

# Introduction to Jewish Studies

## JWST/WCL 2380

Dr. Caryn Tamber-Rosenau  
T/Th 10-11:30 a.m.  
C (Roy Cullen) 112

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**Office hours:** Mondays 3-4 p.m. and Thursdays 1-2 p.m.



### Course description:

The history of the Jewish people is in many ways also the history of the world. Judaism is thousands of years old, bearing witness to much of recorded history, and Jews have lived in nearly every land in the world. In this course, we will explore the sweep of Jewish history from biblical origins to the present day, exploring persistent themes such as identity, community, persecution, and diaspora. We will also use Jewish history as an organizing schema for discussing the many ways of studying and understanding Judaism. Students will read and discuss both primary and secondary sources. We will discuss the birth and goals of the field of Jewish

Studies, and students will have a chance to investigate and assess how American universities choose to teach Jewish Studies.

Course goals:

- To gain an understanding of Jewish history from ancient times to the present day;
- To be able to speak and write knowledgeably about Jewish history;
- To learn techniques of engagement for both primary and secondary sources;
- To understand the nature of Jewish studies as an academic field, and to discover what Jewish studies scholars do and how they do it; and
- To investigate and assess how Jewish studies is taught in American colleges and universities.

**Required books:**

Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Dean Phillip Bell (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Jewish Studies*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

**Course requirements and policies:**

1. New concepts will be introduced every class session, so students are strongly encouraged to make attendance and punctuality a priority. Excessive absences or lateness will affect a student's grade, as will unexcused early departures from class. If you must miss class, please *let me know in advance* if at all possible; it will be your responsibility to make up work that you have missed.
2. Please bring assigned readings to class in book form, print-out, or as a PDF on your computer or tablet.
3. Please come to class having read and annotated all assigned readings. This is a seminar-style class that will involve a lot of discussion, and you are expected to make valuable and respectful contributions. Please come with one or two questions to ask about each reading. Class participation will affect your final grade.
4. For every class session, I have provided below a few questions for you to consider while doing the readings for that day. I hope that this will focus your time and allow you to get more out of both the readings and class sessions.
5. It is impossible to pay attention and participate if you are checking your e-mail or on Facebook (and it's also incredibly rude), so I ask that you refrain from using your computer, tablet, or phone for any non-class-related purposes during class time. Failure to honor this rule will result in a lowered grade.
6. In between class sessions, I will occasionally need to communicate important information to the class via e-mail. It is your responsibility to check your university e-mail regularly.

7. There will be short quizzes given regularly. We will discuss how often and how many as a class.
8. *Hevruta* (Aramaic for “friendship”) is a traditional Jewish way of studying texts. In *hevruta*, two people read and discuss a single text together. We will be working in *hevruta* at some point during most class sessions, especially to analyze primary-source texts.
9. Students will work on group projects aimed at analyzing the ways in which Jewish Studies as a discipline is taught at American institutions of higher learning. Groups will present their work on **Tuesday, April 18**.
10. Students will write short response papers (2 pages each) to the films *Footnote* and *Executing Eichmann*, both of which we will watch in class together. For each film, I will give you a set of response questions to choose from. The response papers will be due on TurnItIn.
11. Students will write a final paper assessing how a Jewish Studies topic of their choice is treated in scholarship. There will be interim deadlines for the paper’s topic, bibliography, and thesis statement. The final paper will be due on TurnItIn on **Friday, May 5**.
12. There will be periodic opportunities to earn extra credit points by attending events on campus. Stay tuned for more information.
13. This syllabus is subject to change. If I make any changes, I will notify you.

**Grading:**

Attendance and participation: 15%

Quizzes: 20%

Group project: 20%

Film response papers: 20%

Final paper: 25%

**Special accommodations for students with disabilities:**

To receive reasonable accommodations for a disability at the University of Houston, students are to register with the Center for Students with Disabilities. If the CSD has granted you accommodations, please make an appointment with me to discuss how we can work together to make sure you receive those accommodations in this class.

**Academic integrity:**

Students at the University of Houston are required to adhere to the university’s academic honesty policy, which you can find here: <http://www.uh.edu/provost/academic-affairs/policy-guidelines/honesty-policy/> If you are unsure how the honesty policy applies to a given assignment in this course, please ask me. I have no tolerance for cheating (including plagiarism) and will refer *all* violations to the appropriate officials.

Schedule:

Week 1

Tuesday, January 17: Introductions and syllabus review

Thursday, January 19: What is Jewish studies?

