

Jews and the Body
RELG/JWST 256
Spring 2017, TR 3:00-4:15 pm
SEVE 132B

Professor: Rebecca J. Epstein-Levi

Office: Rice Hall 324

Office Hours: Monday, 10-11 am, Wednesday, 2-3:30 pm, or by appointment

Email: repstein@oberlin.edu

(Email policy: I try to respond to emails within 24 hours, but this is not always possible. Hang in there, and I'll get to you! If you are writing regarding a time sensitive matter, you can greatly increase your chance of an expeditious response by putting "URGENT!" in the subject line. Also, please note that I will not respond to emails between sundown Friday and sundown Saturday, or on Jewish holidays.)

Course Description:

This course will explore the body in Judaism as a subject of textual and ritual discourse, as a site of ethical problems and moral formation, as a marker of otherness, and as a site of conflict over questions of power and identity. We will examine the place of the body in ritual practice, Jewish thought on biomedical ethics, and the ways in which rhetorics of supposed Jewish physical difference have affected Jews' relationships with non-Jews.

Requirements:

This course meets twice a week, and will mix lecture and discussion. The success of this course depends on your familiarity with the assigned readings, and your regular and active participation in discussion. You are allowed one absence, no questions asked. Subsequent absences without a compelling reason will affect your final grade.

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| 1. Weekly Blog Posts (200-300 words) | 15% |
| Each week, you will use Blackboard to write an informal critical response to at least one of the week's readings. You can address the reading's overall argument, a specific point within a reading, or put multiple readings in dialogue with one another. Out of 10 possible weeks (so excluding the first and last weeks and the two weeks in which longer papers are due) you may skip <i>two</i> posts, no questions asked. | |
| 2. Short analysis paper (Tuesday, 2/23) | 15% |
| A short (1000 words) paper analyzing and critiquing one of the readings from unit 1 in greater detail. | |
| 3. Midterm Exam (Tuesday, 3/9) | 25% |
| 4. Class participation | 15% |
| 5. Final Paper | 30% |
| A longer (2500-3000 words) research paper on a topic of your choosing. | |

Late Work Policy:

I will not accept late work. If you have a reason why you believe you will be unable to meet a given deadline, please see me to discuss an extension.

Required Materials:

- * Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (JB)
- * Elliot Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death*
- * Readings not among these can be found on the course website.

A Note on Violence, Student Safety, and Mandatory Reporting:

As an instructor and as a human being, I am committed to fostering a safe and equitable learning environment for everyone who enters my classroom, and I will do my best to support any student who comes to me with a report of sexual assault or other sexual violence, harassment, or sex-based discrimination. **However, you should know that as an employee of the college, I am a mandatory reporter—that is, if you tell me about an incident of this kind, I am required by both college policy and federal law to report what you tell me to our Title IX coordinator.** If you would prefer that an official report not be made, a list of Confidential Employees can be found here:

<https://new.oberlin.edu/office/equity-diversity-inclusion/sexual-misconduct/on-campus-resources/>

In providing this information, I am not recommending or discouraging a given course of action, nor am I promising particular outcomes. I am simply making you aware of my institutional and legal obligations.

Discussion Guidelines:

“If we want to avoid giving the dose of hemlock or the sentence of banishment in the wrong case, nothing will do but a capacity to understand the subject matter on which the immovable man is convinced, and fellowship with human travail, both near and afar, to hinder us from scanning any deep experience lightly.”

- George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

Productive discussion *should* be challenging, and sometimes profoundly uncomfortable. Especially in disciplines such as religious studies, which examine topics that are difficult, often divisive, and in many cases deeply personal, discussions have the potential to become unsettling and difficult or even painful.

To benefit most from this challenge, and to handle it responsibly, it is imperative to create a community in which every participant feels personally respected. To this effect, here are some basic ground rules for the community in which we will participate this semester:

***Ad hominem arguments, including slurs or other derogatory language referring to race, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, or class, will not be tolerated.** I trust this is obvious to you, but it nevertheless bears stating explicitly. Clearly, actively using such language is different than quoting or making reference to an occurrence of it in a text or other source.

