A. Catalog Description

Explores selected topics that are central to Jewish thought and practice. An introduction to Judaism for those without background in Jewish texts and traditions, but also appropriate for those with background. Topics include covenant, ritual, idolatry, interpretation, gender, violence, chosenness.

B. Course Overview

The course aims to offer a sustained, critical examination of a series of topics that are central to Jewish thought and practice, employing Jewish texts (from various periods, both classical and modern) as well as other illuminating material from comparative religion, anthropology, philosophy, and elsewhere.

To explain the organization of the course, we might contrast it with three alternative models.

First, this course is not an overview of Jewish philosophy, organized chronologically or through the central topics that have concerned Jewish philosophers through the ages (faith vs. reason, anthropomorphism, etc.).

Second, this course is not a survey of major Jewish thinkers of the modern period (Spinoza, Mendelssohn, Geiger, Hermann Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, etc.).

Third, this course is not a study of major topics in philosophy of religion or theology (arguments for God, the problem of evil, etc.) as they apply to Judaism.

Instead, this course starts from Jewish life—from a set of issues and topics that, as stated above, are central to Jewish thought and practice. What do Jews mean when they talk about these topics? What are the classical sources that inform their thinking? How can we make sense of these topics as theoretical constructs? Do they withstand critical scrutiny? Do they have something to teach us, regardless of our particular faith commitments?

The course proposes that there is value to be gained from a wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary investigation of these topics, including their origins, their development over time, and their
intellectual and ethical challenges. And it proceeds by considering both Jewish and non-Jewish texts on those topics, providing as wide a set of perspectives as is feasible.

The possible topics are endless; surely any major idea or issue from the entire history of Jewish thought or practice is suitable for investigation. So the selection of topics for this course is necessarily idiosyncratic. As the instructor, I therefore leave myself open to the charge that I should have included other topics than the ones currently included—a topic central to religious practice such as prayer, a topic central to Jewish internal politics such as heresy, a topic central to philosophy of religion such as time, or a topic central to Jewish consciousness such as exile. Any of these would have been suitable and valuable. I cannot defend their exclusion. I merely propose that the topics that I did choose are justifiable on their own merit, i.e., that they are both central to Jewish thought and practice and that they will repay our critical scrutiny.

C. Outcomes of the Course

The learning outcomes of this course are as follows:

1. Students will learn about a set of ideas and concepts central to Jewish thought and practice;
2. Students will learn to philosophically analyze aspects of religious thought and practice, and acquire a set of critical perspectives and vocabulary to help them do so;
3. Students will learn to bring disparate texts (from within the Jewish tradition and from without) about Judaism or Jewish practice into critical dialogue;
4. Students will develop a reasoned and defensible position about central aspects of Jewish thought and practice.

D. Methods of the Course

The course will proceed through the encounter with and discussion of texts. As a university seminar in which we are trying to understand a complex phenomenon, we will not endorse any particular ideological view of the topics under discussion or any particular approach to those topics. The only assumption that we ought to share is that our focus, a philosophical exploration of Judaism, is worthy of the time and intellectual effort that we will invest in it.

I do not ask that you leave your personal commitments outside the seminar room; however, I do ask that you be sensitive to the ways that those commitments may not be shared by others, and especially that you be willing to articulate those commitments when necessary in order to further our communal understanding.

E. Course Requirements

In this course, you will do a lot of reading, a lot of writing, a lot of talking, and hopefully a lot of thinking. Please note: these course requirements are not final. I may depart from them.
depending on the number of students who decide to enroll and the trajectory of class discussions. But my current expectation is that the work in the course will be comprised of six elements.

1. **Preparation and participation (20%)**:
   The first and foremost requirement for the class is thorough preparation and informed participation, which includes three components:
   a. conscientious preparation of the reading, which will typically include either commenting on the reading via an online platform (NB.com) or writing a brief response to the reading, and will sometimes also include some other preparation such as gathering background material on a particular issue or author;
   b. attendance in class; and
   c. engaged participation in class discussions.
   Each of these is absolutely necessary for your learning, and for the success of the seminar. You will be learning via substantive encounter with the texts and with each other.

2. **Session Reporting and LATTE Discussion (15%)**:
   Each session, one student will be assigned to keep a record of the discussion. Following the session, the student will write a report on the discussion and post it to the class list by the end of the day. What should these reports look like?
   a. These reports are not intended to be minutes of the discussion. We do not need to know who said what at every moment. Nor are they expected to replace individual students’ notes.
   b. Reports should be in the reporter’s own voice, not in the voice of a disembodied and dispassionate observer. They can adopt a casual tone, as if you’re writing an email to your classmates, not an “official record” tone. Feel free to add observations or comments as appropriate.
   c. Usually, 1-2 paragraphs will suffice. Really! Somehow, students don’t believe me when I say that these can be short, but I really do mean it.
   d. Finally, the report should close with a question (or two, but one is really fine) that remain or that is raised (for the reporter) by the discussion.

After the session report is posted, I will expect others in the class to offer their contributions on LATTE, to create an ongoing, online discussion. (I will chime in from time to time as well.) Over the course of the semester, you should post online at least 12 times. These contributions can …
   a. respond to a question posed by the reporter (or by an earlier participant in the discussion);
   b. respectfully disagree with something someone else has said, explaining one’s contrary view;
   c. least interestingly, agree with someone else (in which case, you will want to figure out what new or expanded idea you’re contributing to the conversation!).
3. **Reading responses (10%)**: 
   For some of our sessions, I will ask you to write a brief response to the reading assignment(s) or to a particular question, due the evening before class. This writing will not be graded. Note, however, that you will not receive credit if you submit a response late.

