10.11 Classical Jewish Texts: Moving Toward Modernity
3 hours; 3 credits

Exploration of masterpieces of Jewish literature. Various genres of Jewish writings, including biblical, rabbinic, poetic, philosophical, mystical, and kabbalistic. Examination of the extent to which modern Jewish literature adapted and/or broke away from earlier classical genres/ A particular focus on the writings (and/or films) of Sholom Aleichem, Woody Allen, Ahad Ha’am, and I. B. Singer.

Prerequisite: Junior standing and satisfaction of all lower-tier requirements in Arts and Literatures.

Common Goals Addressed by Core Course:
1. A critical appreciation of the literature and cultures of the past as a foundation for those of the present. (3, 4)
2. To hone the students’ ability to think and read critically and to express their thoughts in a clear manner both orally and in writing. (9, 11, 12, 13, 21, 23)

Objectives of Core Course:
1. To introduce students to many of the major works of Jewish literature and the historical contexts in which they were written. To acquaint students with some of the central concepts and issues presented in these writings. (3, 4)
2. Students will be able to compare different genres of literature (i.e. biblical, rabbinic, poetic, philosophical, and kabbalistic) and the diverse functions and audiences for which they were written. This will allow students to evaluate critically the unique contribution of each of these genres. (4, 13)
3. Students will be able to express ideas clearly in writing. (10)
4. To develop students’ ability and confidence to communicate complex thoughts orally. (12)
5. Students will sharpen their abilities to think critically. (9)
6. Students will receive a broader basis for evaluating texts. (13, 28)
7. Students will be introduced to diverse research methodologies of different disciplines. (17)
8. To acquaint students with various mediums in which the classics of Jewish literature have been presented. (23)

Outcomes for Core Course:
1. Students can read and engage with important literary works written in different historical periods and discuss various significant issues presented in these works. (3)
2. Students can critically reflect upon how major themes and issues are presented in eclectic ways in different genres of writing. Students will also look at how and why the same narratives are treated differently by various authors (even within the same genre) and at times even within the same works. (13)
3. Students can write clear and compelling essays on topics which have emerged from the readings and class discussion. (10, 11)
4. Students can orally summarize and analyze difficult and/or controversial materials that we have read or viewed. They will also be able to debate, and if necessary defend, their opinions and arguments. (10, 12)
5. Students can compare and contrast the different audiences and purposes of various texts. (9)
6. Students can begin to appreciate the religious, social, political, and geographic contexts in which sources were written. (3, 13)
7. Students can read various secondary materials reflecting different methodological schools of thought. (17)
8. Students can identify how various narratives were changed when they were presented in different mediums and in different parts of the world. (23)
Course Outline:

Week 1. Course Introduction: Discussion of the term “The People of the Book” and a Survey of the Classical Books of Judaism

Week 2. The Bible- The Pentateuch, Prophecy, and Writings
Readings:
~Genesis, selected chapters.
~Exodus, chapters 1-16, 19-20.
~Leviticus, chapters 18-19; ~Deuteronomy, chapters 28-29.
~1 Samuel, chap. 8; ~1 Kings, chap. 11; ~2 Kings chap. 25
~Ezra, chapters 1, 6, 9-10.
~Nehemiah, chapters 8-10.

Recommended:
~Jeremiah, chapters 1, 2, 7
~Book of Esther

Suggested Reflected Paper Topic #1- Compare and contrast similar themes in two different sections of the Bible (i.e.- the Pentateuch, Prophets, or Writings) [3 pages]

Week 3. The Emergence of Rabbinic Judaism: Introduction to the Mishnah
Readings:
~Mishnah, Pesahim (selections)
~Passover Haggadah (selections)

Recommended:
Scheindlin, A Short History of the Jewish People, pp. 41-56.

Week 4. The Development of Rabbinic Judaism; The Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds
Readings:
~Talmud, tractate Pesahim (selections)
~Other selected talmudic passages

Recommended:
Scheindlin, A Short History of the Jewish People, pp. 57-69.

Week 5. Comparative Medieval Biblical Exegesis: Rashi, ibn Ezra and Nahmanides; Hebrew Poetry from Medieval Muslim Spain: Writings of Samuel ha-Nagid, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Moses ibn Ezra, Judah ha-Levi
Readings:
~Rashi’s commentary on the Pentateuch, samples
Ibn Ezra’s commentary, samples—will look at same verses as above
Nahmanides’ commentary on the Bible, will look at same verses as above
R. Scheindlin, Wine, Women and Death, excerpts; idem, The Gazelle, excerpts
Nina Salamon, Selected Poems of Judah ha-Levi

Suggested Paper Topic #2: Compare passages from two biblical commentaries—one
written in an Arab land, the other in a Christian land. In what way, if any, do each of
these works reflect their cultural milieu? [3 pages]

Week 6. Medieval Spanish Jewish Philosophy: Judah ha-Levi and Maimonides
Readings:
Judah ha-Levi, “Kuzari” in Three Jewish Philosophers
Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed, ed. S. Pines II, chaps. 17-24; III, chaps. 22-23, 51