***Respect each classmate’s preferred form of address, including name, title, and pronoun choice.**

***Speak for yourself.** Don’t presume to speak for another person’s thoughts, feelings, or perceptions.

None of these ground rules mean that you cannot argue with or challenge your classmates, with me, or with the readings. No ideas are immune to critique. What these rules do mean is that you are required to respect each other as fellow humans as you are engaging in this critique.

Schedule of Topics:

Week 1:

Tuesday, 1/31: Introduction: What Does the Body Signify?

Primary text: Ezekiel 37

Thursday, 2/2: Jews and Others in Late Antiquity

Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 31-60

Unit I: The Body in Rabbinic Text

Week 2:

Tuesday, 2/7: The Vagaries of Text and Embodiment

Primary text: Genesis Rabbah 9:7, Tosefta Yevamot 8:7

Secondary texts: Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 61-76, 134-166

Thursday, 2/9: Managing the Body, Shaping the Self

Primary text: B. Berakhot 62a

Secondary texts: Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *Confronting Vulnerability*, pp 53-76

Week 3:

Tuesday, 2/14: The Body, Ritual Impurity, and Communal Identity

Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature*, 48-73, 122-147.

Thursday, 2/16: Constructing Female Bodies

Charlotte Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, 40-67

Week 4:

Tuesday, 2/21: Constructing Male Bodies

Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 127-150

Unit II: Jewish Bodies in History and Literature

Thursday, 2/23: Body Parts (or, you know what they say about guys with big noses...)

JB, 169-193

SHORT ANALYSIS PAPER DUE

Week 5:

Tuesday, 2/28: The Jewish Psyche

JB, 60-103; Phillip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* [excerpts]

Thursday, 3/2: The Diseased Jew

JB, 210-233 ; Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

Week 6:

Tuesday, 3/7: The Healthy Jew

Mitchell B. Hart, *The Healthy Jew*, 28-77

Thursday, 3/9: MIDTERM EXAM

Week 7:

Tuesday, 3/14: Sissy Scholars and Ball-Busting Balaboostas

Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 151-185

Thursday, 3/16: Women's Resistance to Authority: The Case of the Mikveh

Shaye J.D. Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of 'Incorrect' Purification Practices" in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel Wasserfall, 82-100; Joelle Allouche-Benayoun, "The Rites of Water for the Jewish Women of Algeria: Representations and Meanings" in Wasserfall, *Women and Water*, 198-217.

Week 8 (3/18-3/26): SPRING BREAK

Week 9:

Tuesday, 3/28: Jews, Sports, Animals, and the Outdoors

John Hoberman, "How Fiercely that Gentile Rides!" in *Jews, Sports, and the Rites of Citizenship*, ed. Jack Kugelmass, 31-50; Steven J. Whitfield, "Unathletic Department", in Kugelmass, 51-74.

Thursday, 3/30: Jews and Whiteness

Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, 53-76

Week 10:

Tuesday, 4/4: NO CLASS, MAKEUP ACTIVITY TBA

Thursday, 4/6: Nationalism and the Muscle Jew

Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism*, 112-154

Unit III: The Body in Jewish Biomedical Ethics

Week 11: Foundations of Jewish Bioethics

Tuesday, 4/11: No Class: Pesach I

Thursday, 4/13: Who Owns the Body?

Eliot Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death*, 14-33; Laurie Zoloth, *Healthcare and the Ethics of Encounter*, 144-159

Week 12: Foundations II

Tuesday, 4/18: Duties to Heal and Seek Healing

Primary text: B. Sanhedrin 73a

Secondary texts: Benjamin Freedman, *Duty and Healing*, 139-190

Thursday, 4/20: Duties to Heal the Community

Primary text: Ruth 1

Secondary texts: Laurie Zoloth, *Healthcare and the Ethics of Encounter*, 193-220

Week 13: Problems in Jewish Bioethics I

Tuesday, 4/25: Contraception and Abortion

Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death*, 116-133; Zoloth, "Nursing Fathers and Nursing Mothers: Notes Toward a Distinctive Jewish View of Reproductive Ethics" in *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001), 325-337

Thursday, 4/27: Reproductive Technologies

Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death*, 53-115

Week 14: Problems in Jewish Bioethics II; Summing Up**Tuesday, 5/2: Death and Dying**

Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death*, 167-220

Thursday, 5/4: “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story...”