1. Course Overview
What does the Bible have to say about human mortality, divine immortality, and the afterlife? Are these ideas more consistent with later Jewish and Christian notions of death and the afterlife, or are they closer to the views of their ancient Near Eastern neighbors? In this course we will examine the development of biblical and ancient Near Eastern concepts of death and life-after-death. We will look at a variety of different types of texts that touch upon these themes, such as narrative, poetry, ritual, and law in the Hebrew Bible and ancient texts, from some of the oldest written stories to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among the topics we will cover include the depiction of human mortality and divine immortality in literature, dying as a social process, the development of the notion of an afterlife and the concept of the ‘soul’, and communication with the dead. We will also learn about the history of how these texts have been received in the West, and how they have shaped our inherited ideas of the immortality of the soul, human suffering, and divine justice. The aim of the course is to develop an awareness of the ancient historical and cultural context in which these texts were authored, and to deepen our understanding of our own modern views of mortality.

2. Course Responsibilities and Grading
Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

The grade for this class will be based on the following percentages:

20% of your total grade: Your continuous, active, and thoughtful participation in class discussion and reflection upon the readings.
30% of your total grade: A midterm exam, for which you will be amply prepared by a midterm study guide and in-class midterm review session.
10% of your total grade: A 10-15 minute presentation (“reading report”) of your summary and thoughtful reflection on one of the week’s readings to the rest of the class. (Sign up first week of class)
40% of your total grade: A final written project that synthesizes the knowledge and skills acquired in this course, to be turned in a week after the last day of the course, 9-11 double spaced pages. You will have a choice of type of project, see below.

*Participation (20% of your total grade—including 3 reflection assignments)
Come to class ready to listen, participate, and engage thoughtfully with the course material and with other members of the class. If you need to be absent, please inform me ahead of time. Excused absences, outside of religious observance, require a doctor’s note.
Three times in the course you will be required to submit a 1-2 page double spaced reflection on the readings and lectures, specifically responding to a question prompt. These reflections are not evaluated but count towards your participation grade.

**How to write a reflection.** Think of reflections as (intelligent, well-written) journal entries that you would be comfortable sharing with the class, sometimes they are used to structure discussions (indicate in your reflection if you would like that your words not be shared in class). Reflections are written demonstrations of how you are processing the lectures and readings of the course. In your reflection, you must respond to the question prompt and cite that week’s readings in your response.

*Midterm Exam (30% of your total grade)*
The midterm is scheduled for Tuesday, November 2. The exam will cover all the material up to Week 7 of the course. You will receive a midterm study guide a week before the exam, which will tell you the format of the exam, summarize what you need to know, and will give examples of essay questions. There will be a review session for the exam on Tuesday, October 31.

*Reading Report (10% of your total grade)*
Once during the semester you will be responsible for presenting a summary and your reflections on one of the assigned readings. This summary is a FIVE minute explanation of the main points of the reading and a SINGLE PAGE outline for the class. (Email the outline to the class TF the morning your reading report is due so he can distribute to the rest of the class).

*Final Paper (40% of your total grade)*
You will write a 9-11 (double spaced) page paper, deepening your examination of a topic addressed in the course (please clear your topic ahead of time with the course instructor, by Thursday of Week 9). Include as your sources, in addition to all of the readings assigned to that topic in the Course Syllabus, an additional eight sources that you have read and engaged, which you have discovered through your course readings (or otherwise assigned by the instructor for your particular topic).

**Topic Proposal Due Thursday, Week 9** The Proposal will consist of a paragraph length abstract that explains (1) your main research question, (2) a preliminary argument, (3) a basic outline of the topics your paper will cover in order to address your main research question, (4) your bibliography. Your proposal represents 10% of your paper’s final grade.

3. Class Policies
*Attendance and participation* are a key part of the learning experience in this class. Your participation and attendance grade is based on your attendance in all classes (you are permitted one unexcused absence, beyond that absences without a doctor’s note or otherwise excused by the instructors will affect your grade). Your preparation and participation means having read the assigned reading and making an effort to understand the ideas in these readings, being prepared to raise meaningful questions about the readings, and being willing to share your ideas and respond respectfully to the contributions of other students in the class.
Absence from exams: The midterm exam is scheduled for November 2. If you have an excused conflict with this exam date, notify me as soon as possible. I will allow in these cases a makeup midterm exam. An excused conflict is defined as a) an excused absence from me, obtained within the first two weeks of the course; b) an emergency or sudden illness. In the case of sudden illness, I expect a note from the health center or a physician. In the case of a different type of emergency, a makeup midterm exam is at my discretion. Absence from the final exam is a matter handled by the registrar’s office.

Assignment Submissions and Due Dates: The reflections are due by noon on LATTE on the day they are indicated on the syllabus. The final papers are due Wednesday, December 20 by 6pm on LATTE. Any papers turned in after that point are considered late. Late papers will be marked down by 10% per day.

