

RSOC 168. Women, Gender, and Judaism. Joan Rappaport, Ph.D.

Summer 2017, ONLINE

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Course Description:

This course uses religious, historical, and literary sources to explore the roles and experiences of Jewish women from Rabbinical times through the present. We begin by examining the status of women in Halakhah (Jewish Law), particularly in the areas of religious rituals, marriage, divorce and sexuality. We also look at Halakhah's capacity for change, and with it, the improvement of women's status in Judaism. With the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment Movement), Jewish Law was challenged and what was once an insular world for Jews began to break down as Jews confronted "modernity." Using historical and literary sources, we consider both the difficulties and the benefits Haskalah created for Jewish women in a variety of nations. We examine this diverse array of Jewish women's experience through various historical approaches -- both those that apply gender as a category of analysis to sources written by men, as well as those that discuss a much more limited body of women's writings. By identifying diverse perspectives on Jewish women's roles and experiences throughout history, students will be able to evaluate ethical positions on contemporary questions about women's status and roles in Judaism today. Finally, we explore ways that modern and contemporary Jewish women have used liturgy, literature and community to create new spiritual and cultural identities, while at the same time remaining beholden to Jewish traditions. Since forging such dual identities is an endeavor shared by women of other religious and cultural groups, students are able to extend and apply insights from the study of Jewish religion to open-ended questions about religious, cultural and gender identity in contemporary society.

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Santa Clara University's Core Curriculum

Santa Clara University's Core Curriculum guidelines list the following goals of RTC courses: "Critical thinking; ethical reasoning; religious reflection; perspective."

The Core Curriculum guidelines list as follows the Core Learning Objectives for RTC 3 courses:

- 1) "Students will be able to identify diverse perspectives and evaluate ethical positions on contemporary questions."
- 2) "Students will be able to evaluate and apply insights from the study of religion to open-ended questions facing contemporary society."

Given these Core Curriculum goals and objectives, the particular learning objectives for the course are as follows:

- 1) Acquire knowledge of Jewish Law and Jewish history so as to enable students to understand how Jewish texts, traditions, and historical events have shaped contemporary Jewish women's roles and lives.
- 2) Critically examine diverse perspectives on the status of women in Judaism and Jewish life throughout history and evaluate ethical positions on women's roles in contemporary Judaism and Jewish religious life.
- 3) Critically examine "feminist" changes in Judaism as a means of sustaining Judaism in present times. This will entail in-depth discussion of "what is feminism"? To what extent can Jewish traditions adjust to "modernity" and still remain Jewish? We explore diverse ways that Jewish women have balanced versions of feminism and Judaism in order to carve out places for themselves in both Jewish and feminist realms. We also look at how these diverse attempts been received by the broader Jewish community, as well as by non-Jewish feminists.

5) Explore the diversity of Jewish women's religious experiences and identities as presented in their own voices. This will help students both to understand women's changing roles in Judaism, and also to gain perspective on their own religious, gender, cultural and/or other identities.

Required Texts:

Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources*

Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*

Judith Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*

Joyce Antler, *America and I: Stories by American Jewish Women Writers*

Kates And Reimer, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*

Assessment of learning:

The final grade will be based on the following:

First 5 -6 page essay 25%

Second 5 – 6 page essay 25%

Class discussion 25%

Final exam 25%

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Essays

Each 5-6 page (double-spaced) essay will be a critical analysis using only texts studied for the course. Each of the essay assignments requires students to identify diverse perspectives, and evaluate ethical positions on contemporary questions about women, gender and Judaism. In addition, the second essay requires students to evaluate and apply insights from the study of Judaism to broader open-ended questions about religious, gender and cultural identity in contemporary society.

Discussion

Students participate in ongoing online discussion of the required reading. This requires careful preparation of reading assignments, informed and thorough responses to weekly prompts, and critical discussion of responses with peers and instructor on a regular basis throughout the week. We will use an approach called "Post First." This means that each student's first post (the response to my prompt) will be made without being able to see the posts of classmates. This approach encourages uniqueness of the posts. After making this first post, students may view others' responses. In general students' post first responses will be due on Thursday. Students must then post questions and comments to peers by Friday, and respond to any comments and questions they have received by Sunday at midnight. Discussion is a major part of the course, and is meant to encourage students' daily engagement with the assigned materials. Consistent participation will enable you to develop the discipline of identifying perspectives on contemporary questions in Judaism, and evaluating issues on an ongoing basis throughout the course.

Final Exam

The final exam is an open-book essay exam covering all texts read for the course. The exam addresses each of the Core learning objectives, as well as each of the Particular learning objectives for the course.

