Introduction to Jewish Philosophy

(PHL 412 • FALL • WEDNESDAY)
8:30 – 11:00 AM

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SHAPIRO SYNAGOGUE, STUDY ROOM TWO

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The purpose of this class is (a) to make it possible to enter the dialogue of Jewish philosophy by (b) acquainting you with representative great thinkers who have joined and shaped the conversation, by (c) exposing you to the rigors and methods of Jewish philosophy in the ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary periods (d) and by addressing major issues in Jewish religious thought. This fourfold agenda requires exposure to primary and secondary sources, engaged debate, and careful analysis.

Consequently, attendance, preparation, and participation are the fundamental requirements for this course. Preparation consists of reading the assignment in advance, (you might consider preparing a two or three page summary of the philosopher’s primary arguments and assertions, as well as a brief critique or list of questions to probe). Please bring the textbooks to class for use during our discussions. Participation means more than just joining in class discussion. It means treating the material not merely as of antiquarian interest, but as guideposts and goads to fashioning a personal and contemporary theology of Judaism.

HONOR CODE: The Vice President for Academic Affairs has asked all instructors to remind students as part of the syllabus that the University’s Honor Code applies to all courses, including this one. As part of that reminder, she has asked us to include the Honor Code’s section on plagiarism (the word comes from the Latin meaning kidnap), which is appended to this syllabus. Be sure to attribute ideas and passages correctly so that you do not appear to be claiming them as your own and thus stealing them. By all means, learn from others, but give credit where credit is due.
**Goals:** There are two goals to this course, one of content and one of method. I hope to introduce you to some of the most important thinkers and issues in modern Jewish philosophy. While doing that, I also hope to hone your abilities to analyze an argument philosophically, identifying its strengths and weaknesses and seeing its implications. Quite a tall order!

The content goal requires that this be a survey course, covering a number of topics and as many approaches as possible. The second goal, though, requires that we not only describe the arguments in our readings accurately, but that we also evaluate them for their strengths and weaknesses. This will provide a model for you as to how to proceed in your examination and paper for this course.

**Reading:** Since you are most likely taking more than one reading class, each with its own requirements, it is important that you plan and follow a reading schedule. This class requires 4–6 hours of outside work per week. It is recommended that this be divided into three work-sessions during the week. Class lectures will help you contextualize the readings, but will rarely go through the readings themselves. Your task will be to integrate the two.

**Format:** Students will be expected to read the material assigned for each session, as listed in this syllabus, and to come to class prepared to discuss the appropriate readings. Please bring the readings assigned for each session to class since we will be referring to them often during our discussion.

Students will be expected to write a paper. Here are the directions for that paper: Choose one thinker whose work we will be taking up in class on a given topic (that is, who appears on the syllabus for that topic). Choose some other Jewish thinker (and you may even be able to convince me to let you take a non-Jewish thinker) whose work we are not studying on that topic this semester. (You may choose someone whose work we are studying on some other topic, or you may choose someone whose work we are not studying at all.) Then compare and evaluate both approaches.

Your comparison should not be a summary of thinker A and then of thinker B, leaving it to me to do the comparisons for you! Instead, compare the two approaches subtopic by subtopic. Your evaluation should be from both a general, philosophical perspective and from a Jewish perspective. Philosophically, evaluate the arguments for their clarity, consistency, adequacy (truth), and pragmatic implications. Jewishly, evaluate them in terms of the degree to which they articulate the classical Jewish tradition and, on the other hand, respond to distinctly modern concerns. Remember: If a theory only repeats what the tradition already says, the theory is useless; but if a theory neglects the tradition entirely, it ceases to be recognizably Jewish. As a result, every theory worth its salt will have to balance the traditional with the modern. Your job is to describe how the two thinkers you choose are doing that and to evaluate their attempts to bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern.

The paper should be typed, double-spaced, one inch margins, 12 point font, 10-15 pages. Please remember to number the pages.

My mother was an English literature major, and I am afraid that I have inherited her penchant for insisting that your (and my) English is good. So please check your paper for spelling and grammar mistakes (Spell-Check is great, but not sufficient) before you hand it in. Over the years, it has become apparent to me that good language usually coincides with good thinking, and so even though I will be grading your paper and examination on the basis of its
philosophical clarity and cogency, checking your paper for its English clarity and grammar will often help you achieve philosophical clarity and cogency as well. Moreover, as future rabbis and educators, you need to know that even people whose mothers were not English teachers will judge you and what you stand for, at least in part, on the basis of your ability to communicate well, in writing as well as orally, and so you do yourself and indeed Judaism a disservice if you do not take care to do that well. Enough of the sermon, but *verbum sapientibus salus est*.

To help you prepare your paper, there will be an extra session on “How to Research and Write a Philosophy Paper, on Wednesday, November 2nd, from 7:30 – 9 PM at my home. This is purely optional and is meant to be helpful to you.