Read: Bell chapter 1

- Bell writes that the study of Judaism has been used for many different purposes. What are those purposes, and can you think of examples of each?
- What does it mean to “scientifically” study something that is not itself a science?
- To what should we attribute the growth in Jewish Studies?
- How does Bell describe the relationship between academic Jewish Studies and the Jewish community?

Week 2

Tuesday, January 24: Biblical Origins

Read: Scheindlin chapter 1

- Which pieces of the biblical story can we analyze historically?
- According to Scheindlin, what are the results of those analyses?
- What were the major empires that affected the ancient Israelites?

Thursday, January 26:

Read: Bell chapter 2, pp48-54 only

- How does Greenspoon support his claim that biblical interpretation starts in antiquity?
- How did Jews react to the modern form of biblical scholarship that emerged in the 1800s? Why?
- Why did the number of Jews studying the Bible academically increase in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
- Do you think Jewish academic Bible scholarship is any different than general academic Bible scholarship?

Week 3

Tuesday, January 31: The Diaspora

Read: Scheindlin chapter 2

- At what point can we begin speaking of “Jews”?
- What is Diaspora? Where were the earliest Diaspora communities? What were the religious implications of the development of the Diaspora?
- What major empires affected the early Jews?

Thursday, February 2

Read: Bell chapter 3, pp64-79 only

Watch in class: *Footnote*

- What are some problems with using rabbinic literature to write history?
- Describe the disagreement about the unity of rabbinic literature. Which side of the debate do you favor?
- In what ways are scholars starting to explore the influence of non-Jewish culture on Jews and Jewish literature in the rabbinic period?

## Week 4

Tuesday, February 7: Palestine and the Diaspora

Read: Scheindlin chapter 3

Watch in class: rest of *Footnote*

- How and why did religious authority shift from Temple to synagogue and from priests to rabbis?
- What did life look like for Jews in Roman Palestine after 70 C.E.? What about for Diaspora Jews?
- How did the rise of Christianity in this period affect Judaism? How did the rise of rabbinic Judaism affect Christianity?
- What is the Talmud and why is it important?

Thursday, February 9

Read: Judith Hauptman, excerpt from *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice*

Tal Ilan, "A Menstruant 'Forced and Immersed'

- Why have women traditionally not weighed in on rabbinic texts? Why does Hauptman argue that they should?
- Do you think it is important that scholars of a particular topic be diverse in gender? Why or why not?
- To Ilan, what is the major issue raised by the question of whether a woman forced to ritually purify herself is fit for sexual intercourse?
- What does the question of "intention" say about rabbinic views on women?

## Week 5

Tuesday, February 14: Jews in the Muslim Middle Ages

Read: Scheindlin chapter 4

Due: *Footnote* response paper

- How did the rise of Islam affect the Jews?

- What kinds of intellectual cross-pollination occurred between Jews and Muslims in the Middle Ages?
- Who were the Karaites and why were they important?
- Who was Maimonides?

Thursday, February 16

Read: Bell chapter 5, pp103-108 only

Mark R. Cohen, “The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish-Arab History”

- Why was the Cairo Genizah discovery so important? How have scholars used the Genizah documents to write history?
- What does Cohen mean by “lachrymose” and “neo-lachrymose”?
- In Cohen’s argument, what is the relationship between history-writing and modern debates about Israel? What does he think of this relationship?

## Week 6

Tuesday, February 21: Jews in the Christian Middle Ages

Read: Scheindlin chapter 5

- What are the origins of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews?
- What was the general status of Jews in Christian Europe in the early Middle Ages? How did the Crusades affect Jewish-Christian relations?
- What kinds of anti-Jewish sentiments and actions took hold during this time period? Why?
- What led to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492?

Thursday, February 23

Read: Roberto Bonfil, “Dubious Crimes in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Rethinking the Relations between Jews, Christians, and *conversos* in Pre-modern Europe”

- What is a *converso*? In the incident Bonfil describes, what was their “crime”?
- What was the aim of the proposed boycott discussed here?
- According to Bonfil, what did this incident mean about the boundaries between Jew and Christian and about the right to self-definition for the *conversos*?
- What implications does the history of *conversos* have for discussions of Jewish identity today?

## Week 7

Tuesday, February 28: Jews in the Ottoman Empire

Read: Scheindlin chapter 6

- What led to the growth of Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire?

- What is a “messianic movement”? Why did these movements flourish in Renaissance Europe?
- What happened to the status of the Jews in the Muslim world in modern times (1800s and after)? How did these Jews fare during and after World War II?

