

DRAFT Syllabus

Portland State University
Oregon School of Judaic Studies
Summer 2004

Jewish Identities in Europe, America, and Israel **Erica Lehrer, University of Michigan**

June 21 – July 1, MTWR 1:00 - 3:20 pm
Anthropology 099/410/510
CRN 82457/82458/82459
2 credits

Course Description: Jewish identity vexes the modern vocabulary of groups, boundaries, and identities. What does it mean to be Jewish at particular times and in different places? Is it a religion? A race? An ethnic group? A nationality? Using the instructor's anthropological field studies in Poland, films, histories, and personal narratives, the course explores the meaning of Jewish identity in the U.S., Eastern and Western Europe and Israel, as way to understand the mutations of identity in the modern world.

"Jewishness, like most – perhaps all – other identities, is imagined; it has no empirical, objective, verifiable reality to which we can point and over which we can exclaim, "This is it!" Jewishness is in the mind."
-Shaye J.D. Cohen¹

Texts: Packet of readings at Smart Copy

How class will be conducted: Although some lecturing will be done, much of the class will take the form of discussion that focuses on the topics and questions raised by the readings. From time to time we will watch films or hear guest speakers that address themes of particular units.

Readings/participation: (40%) Be prepared for class by reading the assigned material for that class and taking notes related to the topics to be discussed that day. Although more readings are often listed, daily reading will be kept to 20 pgs. per class session. I will ask one or two members of the class to do the extra reading(s) and report back to the rest of the class.

Assignments:

Each student will be required to do an additional reading for one class session and report back to the rest of the class. (20%)

Students will have two options for their course paper (40%)

Options:

¹ *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties.* Berkeley: UCal Press 1999, p.5.

(1) Mini-ethnography. Write an essay (3-5 pages undergraduates, 4-7 pages graduate students) analyzing a Jewish family trip, family custom, the rhetoric of a museum exhibit, a Jewish restaurant or cookbook, or other topics. What makes the subject of your analysis Jewish, and how does it communicate its Jewishness? What larger narratives of Jewishness influenced its structure? What, Jewishly, does this thing do? What did it do for you, Jewishly? Why is it important? What concrete factors shape(d) the experience (organizers, commercial tourist itineraries, religious mandates, accompanying literature)?

Projects should involve observation, interviewing, or interaction, rather than additional reading and secondary research. You may choose to incorporate documentary evidence (photographs, brochures, etc.) into your writing.

(2) Analytical paper. (3-5 pages undergraduates, 4-7 pages graduate students). Choose a topic that arose in the course readings or discussion that you wish to explore in more detail. The paper may focus on one particular work, or compare an issue that arises in multiple works. In addition to the source(s) from the course, the paper must also include one independent bibliographic source you will add.

FOR BOTH ASSIGNMENTS, PLEASE CONFIRM YOUR TOPIC WITH ME BY THURSDAY, JUNE 24.

DISCUSSION AND READINGS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

Monday, June 21: Introduction. Doing Jewish (vs. being Jewish)

Readings (to be completed before class):

- Tennenbaum. "Good or Bad for the Jews? Beyond the Continuity Debate" (5 pgs.)
- Jenkins. "Ethnicity Etcetera: Social Anthropological Points of View." (15 pgs.)
- Becker. "That Isn't (Whatever)." (2 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

How do these social scientists argue we should look at Jewishness, and why? What are alternative models, and what is wrong with them? Do these new social scientific models differ from how Jews think about Jewishness? Why?

Tuesday, June 22: What is Jewishness?

Religion, Race, Nation, Ethnicity, Culture: Defining our terms

Readings (to be completed before class):

- "What is the Jewish People?" Anonymous (2 pgs)
- "In the Blood? Consent, Descent, and the Ironies of Jewish Identity" Glenn (13 pgs)
- "Different Blood Flows in Our Veins..." Goldstein (26 pgs)
- "Concepts and Definitions" Anderson (2 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

Why have Jews sought to be recognized with reference to these various terms at different points in time and in different places? What kind of social and political currency is gained by these labels? And what sorts of problems might arise from using them?

Wednesday, June 23

Boundaries: Who is a Jew? Who isn't? Who cares?

Readings (to be completed before class):

- "Jew (halakhic definition)" and "Jewish Identity" (Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol.10) (9 pgs)
- Israel's "Law of Return" and amendments (3 pgs)
- "The Law of Return Reconsidered" Clayman (5 pgs)
- "As more Non-Jews Come to Israel..." Steinberg (4 pgs)
- "Who is a Jew?" Freedman (8 pgs)
- "The Who Is a Jew Controversy: Political and Anthropological Perspectives" Liebman (8 pgs)
- "What is the Jewish People?" (a traditional Jewish definition) (2 pgs)
- "Managing Strain, Contradictions, and Fluidity: Messianic Judaism..." Feher (21 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

Why is "who is a Jew" a problem in contemporary times? On precisely what cases/issues do contemporary Jewish groups differ? How does the "who is a Jew" question manifest itself in Jewish society? Consider the aspects of culture, nation, religion, race, and ethnicity from the previous readings. There is a fine line between diversity and discord; is there one Jewish people? If you consider yourself a part of it, why?

