History 219: The American Jewish Experience: From Shtetl to Suburb

University of Wisconsin, Madison
Fall 2011
M-W-F 12:05-12:55 (1651 Humanities)

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Course Description

A century and a half ago, the United States was a backwater of the Jewish world, then centered in Europe and the Ottoman Turkish Empire. Yet, by the 1950s, the United States became home to the largest, most prosperous, and most secure Jewish community in modern history. Why did millions of Jews come to the United States? How has life in a liberal political and capitalist economic order shaped the Jewish experience in America? In turn, how have Jews influenced American culture, politics, and society? This course surveys the history of American Jews from the 18th century until the late 20th century. Topics include patterns of political behavior (radicalism, liberalism, and nationalism), social mobility, Jewish culture in Yiddish and English, inter-ethnic group relations, gender and sexuality, religion, and problems in community building. The course combines lectures, in-class discussions, film, and audio recordings. Readings consist of secondary and primary sources.

Books

Michael Staub, Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America (Columbia Univ. Press, 2002)
All assigned books are on reserve at College Library. They are also available for purchase at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative located at 426 W. Gilman.

The required course packet is available for purchase at the Copy Center on the first floor of the Humanities Building.

# = scholarly articles in course packet
* = primary documents in course packet

Course Requirements

You are required to attend lectures and discussion sections. Failure to participate actively in the discussions will result in a failing grade for participation (see below). The assigned reading should be completed in time for your discussion section. The teaching assistant will give you a separate sheet explaining the requirements (which may include brief assignments) for sections. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, then please consult with the teaching assistant or me. Finally, computers or any other electronic devices are not permitted during lectures and discussions.

An in-class midterm exam, one six-page take-home assignment, and a final exam are required.

Participation and attendance: 20%
Midterm exam (Oct. 10): 25%
Take-home assignment (Nov. 14): 25%
Final exam (Dec. 17 @ 7:25-9:25 p.m.): 30%

The Center for Jewish Studies is sponsoring two afternoon lectures that you are required to attend. The first by Prof. Jonathan Sarna (Brandeis University) is on Sept. 26 @ 4:00 and the second by Prof. Nathaniel Deutsch (University of California, Santa Cruz) is on Oct. 24 @ 4:00. More details will be forthcoming.

Lectures and Reading

Week 1 (Sept. 2): Introduction

Week 2 (Sept. 7-9): Becoming Citizens: Jews in Colonial and Early America
(Note: class cancelled on Sept. 5 for Labor Day)


Course Packet:

*Article VI and the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of
Week 3 (Sept. 12-16): The Rise of American Jewry

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 62-134.

Course Packet:
* Conference of Reform Rabbis, “The Pittsburgh Platform” (1885).
* Solomon Schechter, “Catholic Israel” (1896).
* The Orthodox Jewish Congregational Union of America (1898).

Week 4 (Sept. 19-23): The Great Eastern European Migration

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 135-207.

Course Packet:

Week 5 (Sept. 26-28): Jews in Revolt

Tony Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, pp. 1-124.
Course Packet

Week 6 (Oct. 3-7): Yiddish Culture

Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, pp. 125-216.
Course Packet:
* Workmen’s Circle, The Beginnings of Secular Jewish Schools (1918-1920).

Week 7 (Oct. 10-14): At Home in America?
(Note: midterm exam on October 10)

Eric Goldstein, The Price of Whiteness, pp. 119-186.
Course Packet:

Week 8 (Oct. 17-21): Judaism Reconstructed
Week 8 (Oct. 24-26): Jews in American Popular Culture

Course Packet:

Week 9 (Oct. 31-Nov. 4): The “Red Decade”

Course Packet:
* The Gentile Declaration of Independence from the Jew Dictatorship (1941).

Week 10 (Nov. 7-11): World War II, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel

Course Packet:

Week 11 (Nov. 14-18): Contentment and Its Costs: Jews in Post-War America
(Note: take-home assignment due on Nov. 14)

Course Packet:

Week 12 (Nov. 21): Communal Consensus and Conflict
(Note: class cancelled Nov. 23-25 for Thanksgiving)

Michael Staub, Torn at the Roots, pp. 1-152.

Week 13 (Nov. 28-Dec. 2): Communal Consensus and Conflict, cont.

Staub, Torn at the Roots, pp. 153-308.

Course Packet:
*“Ezrat Nashim: Jewish Women Call for Change” (1972).

Week 14: (Dec. 5-9): Jews in American Popular Culture (act 2)

Course Packet:
*Lenny Bruce, “Jewish and Goyish” (c. 1960).
*Philip Roth, “Shikses and Other Goyim” (1967).

Week 15 (Dec. 12-14): Assimilation or Renewal?

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 306-374.
Goldstein, The Price of Whiteness, pp. 209-239.

Final Exam: Dec. 17 @ 7:25-9:25 p.m.