

**Two Jews, Three Opinions: Argumentation in Judaism**  
**RELG/JWST 258**  
**Spring 2017, TR 9:30-10:50 am**  
**SCTR W201**

**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:**

Jews' supposed love of arguing is a widespread cultural trope. But what work does argumentation actually do in Jewish traditions and discourses? In this course, we will examine patterns of argument in the Jewish textual canon, contemporary debates over matters of Jewish identity and practice and the meaning of texts today, and cultural depictions of Jewish argumentation.

**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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| <b>1. Weekly Blog Posts</b> (200-300 words)  | 20%      |
| 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. |          |
| <b>2. Two short papers (Thursday, 3/2 and Thursday, 4/13)</b>  | 15%, 25% |
| One 1500-1800 word paper due before spring break, and one 2000-2250 word paper due near the end of term.   |          |
| <b>4. Class participation</b>  | 15%      |
| <b>5. Final Exam</b>   | 25%      |

**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:**

- Milton Steinberg, *As A Driven Leaf*
- 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: Introduction

**Tuesday, 1/31: Introduction**

*Film clip: "Yidlife Crisis" 1:3*

*Primary Text: Genesis 18:17-33*

**Thursday, 2/2: Precedents: Arguing With God in the Hebrew Bible**

*Primary Text: Numbers 14:13-19; Job 31*

*Secondary Text: Anson Laytner, Arguing With God, xiii-xxii, 3-39*

### *Unit I: The World of The Talmud*

### Week 2:

**Tuesday, 2/7: The Second Temple, its Fall, and the Emergence of the Rabbis**

*Milton Steinberg, As a Driven Leaf, 11-133*

**Thursday, 2/9: The Tannaim**

*As a Driven Leaf, 134-257*

### Week 3:

**Tuesday, 2/14: The Mishnah**

*As A Driven Leaf, 261-370*

**Thursday, 2/16: The Amoraim and the Two Talmuds**

*As a Driven Leaf, 371-480*

### *Unit II: The Structure and Form of the Talmud*

### Week 4:

*Primary Text:*

**Tuesday, 2/21: Oral and Written Torah, and the Genesis of the Talmud**

*Secondary Text: Jeffrey Rubenstein, The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud, 1-38*

**Thursday, 2/23: An Anatomy of the *Daf***

*Secondary Text: Robert Goldenberg, "Talmud", in Back to the Sources 129-175*

### Week 5:

*Primary Text: b. Bava Metzia 84a*

**Tuesday, 2/28: The Culture of the Beit Midrash**

*Secondary Text: Jeffrey Rubenstein, The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud, 54-79*

**Thursday, 3/2: The Stakes of Argumentation**

*Secondary Text: Jeffrey Rubenstein, The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud, 39-53*

**FIRST SHORT PAPER DUE**

### Week 6:

*Primary Text: B. Niddah 20b*

**Tuesday, 3/7: Argumentation and Power**

*Secondary Text: Beth Berkowitz, Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures, 153-179*

**Thursday, 3/9: Women in the Talmud: Ruse as Argument**

*Secondary Texts:* Charlotte Fonrobert, "Yalta's Ruse: Resistance against Rabbinic Menstrual Authority in Talmudic Literature" in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel Wasserfall, 60-81; Gail Labovitz, "Rabbis and 'Guerilla Girls': Thematizing the Female Counter-Voice in the Rabbinic Legal System" in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 6:2, 2011

**Week 7:**

*Primary Text:* B. Bava Metzia 59a-b

**Tuesday, 3/14: Structures of Argumentation**

*Secondary Text:* Louis Jacobs, *The Talmudic Argument*, 18-33

**Thursday, 3/16: Argumentation, Authority, and the Limits of Interpretation**

*Secondary Text:* Eliezer Berkovitz, *Not In Heaven*, 70-106

**Week 8 (3/18-3/26): SPRING BREAK****Week 9:**

*Primary Text:* B. Bava Metzia 21a-22b

**Tuesday, 3/28: Practical Implications of Talmudic Arguments**

Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature*, 42-75

**Thursday, 3/30: A Case in Action: Lost Property**

*Secondary Texts:* Jacobs, *The Talmudic Argument*, 34-49

**Unit III: The Continued Life of Talmud and Jewish Argumentation****Week 10:****Tuesday, 4/4: No Class, Professor out of town**

View Outside of Class: Film, *The Quarrel*

**Thursday, 4/6: Chaim Potok, *The Promise* (excerpts)****Week 11:****Tuesday, 4/11: No Class: Pesach I****Thursday, 4/13: Women Reading Talmud**

Vanessa Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 98-128, 233-261 and Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism*, 1-6, 235-250

SECOND SHORT PAPER DUE!

**Week 12:**

*Primary Text:* B. Bava Batra 73a-74b

**Tuesday, 4/18: Theories of Dialogue**

M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (excerpts)

**Thursday, 4/20: Rabbinic Imagination and Biblical Grounding**

Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*, 41-55

**Week 13:****Tuesday, 4/25: “Non-Jewish” Arguments**

*Primary Text:* Plato, *Gorgias* (excerpts)

*Secondary Text:* Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 81-132

**Thursday, 4/27: Is the Fight Fixed?**

*Primary Text:* B. Bava Metzia 84a

*Secondary Text:* *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 133-191

**Week 14:****Tuesday, 5/2: Argumentation and Postmodernity**

Robert Gibbs and Peter Ochs, “Gold and Silver: Philosophical Talmud”; Shaul Magid, “Rabbis of Gold and Sages of Silver: A Response to Philosophical Talmud”; Robert Gibbs, “Why Talmud: Renewing Response”, all in *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, 89-118

**Thursday, 5/4: Wrapping up****FINAL EXAM TBA**