Thursday, March 2: Jews in Western Europe

Read: Scheindlin chapter 7

- How did the Reformation and Counter-Reformation affect the lot of the Jews in Western Europe?
- What is a ghetto?
- What was the Jewish Enlightenment? How was it related to the idea of “emancipation”? How did these ideas affect the Jewish community?
- What kinds of religious changes were introduced starting in the 1800s? Why?

## Week 8

Tuesday, March 7: Library day!

Final paper guidelines distributed and discussed

Thursday, March 9

Read: Bell chapter 7, pp147-156, 173-180 only

- What kinds of sources do we have for the Jewish history of this period?
- Why was the “who is a Jew?” question key in early modern times?
- What subjects of study predominate in scholarly work on this period?

## SPRING BREAK

## Week 9

Tuesday, March 21: Jews in Eastern Europe; U.S. Immigration

Read: Scheindlin chapter 8

Joshua Furman, “Across the Ocean to Across Town,” pp27-28 and 36-51

- What was the “Pale of Settlement”?
- What kinds of religious changes were introduced in Eastern Europe? Why?
- How would you describe the importance of Yiddish to Jewish life, both in Europe and later in the U.S.?
- What factors led Eastern European Jews to emigrate starting in the 1800s?
- Identify the waves of Jewish immigration to the U.S. Which nationalities dominated which periods of immigration and why?

- How is the American Jewish Diaspora different from past Jewish Diasporas?
- What were the “push” and “pull” factors driving Eastern European immigration to the U.S.?

Thursday, March 23

Read: Bell chapter 8 pp202-204 only

Listen: StoryCorps Yiddish Radio Project Part I

- What is postmodernism? What is its impact on Jewish Studies?
- What themes have characterized studies of modern Judaism?
- How did Jews on Yiddish Radio in the 1930s-1950s navigate being Jewish and being American?

Week 10

Tuesday, March 28: The Shoah

Read: Scheindlin chapter 9

- What was Hitler’s early message about the Jews? Why did it gain popularity?
- How did German restrictions and violence against Jews progress over time?
- To what extent did Germany’s allies and occupied countries cooperate with Hitler’s policies toward the Jews?
- Describe the ghetto system during the Shoah.

Thursday, March 30

Read: Zev Garber, “Shoah Theology in America: First Responses and Interfaith Statement”

- What is the relationship between theology and the Shoah? Why did the Shoah call traditional Jewish theologies into question?
- What do you think Garber means by “Shoadicity”?
- How have Shoah studies changed over time?
- Why does Garber advocate Jewish and Christian cooperation in Shoah theology?

Week 11

Tuesday, April 4: The State of Israel

Read: Scheindlin chapter 10

Bell chapter 13

- How and why did Zionism develop?
- What was the relationship of the Shoah and World War II to the founding of Israel?

- What discussions and challenges were there around the revival of the Hebrew language?
- Why is Israel Studies as a subfield sometimes controversial?
- Why is there a debate about where in a university Israel Studies should be housed? What do you think?
- What factors have influenced the growth of Israel Studies?

Thursday, April 6

Read: Scheindlin chapter 11  
 Watch in class: *Executing Eichmann*

- What early challenges did the state of Israel experience? Outline its major wars and their outcomes.
- Describe the capture, trial, and execution of Adolf Eichmann.
- What is Hamas? Hezbollah?
- Who was Yitzhak Rabin and why was he important?
- What changes occurred in the American Jewish community in the 1960s and beyond?

Week 12

Tuesday, April 11: NO CLASS

Thursday, April 13: Modern Jewry (focus on gender and sexuality issues)  
 Read: Stuart Charmé, “The Political Transformation of Gender Traditions at the Western Wall in Jerusalem”

Due: *Executing Eichmann* response paper

- What is the source of the conflict over the Western Wall?
- How have gender traditions at the Wall changed over time? Why?
- Are there larger questions in this conflict about authority within the Jewish community?

Week 13

Tuesday, April 18: Group presentations

Thursday, April 20: Demography  
 Read: Bell chapter 12, pp282-295 only

- What are some reasons for studying Jewish demography?
- What variables does Della Pergola say affect the Jewish population?
- How does the question “who is a Jew?” affect the study of Jewish demography?

- What definition of Judaism do you think is best when measuring the Jewish population? Why?

### Week 14

Tuesday, April 25: Reimagining Contemporary Judaism

Read: Bell chapter 9

- What does Kurtzer mean when he talks about “mainstreams” and “margins”?
- What changes in the relationship of America and American Jews to Israel does Kurtzer discuss?
- What is “memory anxiety”?
- How has the rise of Orthodoxy changed the Jewish landscape?

Thursday, April 27: Wrap-up and discussion of final papers