Laptops and Cellphones: Use of laptops and cellphones are not permitted in the class at any time, unless you have a note permitting you to use laptops from Student Accessibility Support.

Academic Honesty: You are each responsible for your own work. You will be responsible for the content and quality of your own individual assignments. If you produce and submit work that is not your own, you will have violated Brandeis University’s policies on academic integrity. You are responsible for making yourself familiar with and following the University’s policies on academic integrity (http://www.brandeis.edu/studentslife/sdc/ai). Allegations of violations of this policy will be forwarded to the Office of Campus Life for potential referral to the Student Judicial System. If sanctioned, you could be failed from the course and suspended from the University.

Special Accommodations: If you are a student with an officially documented disability at Brandeis and wish to have a reasonable accommodation in this class, you should contact the instructors immediately.

4. Contacting the instructor
Your first contact is the course Teaching Fellow, Justin Huguenin (jmmhug@brandeis.edu) for logistical questions about the course, reporting absences, or matters relating to accessing the readings. If he cannot answer your question, or if your concern is of a sensitive nature, please email me. I will make an effort to answer emails in a timely manner, but do not expect an answer to emails between the hours of 6 PM and 9 AM.
For anything that cannot be answered by the syllabus, contact Professor Vayntrub, vayntrub@brandeis.edu, Lown 311.

Office Hours
Please come by at our posted office hours or make an appointment to meet. Professor Vayntrub will hold office hours on Thursdays 1-3 PM.
5. Course Readings
You must purchase two books for this course (the name used in the reading assignments are listed in bold)


*The remainder of the course readings are posted online on LATTE.*

6. Course Schedule

Week 1.
Why take this course?

Thursday, August 31

Topic: Ancient Texts and Religious Canons in Contemporary Life
Reading due: None; Syllabus (online)
Online: Explore http://www.bibleodyssey.org

Part I. Death
Week 2.

Tuesday, September 5

Topic: What was death in the Hebrew Bible? (Afterlife and “Afterdeath”)
Reading:
1. 2 Samuel 3:26-39 (JSB)
2. 2 Samuel 18-19 (JSB)
3. Numbers 20:22-29 (JSB)
4. Levenson 1-34 *Reading Reporter:

Thursday, September 7 Overview

Topic: Theorizing Mortuary Practice
Close Reading:
1. Leviticus 13-14 (JSB)
2. Leviticus 21:1-4 (JSB)
3. Olyan (2008), 1-9 (LATTE)
4. Klawans, “Concepts of Purity” 2041-2047 (JSB)

Reflection Assignment 1: Outline views you held prior to taking this course about how the Bible, Judaism, and/or Christianity understands life, death, afterlife, and meaning. How have the readings so far changed or deepened your understanding? Make specific references to the primary and secondary texts we have read and discussed in class. (1-2 pages double spaced).
Week 3.

Tuesday, September 12 Discussion  
Topic: Social responses to death, continued  
Reading:  
1. Numbers 19:11-22  
2. Numbers 31:19-24  
*Reading Reporter:

Thursday, September 14 Close Reading  
Topic: Death and burial in the biblical world  
Reading:  
1. Genesis 49:28-33; 50 (JSB)  
2. 1 Kings 2:1-12 (JSB)  
3. Job 19:24-27 (JSB)  
5. Smith and Bloch-Smith (1988) 277-284 (LATTE)  
*Reading Reporter:

Week 4.

Tuesday, September 19 Overview  
Topic: Mythology of death in biblical world  
Reading:  
1. Ezekiel 32:17-31 (JSB)  
2. Psalm 49 (JSB)  
3. Sanders 151-169 (LATTE)  
*Reading Reporter:

Extra Credit: Attend Lecture by Professor Annette Reed (NYU)  
Tauber Colloquium 12:20-2:20 PM Lown 315

no class Thursday, September 21

Part II. Memorial  
Week 5.

Tuesday, September 26  
Class cancelled. (Professor giving lecture at University of Chicago)

Thursday, September 28 Close Reading  
Topic: Death and afterlife in Ugarit and Phoenicia  
Reading of primary texts:  
1. From Ugarit: The Ba’al Cycle (KTU 1.5 VI 11-25) (LATTE)  
2. From Ugarit: Royal Ancestors Ritual (KTU 1.161) (LATTE)  
3. From Phoenicia: Eshmunazor Sarcophagus (LATTE)  
4. From Phoenicia: Memorial pillars (various) (LATTE)
Week 6.

Tuesday, October 3 (*Brandeis Thursday Schedule*)

**Topic:** Writing, Object, and Memory

**Reading:**
   *Reading Reporter:*
2. Suriano, “Absalom’s Reversal of Fortune” (LATTE)  
   *Reading Reporter:

**Reflection Assignment 2:** What do the so-called “mortuary steles”—both visually and in their inscribed texts—have to do with memory and death? How do the biblical “standing stones” relate? (1-2 pages double spaced).

