

# METHODS FOR READING GENDER IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

Thurs 8:40-11:25, K306

Dr. Sarah Wolf

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Office hours by appointment

In this course, we will learn about various ways in which the academic field of rabbinics has approached questions of sex and gender. We will focus on understanding different theoretical approaches to gender, cultural history, law, and narrative, and how they have been deployed in the study of ancient Jewish sources. We will discuss what the goals of these different approaches might be, whether those are the right goals, and how effectively they are achieved. Finally, we will think about how these approaches might be applicable to our own personal and academic lives as readers of rabbinic texts.

## **Goals**

By the end of this class, you will be able to:

1. Describe the motivations and strategies of many of the contemporary scholars who work on sex and gender in rabbinic literature
2. Articulate what you think the goal(s) of reading rabbinic texts about gender should be as a scholar, teacher, and/or Jew
3. Draw from a toolkit of approaches to reading rabbinic texts through a gendered lens, and explain why certain theoretical methods are better or worse for achieving your goal(s)

## **Expectations, Assignments, and Grades**

### **Preparation and Participation**

You are expected to come to class having spent time preparing both primary sources (rabbinic texts) and secondary sources (scholarly book chapters and articles). I encourage you to prepare secondary sources with a study partner, though you are not required to do so.

Your participation is what will make this seminar rewarding. If you must be absent because of an illness, a family obligation, a professional commitment, or an emergency, email me before class. Repeated absences will count against your grade.

Part of your participation grade will include choosing one week during which you and a partner will be in charge of presenting secondary material. You and your partner will be required to read and translate the sugya (or mishnah, etc.), present some comments to the class about connections between the secondary and primary sources, and offer some questions for class discussion. I encourage you to consult with me in advance about this presentation.



You will receive a take-home essay midterm and produce one of the following final projects:

- For List students: Write a 10-15 page paper in which you compare the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches of at least two of the scholars we have read in this class using at least one rabbinic text as the basis for comparison, and offer your own argument about what methods you would use to analyze that text and why.
- For any student: Spend time reading at least one of the non-rabbinicist theorists who is relevant for at least one of the scholars in the syllabus (e.g. Michel Foucault for Daniel Boyarin, or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for Julia Watts Belser). For inspiration, I suggest checking footnotes and/or consulting with me. Write a 10-15 page paper analyzing whether or not the scholar's engagement with the theory contributes to better understanding or critiquing that theorist, and/or whether or not the theory helps the scholar more fruitfully engage with gender in rabbinic literature.
- For RS and GS students only: Produce lesson plan that engages with one of the scholarly approaches from the semester, and write a 5-10 page reflection on which theoretical methods might translate well into your chosen classroom setting and why.

Your grade for the class will be calculated as follows:

**General participation (attendance, regular participation in class discussion): 20%**

**Presentation of rabbinic sources for the week: 20%**

**Midterm: 25%**

**Final project: 35%**

*Please be advised that I may make minor changes to this syllabus during the course of the semester.*

## **Resources**

All course readings are available on Canvas.

## **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](http://my.jtsa.edu/ICS/Policies/Student_Disciplinary_Procedures.jnz)

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](http://my.jtsa.edu/ICS/Policies/Students_with_Disabilities.jnz)



## **Course Schedule**

### **Jan 23: Introduction to Reading Gender**

### **Jan 30: Reading Sex and Gender Against the Grain**

Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (University of California Press: 1995), introduction (10-23), and Chapter 5 (134-166)

Charlotte Fonrobert, "On 'Carnal Israel' and the Consequences: Talmudic Studies Since Foucault," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95:3 (Summer 2005), 462-469

BT Ketubot 61b-63a

### **Feb. 6: Gender, Marriage, and Personhood**

Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 3-19 and 40-69

Gail Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature* (Lexington Books, 2009), Introduction (1-17) and Ch 1 (29-53)

Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1-6

BT Kiddushin 2a

### **Feb. 13: Gender and Obligation**

Sarit Kattan Gribetz, "Time, Gender and Ritual in Rabbinic Sources," in *Religious Studies and Rabbinics* (ed. Elizabeth Shanks Alexander and Beth A. Berkowitz; Routledge, 2017), 139-157

Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25-63

m. Ber. 1:1-3, 2:1-2, 2:5, 3:3, m. Qid. 1:7

Mekhilta, Bo 17, ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 68-69

Sifre Bamidbar 115, ed. Horowitz, 124

### **Feb 20: Gender, Translation, and Categorization**

Judith Romney Wegner, "Tragelaphos Revisited: the Anomaly of Women in the Mishnah," in *Judaism* 37:2 (Spring 1998), 160-172

Charlotte Fonrobert, "Regulating the Human Body: Rabbinic Legal Discourse and the Making of Jewish Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, 270-289

Max Strassfeld, "Translating the Human: The *Androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim," in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3:3-4 (November 2016), 587-600



t. Bikkurim 2:1-6

### **Feb 27: Gender and Disability**

Julia Watts Belser, “Brides and Blemishes: Queering Women’s Disability in Rabbinic Marriage Law,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2015), 1-29

BT Ketubot 75a

\*\*\*Midterm posted on Canvas\*\*\*

### **March 5: Reading Masculinity in Babylonia**

Michael Satlow, “‘Try to be a Man’: The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity,” in *The Harvard Theological Review* 89:1 (Jan., 1996), 19-40

Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (University of California Press, 1997), prologue (ix-xxiv)

BT Nedarim 20a-b

\*\*\*Midterm due\*\*\*

### **March 12: Reading Masculinity in Babylonia**

Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, Introduction (1-29), and Ch 3 (127-150)

BT Bava Metzia 84a

### **March 19: Reading Masculinity in Babylonia**

Michael Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity: Testing Virgins and Making Men in Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press: 2018), introduction (1-11), Ch 6 (120-147), and Ch 8

Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “The Rise and Fall of Rabbinic Masculinity,” in *JSIS* 12 (2013), 1-12

BT Ketubot 10a-10b

### **March 26: Gender and the Legal Subject**

Charlotte Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford University Press, 2000), Ch 4 (excerpts)

Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (Indiana University Press, 2010), Ch 1

Mishnah Niddah 8

### **April 2: Gender and the Legal Subject**



Barry Wimpfheimer, “Footnotes to *Carnal Israel*: Infertility and the Legal Subject,” in *Talmudic Transgressions: Engaging the Work of Daniel Boyarin* (Brill, 2017), 161-200

BT Yevamot 64a-64b, 65b-66a

**April 9 and 16: *Pesach* – no class**

**April 23: Gender and Reproduction**

Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Indiana University Press, 2018), Ch 1

Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), Ch 1 (1-28), Ch 5 and Epilogue (89-135)

Vayikra Rabbah 14  
BT Niddah 31a

**April 30: Gender Beyond the Human**

Mira Wasserman, *Jews, Gentiles, and Other Animals* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) 73-101

Rachel Neis, “The Reproduction of Species: Humans, Animals, and Species Nonconformity in Early Rabbinic Science,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 24:4 (2017), 289-317

m. Niddah Ch. 3  
BT Niddah 22b-23a

\*\*\**Final due May 10*\*\*\*