

INTRODUCTION TO RABBINIC LITERATURE

TAL 5025D, Spring 2021

Dr. Sarah Wolf

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Course format: asynchronous on Canvas

Course Description and Goals

This course is an overview of some key topics in rabbinic literature, intended for students of all levels and backgrounds. Our class will focus on the following four areas, each of which will be its own three-week unit.

- **Study culture:** What did rabbinic study centers look like? What did the rabbis value as learners and educators? In what ways can rabbinic culture serve as a model of what to do or what not to do in contemporary learning environments?

- **Justice:** In addition to setting forth laws and rituals to structure Jews' daily lives, the rabbis also produced a system of civil and criminal law. How did the rabbis envision their justice system? How did they deal with questions of doubt or uncertainty in the courtroom? How did they conceive of the relationship between law and ethics?

- **Sex and gender:** What did the rabbis think about the roles of men and women in society? How did they think about marriage, and what does this tell us about how they understood gender roles? Given that the rabbis were all men, what did masculinity mean to them?

- **Theology:** How did the rabbis talk about God? What did they think about the relationship between God and the Jews, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem? What role did they think humans could or should play in interpreting God's laws?

Learning Outcomes

Regardless of your previous exposure to rabbinic literature, this class is meant to help you:

- Learn about the culture and values of the rabbis who were active in Roman Palestine and Babylonia from 70 through the 7th century C.E.

- Become more familiar with some of the characteristic features of rabbinic texts, focusing primarily on Mishnah and Talmud.

- Gain fluency with Sefaria and other online resources for the study of rabbinic literature.

- Draw connections between rabbinic literature and questions that are relevant to the contemporary Jewish and secular world.

Expectations, Assignments, and Grades

Each Monday at 10 a.m., a new module will open on Canvas. By the time the next module opens, you are expected to do the following things (which will also be listed in a weekly overview for each module):

- Watch a short video lecture
- Starting the *second week of class,* find a time to meet with your hevruta (study partner), who will be assigned to you at the beginning of each unit, to study and discuss the rabbinic texts on the source sheet for that week (note: all texts will be available in translation). There will be an alternate assignment for the first week.
- Starting the second week of class, jointly with your hevruta, briefly write up your reactions to your learning that week and send them to me. There will be an alternate assignment for the first week.
- Post on the discussion board. Discussion board posts should be about 250 words, or a 2-3 minute video or audio recording. In addition to submitting your post by Monday at 10 a.m., please respond to at least two of your classmates' posts (with something more substantive than just "I agree!") no later than the following Thursday at midnight.
- Possibly read the academic article in that week's module. The two articles for the first week are required. After that, you will not need to do the reading each week, but you're certainly welcome and encouraged to, and you will need to pick at least one reading per each of the four units on which to write a reading response.
- Once each unit, submit a reading response.

Your grade for the class will be calculated as follows:

Weekly hevruta write-ups: 25%

Weekly discussion board posts: 25%

Four reading responses: 20%

Final project: 30%

Course Policies

Virtual Drop-in Hours

I will hold drop-in office hours on Zoom every Friday at 1 p.m. at this link:

<https://columbiauniversity.zoom.us/j/98276696990?pwd=ZEczUEJLRWd6QU5qeTlOL2JTVDhsUT09> (Links to an external site.)

If you have any insights, questions, or confusions about the week's material, this is a great opportunity to discuss them with me in person. I'd also love for you drop in just to chat.

If that time doesn't work for you, you can always email or make an appointment to meet with me over phone or Zoom. I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours, but I will generally not be on email over the weekend.

Lateness

I understand that sometimes things come up. However, barring truly extenuating circumstances, you must be in touch with me at least forty-eight hours in advance to ask for an extension. Otherwise, one third of a letter grade will be deducted for each day you are late (so, one day of lateness will bring you from a B+ to a B, two days to a B-, etc). Note that this policy does not apply to discussion board posts or hevruta write-ups, which must be completed the week they are due.

Academic Integrity

Students in this class are expected to maintain academic integrity; academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. JTS Student Disciplinary Procedures can be found at:

http://my.jtsa.edu/ICS/Policies/Student_Disciplinary_Procedures.jnz (Links to an external site.)

JTS students are expected to bear sole responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity and to uphold its ideals.

Students with Disabilities

JTS is committed to accommodating students with disabilities. The JTS policy on disabilities may be found at: http://my.jtsa.edu/ICS/Policies/Students_with_Disabilities.jnz (Links to an external site.)

Mental Health

The JTS counseling center is here for JTS students. Survey data indicates higher levels of stress, uncertainty and depression among students due to the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic. More students also report days when mental health issues interfere with their academic focus. Counseling is available for all JTS students. For more information, or to make an appointment, email counseling@jtsa.edu. All contacts will be kept confidential. The deans and I are also here to help you figure out how to manage coursework if you are struggling, so please don't hesitate to reach out to me or to them at any time.

Course Schedule

Week of Jan. 11 - introductions

Richard Kalmin, "Why I Study Talmud," and Devora Steinmetz, "Talmud Study as a Religious Practice," from *Why Study Talmud in the Twenty-First Century?* (Lexington Books, 2009).

Unit One: The Rabbinic House of Study

Week of Jan. 18 – pluralism and dispute

Shaye Cohen, “The Significance of Yavneh”

Week of Jan. 25 – orality

Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, “The Orality of Rabbinic Writing”

Week of Feb. 2 – the beit midrash

Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, Ch. 1

Unit Two: Rabbinic Justice

Week of Feb. 9 – witnesses and doubt

Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Rabbinic Literature*, Ch. 3

Week of Feb. 16 – the death penalty

Beth Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention*, Ch. 6

Week of Feb. 23 – ethics

Deborah Barer, “Law, Ethics, and Hermeneutics”

Unit Three: Sex and Gender in Rabbinic Culture

Week of March 2 – marriage

Gail Labovitz, *Marriage as Metaphor*, excerpts

Week of March 9 – study vs. sex

Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, Ch. 5

Week of March 16 – masculinity

Michael Satlow, “Try to Be a Man”

Unit Four: Rabbinic Theology

Week of March 22 – revelation

Ben Sommer, *Revelation and Authority*, Ch. 5

Week of April 5 – loss

Baruch Bokser, “The Wall Separating God and Israel”

Week of April 12 – the image of God

David Stern, “Imitatio Hominis”

Final assignment due: Tuesday, July 7