Thursday, June 24
Jews in Others' Eyes: Who else cares? Why?
Beyond simple anti-Semitism

Readings (to be completed before class):

- "The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish-Arab History" Cohen (5 pgs)
- "Myth, Counter-Myth and Distortion" Stillman (4 pgs)
- "Repopulating Jewish Poland – In Wood." Lehrer (21)
- "The Cult of Tzaddikim Among Non-Jews in Poland" Cala (3 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

How have non-Jews seen and defined Jews? Is Jewishness as much a category ascribed from the outside as it is chosen from the inside? Do external ascriptions influence Jewish identities? Do Jews have a "lachrymose" conception of their own history?

In your opinion, do Jews generally perceive their history as a lachrymose one? Do you think the outcome of studying Jewish history should be to understand Jewish victimhood? Considering this past week's readings, film, and discussion, what gets lost when Jewish history is seen as a litany of tragedies and persecutions? What might be some consequences of viewing Jewish history as a history of victimhood (a lachrymose history), and what might come of painting a more complicated picture? If you were an educator, what aspects and lessons of Jewish history would you highlight, and why? Try to consider the outcomes in political, social/cultural, religious, emotional terms.

WEEK 2

Monday, June 28
Identity and Nation-building

Guest Speaker

Readings (to be completed before class):

- Gitelman, Zvi. "The Decline of the Diaspora Jewish Nation: Boundaries, Content, and Jewish Identity.
- Memmi. "What is an Arab Jew?" (4 pgs)
- Shohat. "Reflections by an Arab Jew." (3 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

First, how do nation-states participate in identity construction? Do nations create ethnic groups, or do ethnic groups create nations? What is some of the “collateral damage” of nation-building?

Second, based on what we've discussed about the 'social construction' of ethnic groups, nations, identities, etc., consider "ideal vs. real" Judaism. Do Gitelman's categories between "thick" and "thin" culture relate to this distinction? Do you agree with this split he makes? What agenda or assumptions might color his argument?

Tuesday, June 29

**Jews in America, class, and race:
the politics of “passing” in America**

In-class film: *Brownsville Black and White*

Readings (to be completed before class):

- "Jews in the U.S.: the rising costs of whiteness." Kaye/Kantrowitz (13 pgs)
- “Beyond the Taboo: Talking about Class” Yeskel (13 pgs)
- ““Safe Treyf”: New York Jews and Chinese Food” Tuchman & Levine (18 pgs)
- “Finding their voice” Cohen (5 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

Are Jews white? Did they become white? Where, when, how, and at what price? Upward mobility, visibility (the Jewish body), assimilation, and relations with other “others.”

Address Kaye/Kantrowitz’s questions: Did Jews opt to become white? Did it work? Was it an illusion? Could they have opted otherwise? Can they still? How?

Wednesday, June 30
Gender & Sexuality

Film: *Half the Kingdom*

Readings (to be completed before class):

- "Sacred Categories and Social Relations: The Visibility and Invisibility of Gender in an American Jewish Community." (Riv-Ellen Prell)
- "Challenging Male/Female Complementarity: Jewish Lesbians & the Jewish Tradition." Alpert (13 pgs)
- "Klal Israel: Lesbians and Gays in the Jewish Community." Goldfarb (13 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

How are the categories of male and female structured in traditional Jewish culture, and how are they being questioned and restructured in contemporary times and places? How does Jewish tradition and community define and deal with "deviant" sexuality, and how do Jewish homosexuals deal with Jewish tradition and community?

Thursday, July 1
Jewish Geography: Pilgrimage to Poland

Film: *Back to Gombin*

Readings (to be completed before class):

- Lehrer. "Scratching the Heart: Jewish Tourism and Salvage Ethnography in Poland." (20 pgs.)
- Kugelmass. "Rites of the Tribe: American Jewish Tourism to Poland" (45 pages/skim)
- Feldman "'It Is My Brothers Whom I Am Seeking:' Israeli Youths' Pilgrimages to Poland of the Shoah" (4 pgs)

Come prepared with notes based on the readings to discuss these questions:

Consider Poland in the context of these questions: What geographic places form significant symbols among Jews, and how do Jews relate to these places, in terms of symbolic (museums, religious practice, storytelling) and practical (kin, travel, financial support) connections? Consider how the notion of a "natural" connection between people and place are constructed and supported. Does your family have ethnic geography? What makes you feel connected to those places? How was that connection built?