

## **Jews, Race and Religion**

Religious Studies 207/Jewish Studies 207

Spring, 2021

(draft to be revised closer to the beginning of the semester)

Professor Steven Weitzman (pronouns he/him)

2020 marked what *could* be a major new chapter in the history of race relations in the United States, with untold numbers of protestors demanding that the country confront abiding race-based injustice. The consequences of this movement are not yet known, but it has newly forced racism, and the category of race, into public consciousness in a way that might be transformative

The aim of this course is to help students deepening their understanding of how discourses of race have shaped how Jews have understood their own identity, how they have been understood by others, and how they in turn have related to other groups. The topics it will address include: 1) the history of racial thinking, including the categories like Whiteness and Blackness; 2) the role of Jews within the larger history of race relationships in the U.S.; 3) the racial diversity that exists within the Jewish community today; and 4) the roles of Jews in the struggle for racial justice. This course involves the study of history, but it aims to incorporate a range of intellectual perspectives and disciplinary approaches from Jewish Studies, anthropology, cultural studies, and other fields, and to reflect on the role of scholarship itself in the effort to overcome racism.

In order to expose students to a range of approaches and issues within Jewish Studies and religious studies, this course will be anchored by a series of weekly (online) presentations featuring leading scholars of race and/or religion. One of the main aims of these guest lecture is to help put the study of race as a part of Jewish history and identity with the broader critical and comparative study of race. These talks will occur in tandem with discussion-oriented sessions focused on topics listed in the schedule below. Assignments will include responses to readings and presentations, personal reflection, and a research paper that will allow you to delve more deeply into a particular question or issue.

Please note that while we will be taking a global approach to Jewish identity, considering ancient, medieval and modern topics and touching on the situation in Israel, much of the class is focused on the situation in the United States, which has its own distinctive history of race relations and its own distinctive racialized culture. Students interested in the situation for other societies may use the research paper to explore topics that go beyond what we cover in class.

There are no prerequisites for this course beyond an openness to learning about perspectives different from your own.

*What Will You Learn in this Course?*

For those interested in Jewish Studies, the course is an opportunity to think more deeply about the nature of Jewish identity. For those with interests beyond Jewish Studies, the topic also offers an entry into the history of the category of race, the racialization of religious identity, and the history of how immigrants to the U.S. came to embrace whiteness in their self-understanding. Students are meant to derive from the class deeper understanding of the following topics”

- 1) the categories of “race” and “religion,” and how these ways of categorizing human difference have developed over time and influenced one another.
- 2) Jewish identity and how it resembles, differs from, and intersects with other kinds of group identity.
- 3) Racial diversity within the Jewish community and the experiences of Jews of Color.
- 4) The place of Jews in the history of race relations in the U.S. (and to some extent Israel).

There may be no more sensitive topic to broach in our day and age than race and race relations. It gets to the heart of people’s sense of identity, how see themselves in the world, and how they are treated by others, and talking about it can arouse fear, anger, hatred, guilt and other powerful emotions. Anti-Black racism has been at the heart of American society since before its founding, and continues to have devastating consequences to this day. White Jews have to reckon with that legacy as whites; the topic is complicated in other ways for Jews from other racial or ethnic backgrounds; and Jews in general are heir to a history that includes the Holocaust, an extreme example of what racist thinking can lead to. To be able to explore the topic in an open-minded way, and to discuss issues candidly, I ask you to approach this class with empathy, sensitivity, curiosity, and respect for fellow students and the guest lecturers from whom you will be learning.

### **Remote Participation, Absence policy, and accommodation for students with disabilities**

This is a class built around discussion and what we can learn from each other, and what follows is meant to facilitate the kind of interaction needed to develop your understanding and interpretative skills. The class will meet twice a week at the designated hour, synchronously, but sessions will be recorded in case any student needs to miss a session. As of November 1, 2020, the plan is to offer the course through Zoom unless the public health situation improves significantly. If all enrolled students are able and the public health situation allows, we may consider some in-person meetings over the semester, but no one will be required to attend in-person.

This class aims to be as welcoming and inclusive as possible; it will be enriched by drawing students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Students who have a disability which may necessitate an academic accommodation or the use of auxiliary aids and services in a class are asked to initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education’s Disability Resource Center (DRC, phone 723-1066), and to be in touch with me to let me know their situation.

You are responsible for understanding university rules regarding academic integrity, and can review the code at [http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai\\_codeofacademicintegrity.html](http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai_codeofacademicintegrity.html) In brief, conduct prohibited by the Code of Academic Integrity includes all forms of academic dishonesty, among them copying from another’s exam, unpermitted collaboration and representing as one’s own work the work of another.

