



Ben Shahn, *Maimonides*, 1954, tempera on paper mounted on panel, The Jewish Museum.

Jewish Political Thought

Course Description: What does it mean to do Jewish political thought? What is “Jewish” about it? What is “political” about it? In this course, we will explore contemporary questions in our politics – those specifically facing Jewish communities and those facing communities beyond – by interrogating the role Jewish texts have had in shaping political thought and thinking, especially in the ‘Western’ canon. What do we make of the present absence of Jewish sources, concepts, and authors?

There is no expectation that you have to read, speak, or otherwise understand Modern or Biblical Hebrew to enjoy or be successful in this class.

Learning Objectives:

- Critically engage the many sources in Jewish thought: philosophy, *halakha*, scripture, literature, poetry, polemic, liturgy, etc.,
- Challenge our assumptions about who and what constitutes Jewish political thinking
- Evaluate the contributions of Jewish texts to our contemporary political discourse

Required Texts:

Jewish Study Bible (Oxford) - this has the New Jewish Publication Society translation and scholarly annotations. If you would like to consult the Hebrew text, please use Sefaria.org or the Sefaria app to access the same NJPS translation side-by-side with the Hebrew.

Organized by crises/transitions/problems/transformations/breaches. In a graduate seminar, most, if not all the books listed would be assigned. In an undergraduate seminar or lecture course, I would excerpt key chapters, and post reading guides for the more challenging texts.

Reading and Thinking Jewishly

The People of the Book by Moshe Halbertal

“Persecution and the Art of Writing” by Leo Strauss

Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash by Daniel Boyarin

Sacred Attunement by Michael Fishbane

How Judaism Became a Religion by Leora Batnitzky

“Athens and Jerusalem” by Leo Strauss

Founding: Covenant, Nationhood, Narrative

Genesis, Exodus, Numbers

In God’s Shadow by Michael Walzer

The Literary Guide to the Bible ed. Alter and Kermode

City on a Hill sermon by John Winthrop

Monarchy, Democracy, Oligarchy in the Jewish Tradition

Judges, I-II Samuel, I-II Kings (all)

Kinship and Consent by Daniel Elazar

The Jewish Social Contract by David Novak

The Theological-Political Treatise by Baruch Spinoza

Exile: *Hurban*, Diaspora

Tisha b’Av *kinot* (dirges)

“Theses on the Philosophy of History” by Walter Benjamin

“Rupture and Reconstruction” by Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik

Shabbat – “More than the Jewish People have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews” –

Ahad Ha’am

“Sabbath Power” by Bonnie Honig

The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel

“Theo-politics” by Charles H.T. Lesch

Secularism/ization and Assimilation

Excerpts from the *Theological-Political Treatise* by Baruch Spinoza

Migrants in the Profane by Peter E. Gordon

Why I am not a Secularist by William E. Connolly

“The Jewish Question”, Citizenship, and Emancipation

Democracy and the Foreigner (“Ruth”) by Bonnie Honig

Washington/Seixas letters, [Sarna article](#)

“On the Jewish Question” by Karl Marx

*This is the most difficult essay to assign, but it speaks to the questions facing Jewish people at this time, less than Marx himself being a producer of Jewish political thought

Zionisms

Der Judenstaat by Theodor Herzl

The Battle for Jerusalem by Vladimir Jabotinsky

Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic Ahad Ha'am

United States v. Zivotofsky (amici briefs)

ARZA charter (Reform Jewish Zionist organization)

Shoah: Destruction, Memory, Loss

The Origins of Totalitarianism by Hannah Arendt

Zachor by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi

Gender: Tradition and Authority

Varieties of Orthodoxy and challenges to gender norms in *halaha*

Nashot haKotel

Hohmat Nashim

ORA

RCA statement against women rabbis

Avi Weiss writings

Negotiating Identities

Insecurity of Freedom by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism edited by Susannah Heschel, David Biale, Michael Galchinsky