**Pacing:**
I have indicated the dates on which I plan to discuss each topic in the syllabus. The allotment of sessions is not hard and fast: I fully expect that there will be some topics that will require more time than I have apportioned, and some less. We will adhere to this schedule more or less so that we do not get bogged down in any one topic, however interesting it may be. Hopefully, long after this course has been completed, you will continue to read about other approaches and other topics in Jewish thought!

**Evaluation:**
In regard to the written work for this course, the paper counts for the preponderance of your grade. However, since philosophy requires identifying the issues that a problem raises and thinking through many alternatives, discussion with others is crucial to the process. To evaluate your participation in class discussions fairly I would need to write down a mark after each session. That, though, would make the class environment tense, and it would be counterproductive to our discussions and to your learning. Therefore, I shall count your participation in our class discussions, as I remember it at the end of the semester, as a factor in deciding whether or not to push a borderline grade up. Moreover, when I remember consistent, astute participation, I will raise the grade accordingly.

Evaluation, of course, goes in both directions. Therefore, at the end of the semester I shall ask you to fill out a written evaluation of the organization, topics, and readings of this course. I would appreciate it if you would keep brief notes for yourself on any aspect of the course that you especially liked or disliked so that you will remember that when it comes time to fill out those evaluations. Moreover, you are welcome and indeed encouraged to share such reactions with me during the semester as well. I am sincerely interested in improving the course in whatever way I can.

**Philosophy Resources:**
For those students without previous background in philosophy, I recommend Donald Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy: The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006. It’s cartoons and accessible text make the philosophy more easy to digest, his teaching is very clear, and it won’t take more than 5 or so hours to read. There are also several great online resources you should feel free to utilize:
The Jewish Encyclopedia is at [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com)
The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is at [http://plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)
Wikipedia is a tremendous resource, at [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)
The AJU library has invaluable research links at [http://proxy.ajula.edu](http://proxy.ajula.edu)

**Books:**
Students should buy the following books:
The UJ Bookstore has ordered copies of all these books.

**Office Hours:**
I will generally be available through my Assistant, Blanca Jensen, in the Ziegler office. I’m always happy to meet with you to discuss matters philosophical, so please feel free to make an appointment.

**Topics and Schedule:**

*Please read the following for the opening class:*

I. Sep 7 - The Nature and Topics of Jewish Theology & Philosophy
   “The Bible and Philosophical Exegesis,” JPR, pp. 3-6.
   “Talmud, Mishnah, and Midrash as Sources for Philosophical Reflection,” JPR, 87-89.
   “Medieval Jewish Philosophy: Reason in a Religious Age,” JPR 161-164
   “Modern Jewish Thought: Between History and Tradition,” JPR 303-304.
   Introduction; Sherwin, CJT, pp. 1-22.

II. Sep 21 – God
   *Saadia Gaon & Neoplatonism*
   JPR 171 – 201

III. Oct 5 – God
   *Moses Maimonides*
   JPR 220 - 244

IV. Oct 12 – God
   *Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Abraham Isaac Kook, Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Joshua Heschel.*
   CJT 23 – 95
V. Oct 19 – God
  LOUIS JACOBS, ELLIOT N. DORFF, HAROLD M. SCHULWEIFS, MARCIA FALK, ELLEN UMANSKY.
  CJT 95 – 147.

VI. Oct 26 – Creation & Revelation
  PHILO, MAIMONIDES, DAVID HARTMAN, DAVID W. WEISS, ARTHUR GREEN, EMMANUEL LEVINAS, NEIL GILLMAN
  JPR 7 – 38.
  CJT, pp. 148-163.
  CJT, pp. 164-189
  Bring a Tanakh and a Siddur to this class.

VII. Nov 2 - Covenant/Chosenness
  YEHUDAH HA-LEVI, EUGENE BOROWITZ, MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD, JUDITH PLASKOW, ELLIOT DORFF
  JPR, pp. 201 – 214.
  CJT, pp. 221-230, 246-277.

VIII. Nov 9 - The State of Israel
  A. B. YEHOSHUA, DAVID HARTMAN, YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, MARC ELLIS
  CJT, pp. 349-353, 417-484.

IX. Nov 16 - The Holocaust
  INTRODUCTION; ELIEZER BERKOVITS, RICHARD RUBENSTEIN, EMIL FACKENHEIM, IRVING GREENBERG. In preparation for class, students will be asked to read the Introduction to this section in CJT and then three of these five thinkers. Their theories appear in:
  CJT, pp. 345-349; 355-416.

X. Nov 30 - Law
  JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK, JAKOB PETUCHOWSKI, ROBERT GORDIS, RACHEL ADLER, ELLIOT DORFF. In preparation for class, students will be asked to choose three of these five thinkers and read their theories in:
  CJT, pp. 278-343.

XI. Dec 7 – New Frontiers
  REBECCA ALPERT, DAVID ELLENSON, PETER OCHS. Feminist and textual reading, embodied metaphor
  CJT, pp. 485 – 511
  Artson Handout

Paper Due the last day of finals.