

Godtalk: Jewish Texts and Contemporary Music on the Experience of the Divine
JST 104X
American Jewish University Campus in Israel
Young Judeaea Year Course

Course Description

Questions about the nature of God and about God's relationship with human beings are an essential aspect of human existence. Individuals often develop implicit theologies-unexamined beliefs about the nature of God, humanity, and their interaction. In becoming informed adults, young Jewish adults must grapple with theological questions and develop a better understanding of their own evolving personal theology. By examining both historical and contemporary approaches to theological issues, students will have the opportunity to deepen and broaden their understanding of their personal theologies.

This course will examine the following themes:

- Immanence and Transcendence: Where is God?
- Free Will and God's Providence: How Far Does God's "Hand" Reach?
- Pain and Suffering in a World Created by God: Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?
- Love and Fear: Two Different Paths to God?

We will examine how these theological themes have been understood and approached by Jewish thinkers throughout the ages. These themes will be examined through the study of Biblical narrative and exegesis, Talmudic text, Midrash, wisdom literature, and medieval and modern Jewish philosophy. We will also look at how they find expression in modern poetry and music in ways which often echo ancient and medieval ideas about the relationship between people and God.

Through analysis, comparison, and personal reflection, the students will gain a broader understanding of Jewish thought as it relates to these selected themes and how it has developed over the centuries. They will also have an opportunity, in light of these Jewish sources, to reflect on how contemporary poets and songwriters express in creative and symbolic ways their own experience of God in relation to humans. Through study, discussion, research, reflection, and journaling, students will be asked to develop nascent personal theologies.

Assessment

1. Students will be required to journal their responses to the questions raised in each theme.

Students will be expected to

- describe their understandings of historical Jewish responses to each theme
- reflect on the modern poetic expressions that were studied
- express their own conclusions

2. Students will engage in Chevruta study of Jewish texts to explore in-depth the language and ideas presented.

- Students will be required to exhibit their understanding of the texts studied during Chevruta through:
- written responses to questions
- oral presentations of their analyses
- participation in group discussion

3. Students will create a final project that develops a personal theology on one of the themes discussed during the semester.

In their final projects, students will be expected to present their thinking on their chosen theme by:

- * summarizing their personal responses to the Jewish and poetic texts studied in class
 - * analyzing additional Jewish texts which they have researched
 - * analyzing a poem or song of their own choosing
 - * Integrating all of the above into a statement of personal belief
- Specific Themes to be Explored

I. Immanence and Transcendence: Where is God?

A. Goals

In this unit, we will

- * study the themes of immanence and transcendence by analyzing how these two theological concepts are presented in Jewish texts from the Book of Genesis through modern Jewish philosophical writings
 - * note how these ideas develop through centuries of Jewish thought
- We will consider the following questions:

- * What do we learn about the nature of God's involvement with the world?
- * How do these sources define what God is and is not?
- * How do these sources balance, isolate or integrate the idea of God being immanent or transcendent?
- * Is there a dominant Jewish view in these opposing concepts?
- * What are the implications for the relationship between man and God in each of these differing visions?
- * How do you (the student) balance, integrate, or separate these notions of God?

B. Concepts to be examined will include:

- * Immanence
- * Transcendence
- * Names of God as expressions of divine attributes
- * Shechina
- * Hester Panim

C. Sources

- * Opening Song: From A Distance (Julie Gold)
- * Biblical Sources:
- * Genesis 1:1-5
- * Genesis 2: 4-9
- * Exodus 20: 1-3
- * Exodus 33: 17-23
- * Exodus 34: 6-7

- * Deuteronomy 30:11-14
- * Deuteronomy 30:16-18
- * Song of Songs; Chapter 6
- * Isaiah 40:22
- * Isaiah 55:8
- * Psalm 139
- * Ecclesiastes 5:2
- * Jeremiah 31:9
- * Rabbinic Sources
- * Numbers Rabba 11:5
- * Yalkut Shimoni, Song of Songs 2:6
- * Berachot 64a
- * Sotah 5a
- * Chagigah 5b
- * Medieval Jewish Philosophy
- * Kuzari (Yehudah Ha Levi) 1:10-25
- * Rambam, *Eight Chapters*, Chapter 7
- * Modern Jewish Philosophy (Excerpts from listed works)
- * Julius Guttmann, Dat u-Medina
- * Rabbi David Hakohen (Nazir), Kol Ha-nevuah
- * Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, U-Bikashtem Mi-Sham
- * Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*
- * Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search Of Man*
- * Rabbi Harold Kushner, (Interview with Jeremy Caplan, Time Magazine, 2006)
- * Contemporary Music
- * All Because Of You (U2)
- * What if God Were One of Us (Joan Osborne)
- * Each of Us Has a A Name (The Roaches)

II. Free Will and God*s Providence: How Far Does God*s *Hand* Reach?

A. Goals

Having discussed the question of where God is, we will examine ideas about the extent of God*s involvement in the world that God created.

