This a draft and may be changed somewhat. Also some citations are not complete.

History 74900, Topics in American Jewish History  Professor Thomas Kessner
Spring 2012;  Tu 2:00-4:00 tkessner@gc.cuny.edu; 212. 817.8437

For those who would understand the history of the United States and its diverse people the history of the Jews in the US is significant; for those who would understand Jewish history, the role of the Jewish community in the United States is crucial.

Less than one hundred years ago many would have questioned this latter statement. After all, the important centers of world Jewry were located across the Atlantic and much that was important in Jewish life transpired there. But troubles and tragedies triggered a series of migrations that brought millions of Jews to the U.S. and today the U.S. has the largest Jewish population in the world.

We will be investigating some of the uprooting forces that accounted for the waves of Jewish immigration. They came (especially in the period 1880-1920) in the millions, and confronted many of the conventional immigrant challenges; and others that were quite unique. In time this previously marginal population formed an influential minority populating America’s large cities and lending their institutions a piquant cultural tone.

It is of course too simple to speak of a single American Jewish community or culture for they came from many places with a variety of backgrounds. Is there a center that held these disparate historical elements together? Can America’s Jews legitimately be described as a community? Do they share values and outlooks? Are they defined by religion or culture or social relationships, or is there something else, perhaps external, that is even more important?

What was the process of their Americanization? What were the forces – economic, political, social, cultural and religious- that shaped their experience here? Moreover, it was far from a passive experience. Jews had a large, perhaps disproportionate, impact on the American nation and we will seek to study that impact on society, thought, culture and politics.

And what of Judaism? How did it fare in the free, largely Protestant atmosphere of the US? We will discuss the rise of Reform and Conservatism and the resurgence of a diverse American Orthodoxy. We will also look at other themes, both benign and cataclysmic: Zionism, Socialist thought, the Holocaust, Israel.

Over the past thirty years a generation of freshly conceived studies about American Jewish life have given this field a vigor and standing that it had not attained before. Historians of the American Jewish experience have fashioned a rigorous body of systematic work that is informed by theory and broad questions. They have crafted a textured complex past from the lives of immigrants, artists, political ideologues and religious thinkers; from philanthropists, workers, women, and idealists.

Many of these imaginative and at times provocative monographs have tended to isolate their topics, viewing them narrowly to create a field of brilliant fragments. Our challenge will be to bring these important segments together to shape an understanding of American Jewish history.

**Course learning objectives:**
Over the course of the semester students will be expected to demonstrate:

- An understanding of key texts in American Jewish History
- An understanding of the role of politics, economics, social forces, culture and technology in shaping American Jewish life
- Knowledge of the American Jewish experience and an appreciation for its complexity
- An understanding of the role of America’s Jewish population on the larger historical forces of the nation
- An understanding of the role of the American Jewish community on the larger world Jewish community.
- An ability lead a class discussion on a topic in American Jewish history.
- An ability to critically review and analyze historical studies
- Achieve a familiarity with important research resources including archives, web sources, and source collections in the field
- An ability to write a well defined, carefully researched and cogently argued research paper in the field of American Jewish history

Weekly Assignments:

The assignments in this course are designed to train students for research, writing and teaching. Reading, leading class discussions and participating in them are integral to successfully completing the work for this class. Each session will have a discussion leader who will also prepare a short synopsis of a supplemental reading. The weekly discussion will begin with a report on the supplementary book and then move to a full discussion of the assigned readings. A second reader will offer a critique of the reading that will include a consideration of the review literature.

Required Readings are drawn from the following:


**Supplemental Readings:**


1. **Jews and Judaism**
   
The foundational books: Siddur, Chumash, Gmarrah, Tur, ShulchanAruch
   
   
   [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_jewish_history/v096/96.3.sorkin.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_jewish_history/v096/96.3.sorkin.pdf)
   
   
   [http://350th.org/history/histo_marcus.html](http://350th.org/history/histo_marcus.html)

   Sarna, *AJE,* xiii-xix
   
   Sarna, *AJH,* xiii-xx


2. Jews in Early America

Jacob Marcus, "The American Colonial Jew," *AJE*, 6-19
Sarna, *AJH*, 1-61
Faber, *Time for Planting*, 4-127, 142-143
Sarna, "The Impact of the American Revolution on American Jews," *AJE*, 20-30
Malcolm H. Stern, "The 1820s," *AJE*, 31-37


*Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family.*

3. The German Jewish Era

Sarna, *AJH*, 62-134
Stefan Rohrbacher, "From Württemberg to America," *AJE*, 44-59
Michael Meyer, "America," in *AJE*, 60-83,
https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-trefa-banquet/


4. Eastern European Emigration

Jonathan Frankel, “The Crisis of 1881 As a Turning Point in Modern Jewish History,”
DBLJM, 9-20.
Michael Stanislavski, “The Transformation of Traditional Authority in Russian Jewry: The First Stage,” 21-47, DBLJM
Steven Zipperstein, Russian Maskilim and the City, 31-48, DBLJM
Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 5-66

*Anzia Yezierska, *The Bread Givers*

5. The Way They Lived Then

Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 67-286
Rischin, *Promised City*, 51-115


Deborah Dwork, “Immigrant Jews on the Lower East Side,” *AJE*, 120-137


6. **Leaning Left**

Andrew Heinze, “Adapting to Abundance,” *AJE*, 166-84
Rischin, 171-194
Moses Rischin, “Abraham Cahan, Guide Across the American Chasm,” 73-84, DBLJM.