4. **Research Paper (15%)**: 
   Each student will be assigned one of the topics from the course that will serve as the focus of a brief, 5-7 pp. research paper. The research paper will either (a) explore other sources on the topic within Judaism, (b) explore other philosophical literature on the topic, or (c) explore the topic within another religious tradition. Prior to carrying out the research and doing the writing, you will submit a one-paragraph research plan to me, outlining what you are trying to learn and how you plan to learn it. In addition to submitting the paper, each student will also develop a 5-7 minute presentation to the class on the topic, thereby enriching all of our learning. Thus, there will be three parts to this assignment:
   
   a. Research plan, due one week in advance of the assigned due date
   b. Paper, 5-7 pages, due at a time TBD shortly before the in-class presentation
   c. In-class presentation, due at a time TBD shortly after the research paper

5. **Take-home mid-term exam (15%)**: 
   Around the middle of the semester (date TBD), you will receive a set of essay questions for a take-home mid-term exam. These questions will draw on the reading that you have done, as well as class discussions about that material.

6. **Take-home final (15%)**: 
   For your final, you will receive a set of essay questions from which you choose a sub-set. You will have about a week to work on the final.

F. **Disability**

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting accommodations, you should contact the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs. Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodation. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

G. **Student conduct**

As you know, every member of the University community is expected to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. For the purposes of this course, academic integrity does not mean that you are restricted from discussing ideas with classmates, other friends, parents, other teachers, etc. In fact, nothing would make me happier than if you talk about
the ideas outside of class! However, the demands of academic integrity do impose two important obligations.

First, when you submit writing, that writing should be yours and yours alone. The exception to the first obligation is the second obligation: when you use ideas from others (as you are free to do), you should cite them. Some students think that you will receive less credit when you cite a source for an idea. This is incorrect. Students (like advanced scholars) are not judged on whether every idea is originally theirs but rather on the overall coherence of their presentation and argument. We even have special terms reserved for people who cite others copiously. We call those people scholarly, erudite, learned, etc.

The moral of the story is this: borrow ideas freely, but be generous in your citations. Given the requirements of this course, I do not expect that questions of academic integrity should arise. Please do not hesitate to consult me if you are unsure about anything.

More generally, I expect that this course will be a place for serious intellectual inquiry. In order for this to happen students must listen carefully to each other; must accept the responsibility to ask questions when something is unclear; and must strive to advance the discussion (for example, by making a connection to something in the reading or a prior observation, by raising a question about the reading or a prior observation). Please note that objecting to another student’s point is perfectly acceptable, as long as it is done in a courteous and specific manner.

H. Outline of the Course

There will be seven sections of the course, each one approximately two weeks long.

Reading lists will include the following texts. Note that we will certainly not cover all of this material; specific assignments will be forthcoming. All texts will be made available via LATTE; students do not need to purchase any books.

1. Revelation, Tradition and Interpretation
   a. Classical texts: Exodus 19, bYoma 67b (rational and arational laws), bEruvin 54b (teaching of oral law), bMenahot 29b (Moses’ vision of Akiba), bBava Metzia 59b (oven of Akhnai)
   b. Benjamin Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology” (1999)
   e. Gershom Scholem, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism” (1971)
2. Covenant and Commandment, Individualism and Autonomy
   a. “Covenant: God’s Law and the People’s Consent,” chapter 1 in Michael Walzer, et al., eds., The Jewish Political Tradition: Volume 1, Authority (2000), including primary texts with commentary (Exodus 19, 24; Deuteronomy 9, 29, 30; Joshua 24; Nehemiah; bShabbat 88a, Sifre Numbers 115, Sifre Deuteronomy 343, bSotah 37a-b, bShevuot 29a-b)
   b. Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784)
   c. Arnold M. Eisen, Rethinking Modern Judaism (1997), selections
   d. Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity (1992), selections
   e. Hugh Heclo, On Thinking Institutionally (2008), selections
   f. Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, “Radically Free and Radically Claimed: Toward the Next Stage of Liberal Jewish Theology”
   g. Soloveitchik on the covenant of fate and the covenant of destiny

3. Ritual
   a. Eisen, “Buber, Rosenzweig, and the Authority of the Commandments,” Rethinking Modern Judaism, ch. 7
   b. Sigmund Freud, Future of an Illusion (1927)
   c. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (1966), selections
   d. Isaiah Leibowitz, Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State (1992), selections
   e. Mordecai Kaplan, Judaism as a Civilization (1934), selections
   f. Vanessa Ochs, Inventing Jewish Ritual (2007), selections
   g. Adam Seligman et al., Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on Sincerity (2008), selections
   h. Levisohn, “When She Arrives”

4. Monotheism and Idolatry
   c. Halbertal and Margalit, Idolatry (1992), selections
   d. William James, Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), selections

5. Gender
   b. Susan Starr Sered, “‘Woman’ as Symbol and Women as Agents: Gendered Religious Discourses and Practices,” in Ferree et al., eds., Revisioning Gender (1999)
   d. Rachel Adler, Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics (1998), selections
   e. Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition (2004), selections
6. Peace, Power, and Violence
   c. Biale, Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History (1986), selections
   d. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (1963); “Non-violence: The Only Road to Freedom” (1966)
   e. Gandhi, “The Jews” (1938); Martin Buber, “Letter to Gandhi” (1939)

7. Chosenness and Peoplehood
   a. Classical texts: Genesis 12, 17 (Abraham), Deuteronomy 7 (forbidden marriages), Ruth 1, Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 13 (enforcing purity); bAvodah Zarah 2a-3b
   b. Judah Halevi, Kuzari, 1:31-47
   c. Spinoza, Theological-Political Treatise, ch. 3
   g. The A.B. Yehoshua Controversy (American Jewish Committee, 2006)