In this unit, we will

- * study two apparently conflicting notions of God*s involvement in the world--free will and divine providence.
 - * begin by analyzing the origin of the notion of divine providence in the book of Genesis
 - * study different models of balancing free will and divine providence in Jewish thought.
- The following questions will be considered:

- * To what extent does God participate in human activity?
- * What is the nature of this *hashgacha*?
- * What are the different models that biblical and post biblical thinkers have developed?
- * Is there a difference between individual and national divine providence?
- * What are the implications of both notions in addressing the question of human responsibility?
- * How do you (the student) balance these notions in constructing your own personal theology?
- *

The following concepts will be discussed:

- * Individual Divine Providence (Hashgacha Pratit)

- * National Divine Providence (Hashgacha Klalit)

- * Free Will (B*chira Chafshit)

- * Divine knowledge

- * Divine governance

B. Sources

- * Opening Song: Simple Twist of Fate (Bob Dylan)

- * Jewish sources (by theological perspective)

- * Expansive Approach

- * Genesis 3:22-27

- * Deuteronomy: 5:6

- * Psalm 33: 13-19

- * Jeremiah 32:19

- * Psalm 138, Commentary of Metzudat David

- * Ezekiel 8:12, Commentary of Radak

- * Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chulin 7b

- * Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruchin 16b

- * Zohar, Yahel Ohr (Shelach 157b), Commentary of the Vilna Gaon

- * Limited Approach

- * Genesis 18:19 Commentaries of Rabeinu Bechaya ben Asher & Rashi

- * Leviticus 13:47, Commentary of Seforno

- * Ramban, Torat Hashem Temima

- * Rambam, Introduction to the Mishnah

- * Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav me-Eliyahu

- * Restrictive Approach

- * Genesis 18:19, Commentary of the Ramban

- * Exodus 13:16, Commentary of the Ramban

- * Deuteronomy 11:13, Commentary of the Ramban

- * Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim, section 3, Chapter 17

- * Deuteronomy 30:19

- * Berachot 33b

- * Genesis 37:20, 37:21 Commentaries of the Ohr Ha-Chayim Ha-kadosh and the Netziv of Volozhin

- * Gersonidies, The Wars of God (Milchamot Hashem)

- * Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz, Shelah haKadosh

- * Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Halachic Man

- * Rabbi Levi Darby (2007). The most complex equation: Free will or God's will? Jweekly.com, October 4, 2007.

- * Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Sihot al Shemonah Perakim la* Rambam, page 253

- * Contemporary Music:

- * Halleluyah and Order (The Roches)

- * Who By Fire (Leonard Cohen)

- * Waiting For A Miracle (Bruce Cockburn)

III. Pain and Suffering in a World Created by God: Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

A. Goals

After considering how God interacts with God's world, we now look at

- * How Jewish thinkers understand why God interacts with people in the ways God does
- * Specifically, we will confront the problem of human suffering.

The following questions will be considered:

- * Why is suffering part of the *good* world that God created?
- * What role does suffering play in God's cosmic script?
- * How should people respond to suffering?
- * How does suffering inform our relationship with God?

B. Concepts to be examined will include:

- * Tzadik v*ra lo
- * When Bad things happen to good people
- * Hester Panim
- * When God *hides his face*
- * Yisurim shel ahava
- * Loving Afflictions
- * Olam haBa
- * The World to Come

C. Sources

- * Jewish Sources
- * Excerpts from the biblical book of Job, the Jewish people's quintessential response to the question of why people suffer, will be used as the main text
- * The Book of Job (Excerpts)
- * Commentaries on the Book of Job:
 - * Rambam
 - * Saadyah Gaon
 - * Gersonides
 - * Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Kol Dodi Dofek
 - * Rabbi Harold Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People
- * Contemporary Music
 - * You Found Me (The Fray)
 - * Volcano (Beck)
 - * Down in the Hole (Tom Waits)
 - * Let's Roll (Neil Young)

IV. Love and Fear: Two Different Paths to God?

A. Goals

Having considered notions of what/who God is, where God is, and how God interacts with human beings, we turn now to the realm of how people connect with God.

In this unit, we will

* examine two primary perspectives in a person's approach to God, Ahava (Love) and Yirah (Fear/Awe/Reverence) as they appear throughout Jewish thought.

The following questions will be considered:

- * How are yirah and ahava defined in Jewish sources?
- * How does one achieve yirah and ahava?
- *
- * What characterizes a relationship with God based on yirah or based on ahava?
- * What are the separate challenges one faces in striving for these experiences?
- * Is one idea more dominant than another when examining the relevant Jewish sources?
- * How does one separate or integrate these concepts in considering one's own path to God?

B. Concepts to be examined will include:

- * Yirah vs. Pachad
- * Ahavat Hashem

C. Sources

- * Opening song: I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For (U2)
- * Jewish Sources
- * Leviticus 19:14
- * Deuteronomy 10:12, 6:4-7
- * Isaiah 36:6
- * Job 4:6, Commentaries of Rashi and Rambam
- * Ecclesiastes 12:13
- * Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 31b
- * Sifre Devarim, piska 33
- * Proverbs 22:4
- * Berachot 33b
- * Rambam, Eight Chapters (Chapter 2)
- * Rabbi Shalom Carmy, quoted in Yirat Shamayim, edited by Marc D. Stern, page xxxviii
- * Rabbi Kenneth Auman quoted in Yirat Shamayim, edited by Marc D. Stern, page xxix
- * Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, page 307
- * Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, Yemei Zikkaron, 1989
- * Selections from the morning prayer service
- * Contemporary Music:
- * Outrageous (Paul Simon)
- * Indestructible (Matisyahu)
- * Heaven's Gate (Ian Mc Culloch)

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