Grading Scale:

A = 94 – 100%

A- = 90 – 93%

B+ = 87 – 89%

B = 84 -86%

B- = 80 – 83%

C+ = 77 – 79%

C = 74 – 76%

C- = 70 - 73%

D+ = 67 - 69%

D = 64 - 66%

D- = 60 - 63%

F = 59 or below

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Assessment: Students receive written feedback and grades on each of their papers and on their weekly discussion sessions.

Disability accommodation policy: To request academic accommodations for a disability, students must contact Disabilities Resources in Benson Center, (408) 554-4111. Students must register with Disabilities Resources and provide appropriate documentation to that office prior to receiving accommodations.

Policy on Academic Integrity:

It is the student's responsibility to make sure that all of the work he/she submits is his/her own original work, and that the student acknowledges and cites properly any sources from which he/she takes ideas and/or phrasing. I follow the Santa Clara University policies regarding plagiarism and academic honesty. (Please see "Academic Integrity" in the Undergraduate Bulletin). If a student submits a plagiarized assignment, the student receives an F for the assignment. The student also receives an F for the course. In addition, a report of the student's plagiarism is sent to Santa Clara University's Office of Student Life, and I consult with the Dean of Student Life regarding the possibility of any further disciplinary action.

For the Santa Clara University Academic Integrity Policy, see www.scu.edu/academics/bulletins/undergraduate/Academic-Integrity.cfm.

Schedule

Session 1

Course Introduction

Session 2:

Introduction to Gender and Jewish Studies: What is “gender”? What is “Judaism”? What is Women’s Status in Halakhah?

Reading: Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*

After discussing definitions of gender and Judaism, we explore women’s status in Halakhah (Jewish Law). We examine the extent to which there has been gradual change in Jewish Law in the following areas: Women and the Mitzvot; Marriage, Divorce; The Agunah and the Yevamah; Sexuality and Marital Relations; Niddah: Laws of the Menstruant; Sexuality Outside of Marriage: Incest , Adultery, Promiscuity, and Lesbianism; Procreation and Contraception, Abortion, Rape. Through this week’s session, students will be able to identify diverse perspectives of the rabbis through various periods of history in order to evaluate ethical positions on the contemporary question of Jewish women’s roles and status in Halakhah (Jewish Law).

Session 3

Woman as Jew, Jew as Woman

Reading: Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*

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We examine the diverse ways that feminism can be integrated with Judaism. As a traditional orthodox Jew who also identifies as a feminist, Blu Greenberg offers a unique and useful perspective on this issue. We will identify Greenberg's perspective, as well as diverse perspectives of other Jewish women presented in her writing, and evaluate ethical positions on the following contemporary question: How can feminist ideas help Jewish women to become more fully equal members of their religious community? In addition, we will evaluate and apply insights from our study of Greenberg's writings on Jewish religion to open-ended questions facing contemporary society: As traditional Jews, to what extent and why might Jewish women need to separate themselves from "mainstream feminism"? What do traditional Jewish women have to offer broader feminist communities? How might Jewish women's experiences both complicate and enrich a broader feminism?

First essay is due.

Session 4

Jewish Women and History

Reading: Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*

We examine diverse perspectives of Jewish historians who have sought to uncover Jewish women's religious and cultural experiences in a wide array of environments, eras, and forms of Judaism and Jewish life. Topics include: Women in Classical Rabbinic Judaism; Jewish Women of the Middle Ages; Sephardi Women in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods; Ashkenazic Women's Prayers in Yiddish; Jewish Salon Women in Old Berlin; Jewish Women in Victorian England; Jewish Women in Imperial Germany; East European Jewish Women; Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel; Jewish Immigrant Women in the

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United States; and Jewish Women's Religious Lives in the United States in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Session 5

Jewish Women and Literary Identity

Reading: Antler, *America and I*

Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*

Through Jewish women's fictional writing from 1900 through the present, we explore the question of what it means to be both a woman and a Jew in America. We identify Jewish women writers' diverse perspectives and literary voices, and evaluate their various positions on such contemporary questions as how to resolve conflicts between Jewish heritage and feminine identity, and how to create moral and ethical meaning in Jewish life. Since these are questions that reach across generations of Jewish women's writing, we ask whether and how we might define a Jewish women's literary tradition.

We will also read the *Book of Ruth* and examine a diverse array of feminist perspectives on this biblical text. We evaluate how these interpretations enable contemporary women to feel connected to the biblical text. Students then bring their own questions and points of view to the interpretive process and give their own readings of a section of the Book of Ruth. Through their study of this religious text and their evaluation of both modern and contemporary Jewish approaches to interpretation, students will be able to explore open-ended questions about identity, gender, religion and women's roles in contemporary society.

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Session 6

Second essay due

Final exam

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