

# The Making of American Jewish Identities: Blood, Bris, Bagels, and Beyond

Religion 384 / American Studies 383 • Wesleyan University, Spring 2009

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Class Meetings:  
Mon & Wed, 2:40 - 4:00  
in Butterfield A413

Office Hours: Wed 10 - 12,  
or other times by appointment

## Course Description

Jewish identities in the United States have often been difficult to define in categorical terms. Jewishness tends to be seen, and lived, as an amorphous peoplehood -- on the boundaries of such categories as religion, race, ethnicity, nation, class, and culture. This course will examine some of the social and conceptual categories that have been used, since the nineteenth century, to construct the identities of "mainstream" Ashkenazi Jews in the United States. By examining the ties and tensions among these categories of identity, students will gain a new understanding of American Jewishness, as well as a critical perspective on the process of collective identity formation. What, we will ask, does the proliferation of categories around Jewishness tell us about the nature of collective identity as such? Is Jewishness somehow unique, or distinctive, in this categorical multiplicity? Or does the ambiguity of American Jewishness give us insight into the ambiguities of other identities?

Students will explore these questions through active participation in class discussions, brief written responses to the course readings, and a major final paper based on independent research with both primary and secondary sources.

## Required Readings

Six texts will be available to purchase at Broad Street Books, and on reserve at Olin:

Naomi Cohen, *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897-1948*

Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America*

Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*

Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity*

Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism*

Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture*

A packet of photocopied readings is also required, and will be available to purchase at Pip Printing (179 Main Street -- order in advance at pipmid.com). The reader will also be on reserve at Olin, and the readings will be available as pdfs on Blackboard. If you access the readings at Olin or on Blackboard you're required to copy them or print them out. Texts from the reader are marked with an (R) in the schedule of readings.

## Course Requirements

**Reading:** This is a reading intensive course. You will need to keep up with the schedule of readings on the syllabus, read carefully and critically, and come to every class with a solid grasp on the texts.

**Attendance and Participation:** Regular attendance and class participation are absolutely required. This is not the sort of course in which you can skip class then cram for the final. There is no final, and there is no way to grasp the themes of the course without active participation in class discussions. For this reason, I will take attendance in each class and structure the course to encourage (or perhaps require) your participation.

**Reading Responses:** You will write brief responses to the course reading at the end of every major unit of the class (a total of 8 response papers over the course of the semester). These will only be 1 to 2 pages each, and will be graded with a check, check-plus, or check-minus. They will be less formal than full-fledged papers, but will require a serious engagement with the texts. I will discuss my expectations for these reading responses in detail in class.

**Final Research Paper:** You will also write a major final research paper, of 15 to 20 pages, due during finals week on May 11th. This paper will require independent research on a topic of your choice, using both primary sources and secondary or theoretical texts. Your research will focus on a moment or context in American Jewish life in which the definition of Jewishness was actively contested by diverse groups of Jews and/or others. I will discuss my expectations for this paper in detail in class.

You will need to begin your research for this paper early in the semester, and hand in a series of preliminary assignments leading up to the paper itself. A brief research abstract and preliminary bibliography will be due in class on February 25th. A longer report on your research will be due in class on April 6th. And a partial draft of your paper will be due in class on April 27th. These preliminary assignments will not be graded, but they are absolutely required. We will devote our last two class meetings to research workshops, for which you will read and comment on your fellow students' drafts.

**Final Grades:** Your grade in the course will be based on your reading responses (about 35% of the final grade); your final paper (about 40% of the final grade); and your attendance and class participation (about 25% of the final grade). This equation may not be precise, however.

**Fair Warnings:** You'll find that I am reasonably flexible about assignment deadlines when students face medical or personal issues, but I will penalize late papers if you don't communicate with me about these issues in a timely manner. I will only give incompletes to students facing medical or personal issues at the end of the semester. And finally, you should know that I am an anti-plagiarism fanatic. I will have *zero tolerance* for plagiarism, and will refer any intentional plagiarism to the Honor Board for disciplinary action.

## Schedule of Readings and Assignments

### Unit 1: The Multiplicity of Jewishness

- 1/21 Introduction to the course. No reading.
- 1/26 Michael Krausz, "On Being Jewish" (R)  
Joshua Levinson, "Bodies and Bo(a)rders: Emerging Fictions of Identity in Late Antiquity" (R)  
Daniel Itzkovitz, "Secret Temples" (R)
- 1/28 George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (R)  
Henry Goldschmidt, "Race, Nation, and Religion: An Introduction" (R)

### Unit 2: Jewishness as Race: From "Different Blood" to an Ambivalent Whiteness

- 2/2 Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 3
- 2/4 Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Chapters 4 - 6
- 2/9 Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Chapters 7 - 8 and Epilogue
- 2/11 Research workshop. No reading. Introduction to library and online sources.

### Unit 3: Still Race? Intermarriage, Jewhooring, and Jewish Genes

- 2/16 Lila Corwin Berman, "Sociology, Jews, and Intermarriage in Twentieth-Century America" (R)  
Susan Glenn, "In the Blood? Consent, Descent, and the Ironies of Jewish Identity" (R)
- 2/18 Susan Kahn, "The Multiple Meanings of Jewish Genes" (R)  
Tudor Parfitt and Yulia Egorova, "Genetics, History, and Identity: The Case of the Bene Israel and the Lemba" (R)

### Unit 4: Jewishness as Religion: Ritual Performance and Sacred Community

- 2/23 Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2
- 2/25 Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community*, Chapters 3 - 4
- Research Abstracts Due in Class**
- 3/2 Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community*, Chapters 5 - 7 and Conclusion

### **Unit 5: Between and Beyond Race and Religion: The Lubavitch Hasidim**

3/4 Henry Goldschmidt, "Food Fights: Contesting 'Cultural Diversity' in Crown Heights" (R)

Henry Goldschmidt, "Religion, Reductionism, and the Godly Soul: Lubavitch Hasidic Jewishness and the Limits of Classificatory Thought" (R)

### **Unit 6: Jewishness as Class: Consumption and Production**

3/23 Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 4

3/25 Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*, Chapters 5 - 8, 11 - 12, and Epilogue

3/30 Lucy Dawidowicz, "The Jewishness of the Jewish Labor Movement in the United States" (R)

Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, Chapters 1 - 2 (R)

### **Unit 7: Jewishness as Nation: American Zionisms, Then and Now**

4/1 Naomi Cohen, *The Americanization of Zionism*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2

4/6 Naomi Cohen, *The Americanization of Zionism*, Chapters 3, 7, 8, and Afterward

#### ***Research Progress Reports Due in Class***

4/8 Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel*, Chapters 1 - 3 (R)

### **Unit 8: Jewishness as Culture, Part 1: Constructing A Homeland in New York**

4/13 Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, Introduction and Chapter 1

4/15 Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, Chapters 2 - 3 (skim selections)

### **Unit 9: Jewishness as Culture, Part 2: Yiddish as Tshotchke and Identity**

4/20 Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2

4/22 Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, Chapter 4 - 6

### **Unit 10: Jewishness as Anything and Everything Else: Your Research Findings**

4/27 No class. No reading. Professor at a conference.

#### ***Paper Drafts Due to Workshop Members***

4/29 Research Workshop. Read and comment on each others drafts.

5/4 Research Workshop. Read and comment on each others drafts.

**5/11 *Final Research Papers Due in my Mailbox by 5 pm on Monday May 11th***