Week 7. The Great Medieval Philosopher and Legalist, Maimonides (continued); Other
Codifications of Jewish Law: Sefardic and Ashkenazic Traditions
Readings:
Maimonides, “Mishneh Torah,” excerpts from A Maimonides Reader, ed. Isadore Twersky
passages from other selected codes

Week 8. Central Medieval Kabbalistic Texts
Readings:
Azriel of Gerona, “Explanation of the Ten Sefirot,” The Early Kabbalah, ed. Jacob Dan
The Zohar (The Book of Enlightenment”), excerpts from Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom of the Zohar

Week 9. Kabbalistic and Ethical Texts from the 16th to the 18th Centuries: Writings of Cordovero, Luria and Moses Hayyim Luzzatto
Readings:
excerpts from Moses Cordovero, Pardes Rimmonim, Or Ne’erav, and/or Tomer Devorah
Hayyim Vital, “Introduction to Etz Hayyim” & other selections from Lurianic sources
Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal), Path of the Just, excerpts

Reflection Paper #3: Compare and contrast a medieval Jewish philosophical view and a
kabbalistic view on a particular topic. (for. ex. the nature of the Divine, the purpose of the commandments, Creation)

Week 10. A Major Challenge Posed to Traditional Judaism: The Seventeenth-Century
Writings of Baruch Spinoza
Readings:
Spinoza, Theological-Political Treatise, selected chapters
Week 11. Enlightenment Literature
Readings:
~Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem
~excerpts from selected writings of Eastern European maskilim
~Autobiography of Salomon Maimon, excerpts

Week 12. Literature Reflecting Traditional European Jewish Culture, its Modernization and its Encounter with Modern anti-Semitism
Readings and Films:
~Sholom Aleichem, selections
“The Dybbuk” (movie)
“Fiddler on the Roof” (movie)

Reflection Paper #4: Discuss “Fiddler on the Roof” or “The Dybbuk.” In what ways does the movie portray the traditional Jewish community? (if relevant- What mystical concepts and practices and portrayed in this film?) (if relevant- In what ways, does it reflect the breakdown and modernization of the traditional Jewish community?) What, if any, are your critiques of either of these films? [3 pages]

Week 13. Literature Responding to the Holocaust
Readings:
~Elie Wiesel, Night
~Art Spiegelman, Maus

Recommended:
Steven Spielberg, “Schindler’s List” (movie)

Week 14. Writings Discussing the Two Major Centers of Contemporary Judaism: America and Israel
Readings and Films:
~Theodor Herzl, selected passages in Arthur Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea
~Ahad ha-am, selected passages in The Zionist Idea
~Modecai Kaplan, Judaism as a Civilization, selection
*We will watch two of these movies—“The Summer of Aviyah” (Hebrew with English subtitles), Exodus, Yentl, Crimes and Misdemeanors

Reflection Paper #5: View, analyze, compare and contrast any of these movies.

Recommended:
I. B. Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy”
Chaim Potok, The Chosen

Methods of Evaluation
Class Participation: 20%
Response Papers and Oral Presentation: 20%
Midterm: 25%
Final Exam: 35%

Methods of Assessment:
1. Students are asked to summarize and compare various works written in different historical periods and discuss the central issues that appear in these works. (3)
2. Students are asked to compare how various issues are presented in different genres of writings. Students are asked to compare and analyze how and why the same narrative is often treated differently by various authors (even within the same genre) and at times even within the same text. (13)
3. Students are asked to write response papers in which they critically examine issues that interest them and/or questions posed by the instructor. (10, 11)
4. Each student will present at least one oral presentation on a topic that they choose and then discuss with their instructor. (10, 12)
5. In class discussions and homework assignments, students will compare and contrast the different audiences and purposes of various texts.
6. Students will be asked to present (either orally or in writing) the religious, social, political, and geographic background in which a particular text was written and how she or he thinks this background influenced the shape or the content of the text. (3, 11, 12, 13)
7. Students will be asked to read and summarize divergent methodological approaches (for ex. cultural, sociological, psychological, economic etc.) to several genres of literature and various religious concepts that we will be studying (11, 13, 17)
8. Students will be asked to compare and contrast how a particular classic of Jewish literature has been presented in writing, theater and film in various countries. (for ex. Sholom Aleichem’s Fiddler on the Roof) (10, 23)

Assessment Tools:
reflection papers written every other week, oral presentations, class discussions (particular use will be made of the Socratic method), diagnostic and end-of-term writing assignments, homework writing assignments, midterm, final exam

REQUIRED READINGS (Available at the Brooklyn College Book Store or at Far Better Copy)
Bible (TaNaKh)
*The Course Packet.

USEFUL REFERENCE BOOKS AND OTHER IMPORTANT WORKS
Robert Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought (New York, 1980).
Encyclopedia Judaica
Jewish Encyclopedia

RECOMMENDED READING (over the course of the semester)
Chaim Potok, The Chosen