*No class Thursday, October 5*

Week 7.

Tuesday, October 10

*Class cancelled. (Professor giving lecture at Columbia University)*

Wednesday, October 11 (*Brandeis Thursday Schedule*)

**Topic:** Death and afterlife in Mesopotamia. Focus: Sumerians

**Reading:**
1. Stele of Vultures (LATTE)  
2. Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet 12 (LATTE)  
3. Ezekiel 39 (JSB)  
4. Bottero 268-286 (LATTE)  
   *Reading Reporter:*

Week 8.

Tuesday, October 17 *Overview*

**Topic:** Imagining the transition from life to death

**Readings:**
1. Ishtar’s Descent into the Netherworld (LATTE)  
2. Isaiah 14 (JSB)  
   *Reading Reporter:

Thursday, October 19 *Overview*

**Topic:** Communicating with the dead

**Reading:**
1. Deuteronomy 18:9-14 (JSB)  
2. 1 Samuel 28:3-25 (JSB)  
   *Reading Reporter:
   *Reading Reporter:
Week 9.

Tuesday, October 24 Close Reading

**Topic:** Death, Succession, and Mortal Anxiety in Narrative

**Reading:**
1. From Ugarit: Aqhat Tale (KTU 1.17-1.18) (LATTE)
2. Vayntrub (2017) 1-22 (LATTE)
3. A biblical tale of impossible love, revenge, and succession: 2 Samuel 13 (JSB)

Thursday, October 26 Guest Lecture

Professor Rhiannon Graybill (Rhodes College) in Lown 315

**Reading:**
1. Graybill, *Are We Not Men* (selection, LATTE)

Week 10.

Tuesday, October 31

Midterm Review Session

Thursday, November 2

Midterm Exam

Part III. Immortality

Week 11.

Tuesday, November 7 Overview

**Topic:** Ancestor Worship and Lineage

**Reading:**
1. Genesis 35:16-21 (JSB)
2. 1 Samuel 20:1-9 (JSB)
3. 2 Samuel 18:18 (JSB)
4. van der Toorn 42-65 (LATTE) *Reading Reporter:
5. Bloch-Smith (1992b) 213-224 (LATTE) *Reading Reporter:

Thursday, November 9 Close Reading

**Topic:** Death, Family, and Land

**Reading:**
1. Ruth 1-4 (JSB)
2. Genesis 38 (JSB)
3. Brichto 1-54 (LATTE) *Reading Reporter:

*Reading Reporter:
Week 12.

Tuesday, November 14 Discussion
   Topic: Good death vs. bad death in the Hebrew Bible
   Close Reading:
   2. Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 (JSB)

Thursday, November 16 Guest Lecture
   Professor Matthew Suriano (University of Maryland, College Park) in Lown 315

Week 13.

Tuesday, November 21 Close Reading
   Topic: Meaning in Life and Death
   Reading:
   1. Qoheleth 1-12 (JSB)
   2. Levenson 181-200 *Reading Reporter:
   3. Murphy 101-116 (LATTE) *Reading Reporter:

   Reflection Assignment 3: Discuss the role inheritance, transmission, and success play in Qoheleth’s understanding of the meaning of life and death. Integrate your understanding of previous texts we have read, such as Ruth, Job, and the Brichto reading. (1-2 pages double spaced).

   no class Thursday, November 23

Week 14.

Tuesday, November 28
   Topic: Jewish Martyrdom and the Idea of the Afterlife
   Reading:
   1. 2 Maccabees 6-7 (LATTE)
   2. 4 Maccabees (LATTE)
   3. Shepkaru 1-44 (LATTE) *Reading Reporter:

Thursday, November 30
   Topic: Resurrection in the Hebrew Bible
   Reading:
   1. Isaiah 24-27 (JSB)
   2. Ezekiel 37 (JSB)
   3. Daniel 7-12 (JSB)
   4. Levenson 108-132 *Reading Reporter:
Week 15.

Tuesday, December 5

**Topic:** Resurrection in early Judaism and the New Testament

**Reading:**
1. Matthew 27:32-66; 28 (LATTE)
3. 1 Corinthians 15 (LATTE)
4. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 90b (LATTE)
5. **Levenson** 133-165
6. Barr 1-20 (LATTE)

*Reading Reporter:*

Thursday, December 7

**Topic:** The Afterlife in the New Testament, Rabbinic Literature, and Beyond

**Reading:**
1. Matthew 13 (LATTE)
2. Revelation 20 (LATTE)
3. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Pesahim 94a (LATTE)
4. **Levenson** 166-200

*Reading Reporter:

**FILM IN CLASS:** Star Trek, The Next Generation, Season 5, Episode 25
“The Inner Light”

7. Select Bibliography