*http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_jewish_history/v088/88.4michels.html*

*Bloom, Alexander. *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*

7. **Toward the Mainstream**


Howe, 360-554
Rischin, 115-170
Sarna, AJH, 135-207
Jeffrey Gurock, "The Emergence of the American Synagogue," *AJE*, 219-35


8. **The “Other”**

*JAW*, 406-412

Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in American Life*, 3-104
Irving Howe, “Pluralism in the Immigrant World,” 149-156, DBLJM

Karabel, Jerome, *The Chosen: Admission and Exclusion* 1-139


*Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews*, 133-179
9. Depression Jewry
   Sarna, AJH, 208-271
   Jenna Weissman Joselit, “The Jewish Home Beautiful,” AJE, 236-44
   *Moore, Deborah Dash, At Home in America

10. America and the Holocaust
    Thomas Kessner, Fiorello H LaGuardia and the Making of Modern New York, 520-526
    David Nasaw, The Patriarch, 353-367, 501-503, 507-509
    David S. Wyman, The Abandonment of the Jews,
    Henry Feingold, "Who Shall Bear Guilt for the Holocaust?" AJE, 274-93
    JAW 464-467, 480-486
    Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, 19-59,
    *Deborah E. Lipstadt, Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945

11. Zionism and Israel
    Melvin Urofsky, American Zionism: From Herzl to the Holocaust
    Melvin Urofsky, "Zionism," AJE, 245-57
    JAW: 381-389.
    *Mart, Michelle, Eyes on Israel: How America Came to View the Jewish State as an Ally.

12. American Jews and Judaism at the end of the 20th Century
    JAW, 549-562
    Sarna AJH, 273-374
    Charles Liebman, Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life, American Jewish Yearbook 66 (1965) 21-98
    Sarna, AJH, 272-306
    Deborah Dash Moore, "Jewish Migration in Postwar America," AJE, 314-29
    http://www.jstor.org/stable/20101439
    Pamela S. Nadell, “The Impulse to Jewish Women's History at the Tercentenary,” The Jewish Quarterly Review, ns: 94: 4, (Autumn, 2004), 637-642:
    http://www.jstor.org/stable/1455597
    *Cheryl Greenberg, Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century
    *Paul Cowan, An Orphan in History: Retrieving a Jewish Legacy
    *Sue Fishkoff, The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad- Lubavitch
Bibliographies:

There are many helpful bibliographies that are easily accessible on the web. Here are a number of general sites that you may wish to consult. In addition there are a number of specialized bibliographies for focused research on a given topic.

http://350th.org/history/bibliography.html
http://www.aihs.org/reference/essential_readings.cfm
http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/jewishhistory/
http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/jewishhistory/getItems.cfm/majorCatID=10
http://www.jtsa.edu/x1215.xml

Collateral Assignments:

The assignments are keyed to specific sessions.

Session 3: Submit a research proposal for your paper. 500 words
Session 5: Write a 1000 word review of the book that you are assigned to report for class.
Session 11: Submit your paper

The Paper. Choose a topic in American Jewish history between 1865 and 1970 and based upon research in newspapers (The New York Times is an obvious choice, but if there is a reason to use another paper then you can substitute) write a documented analytic essay approximately 15 pages in length. The objective of the essay is to identify, categorize and analyze your topic’s relationship to the larger questions we are studying in the course.

The paper will obviously be limited in scope. But you can look at an issue as it was reported - recognizing that errors often do creep into reports when an observer writes against a deadline, is forced to depend upon random testimony, and often lacks context - and with discretion, use the information. Do not settle upon a single circumstance or event; build a base of information that can be related thematically to your topic.

Your paper should be based exclusively on what can be learned from the primary research. You may use one secondary source to provide the context, but not for information. Footnote your material with brief citations.

Start early. Reserve a good bit of time to organize and write the paper.

By the third session you will need to hand in a brief outline of your subject and your secondary source. The paper will be due the first week in May. There is a one week grace period. If you hand in your paper late your grade will reflect the tardiness.

Feel free to consult me with any problems or questions. If you want a copy back submit two copies of your paper.

Alternatively you may choose to do a historiographic essay on an approved topic.