to the course topics. A starting premise of this course is that Jews make an illuminating case through which to explore broad issues in United States history. Jews have experienced divergent trajectories of cultural assimilation *and* differentiation, social integration *and* segregation, economic advancement *and* poverty, and discrimination *and* equal treatment. 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 operates 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.

In keeping with the Ethnic Studies Requirement, this course emphasizes the awareness of history's impact on the present and the ability to recognize and question assumptions as they relate to ethnicity as important learning outcomes.

### **Credit Policy Statement**

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

### **Readings**

All assigned readings will be available on Canvas.

A course packet will be available for purchase from the University Book Store shortly after the beginning of the semester. You should bring the packet to your discussion sections every week.

### **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.

Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course and disciplinary action. This includes the use of generative AI in the completion of assignments. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please consult with the teaching assistant or the professor.

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

Attendance of lectures and discussions sections is mandatory.

Extensions may be granted for medical reasons and emergencies, such as those having to do with COVID. Extensions should be requested at least 24 hours before the due date

of the assignment. In the case of serious illness that prevents you from attending class for an extended period of time, please meet with us so we can work out alternative assignments.

If you feel ill in any way, because of COVID or otherwise (common colds, flu, etc.), please stay home until you are fully recuperated. See the following link to COVID Response FAQs: <https://covidresponse.wisc.edu/faq>

### **Masks**

The following is a statement on masks from the university's COVID Response FAQs: <https://covidresponse.wisc.edu/faq>

“Effective March 12, 2022, masks may be worn but are no longer required inside university buildings. Masks are required when visiting COVID-19 test sites and other clinical spaces on campus, including University Health Services.

You should wear a mask for 10 days following a positive COVID-19 test and for 10 days following an exposure to someone with COVID-19.”

### **Kutler Lectures:**

You are required to attend both lectures on November 6 and 7 at 4:00 p.m. The lectures will be given by Professor Riv-Ellen Prell (University of Minnesota). Location to be determined.

### **Assignments**

Participation: 10%

In-Class Midterm Examination: Oct. 13: 15%

First Paper: due Nov. 3 (three pages): 20%.

Second Paper: due Dec. 1 (four pages): 25%.

Take-Home Examination: due Dec. 16: 30%

### **Lectures and Reading**

#### **Week 1 (Sept. 6-8): 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. 11-15): Becoming Citizens: Jews in Early American History**

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. 18-22): The Americanization of Judaism**

Shari Rabin, Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America (New York Univ. Press, 2017), pp. 1-54

Documents:

\*A demand for religious reform in Charleston, South Carolina (1824)

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

### **Week 4 (Sept. 27-29): The Great Migration**

Note: class cancelled on Sept. 25 for Yom Kippur

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 (Oct. 2-6) Immigrants in Revolt**

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" (speech, c. 1910)

### **Week 6 (Oct. 9-13): Yiddish Culture**

Note: midterm exam on Oct. 13<sup>th</sup>

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)

Chaim Zhitlovsky, Yiddish and the future of American Jewry (1915)

### **Week 7 (Oct. 16-20): Zionism and Cultural Pluralism**

Noam Pianko, Zionism & The Roads Not Taken (Indiana Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 95-133

Document:

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

**Week 8 (Oct. 23-27): Blacks and Jews, Racism and Antisemitism**

Eric L. Goldstein, The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity (Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 35-50, 119-137

Document:

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

**Week 9 (Oct. 30-Nov. 3): The Best of Times/The Worst of Times**

Note: first paper due on Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup>

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 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 10 (Nov. 6-10): The Anti-Fascist Struggle**

Note: the Kutler Lectures will take place on Nov. 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. Attendance at both is required.

Catherine Collomp, Rescue, Relief, and Resistance: The Jewish Labor Committee's Anti-Nazi Resistance (Wayne State Univ. Press, 2022), pp. 1-87

**Week 11 (Nov. 13-17): Israel and American Jews**

Emily Alice Katz, Bringing Zion Home: Israel in American Jewish Culture, 1948-1967 (SUNY Press, 2015), pp. 19-47

Documents:

\*Daniel Bell, "A Parable of Alienation," Jewish Frontier (1946)

\*Ben Halpern, "Letter to an Intellectual: A Reply to Daniel Bell," Jewish Frontier (1946)

**Week 12 (Nov. 20): Rock & Roll Jews**

Note: class cancelled on Nov. 22-25 for Thanksgiving

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 13 (Nov. 27-Dec. 1): Contentment and Its Costs**

Note: second paper due on Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>

Kirsten Fermaglich, A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America (New York Univ. Press, 2018), pp. 1-22, 101-128

Documents:

\*Marie Syrkin, "Have American Jews a Future?" Jewish Frontier (1961)

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

\*Aviva Cantor Zuckoff, "The Oppression of American Jews," Jewish Liberation Journal (1970)

**Week 14 (Dec. 4-8): Diversity, Fragmentation, and Polarization**

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

Documents:

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

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

\*Camille Shira Angel, "Rabbi's Welcome" and selections from Siddur Sha'ar Zahav (2009)

**Week 15: (Dec. 11-13): The "Jewish Question" Returns**

Shalom Lappin, "The Re-Emergence of the Jewish Question," Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2019), pp. 29-46

**Take Home Exam Due on Dec. 16 @ 5:00 pm**