**Readings.** Readings are listed in the schedule below. The intention has been to make them all available online. You can expect around 70-100 pages of reading per week. You will not be expected to memorize content or tested on details, but you should be sure to grasp the main arguments of essays and the broad outlines of chapters that describe historical periods and be able to draw on them for your thinking and writing.

## **Expectations**

Grades are based on a point system (97-100 A+; 94-96=A; 90-93=A-; 87-89=B+, etc.)

*Participation/Contribution (20 points)* Points assigned based on consistent attendance, and active, informed participation in discussion.

(absences for health or personal reasons may be excused and not to count against these points, but to qualify, you need to contact me beforehand or as soon as you can)

*Written Responses to Questions (40 points).* In the schedule below, under readings, there appear question that you should think about in advance of the relevant class session. You are asked to address four of those question in writing, one per month, in light of readings and lectures—one for January, Feb, March and April. Answers, due at the end of each month, may be as long as you like, and should demonstrate your engagement in readings, lectures and discussions.

*Summaries of Guest lectures (10 points).* One page descriptions that summarize the speaker's central claim and share your own response to the argument—what made you curious, what you agree or disagree with and why. To be submitted by the Monday following the lecture (5:00 pm)

*Take-home Exam (30 points),* based on readings, questions, and guest lectures, due April 27. You may propose a research paper of 12-15 pages, or a project, in lieu of the take-home exam, also due May 3 at 5:00pm

## **Schedule**

Guest lectures will occur online, and most will be scheduled for Thursdays. Once they begin, we will use a part of each Tuesday session to reflect on the previous week's guest lecture.

### **January 21 (Thurs) Welcome and Introduction**

**Questions:** This class is about how we categorize human beings, and the difference such categories make to real people. We therefore need to begin by examining key categories we will be addressing in class—race, ethnicity, religion and the very concept of identity.

In preparation for the first class meeting, in light of your own knowledge and after listening to the podcast below, define what a Jew is. What makes it hard to pinpoint a definition?

Post-cast "Rethinking Jewish Identity and Jewish Education."  
<https://beta.prx.org/stories/118439-rethinking-jewish-identity-and-jewish-education>

## **Unit I. Jews Between Race and Religion (or a brief history of categories and their consequences)**

Jews have proven difficult to classify. Many in the United States would classify Jewishness as a religious identity parallel to being Christian or Muslim, but Jews have also been classified as a race—most notoriously by the Nazis but in other contexts as well, including by Jews themselves. Why is Jewishness so ambiguous, and what can that ambiguity tell us about the categories of race and religion? We will seek to address this question as we explore how Jews in different periods have classified themselves, how they classify others, and how others classify them.

### **January 26 (Tues) The Jews between Ethnicity and Religion**

Reading: Erich Gruen, “Did Ancient Identity Depend on Ethnicity? A Preliminary Probe,” *Phoenix* 67 (2013), 1-22, Benjamin Isaac, “Proto-racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *World Archaeology* 38 (2006), 32-47, all available electronically through Penn Libraries.

Questions. Did ancient Jews and other ancient peoples have a concept of race? Did racism exist in this period?

### **January 28 (Tues).**

*Guest Lecture: Mira Wasserman (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College)*  
“*The Talmud and Racism*”

### **Feb 2. (Thursday) Anti-Semitism and Race**

Reading: George Fredriksen, *Racism: a Short History*, pp, 15-138, available through Penn Libraries (you may not have time to complete this whole reading by today but try to do so in the next week or two as background for the class); Perry and Schweitzer, *Antisemitic Myths*, 5-42;

Questions: According to the readings, when and how did racism emerge in history? When did the perception of the Jews as a race emerge? Do you regard Anti-Semitism as a form of racism? What distinguishes it from other forms of racism?

### **Feb 4. Roots and Race** (beginning of guest lecture series)

*Guest lecture: Richard Newton (University of Alabama)*  
“*Zakhor: Alex Haley’s Roots, Scriptures and the Race for America*”

## **Unit II Jewishness, Whiteness and Blackness**

As we transition from past to the present, the class zeroes in on how Jews fit within the racialized culture of the United States, especially the fraught relationship between Whites and Blacks. As the class positions Jews within this culture, we will investigate the origin of the category of Whiteness and how it was applied to Jews.

### **Feb 9. Whiteness and Religion**

Reading: W E.B. Dubois, “The Soul of White Folks”: <https://medium.com/religion-bites/the-souls-of-white-folk-by-w-e-b-du-bois-354f91ca08ef>; Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 13-38; Rachel Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion: Implications for Theology and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88 (2020): 175-199, available electronically via Penn libraries; Adam Serwer, “White Nationalism’s Deep American Roots,” *The Atlantic* (April 2019): [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/04/adam-serwer-madison-grant-white-nationalism/583258/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6ar4BRDnARIsAITGzID3ho53yGKMyW2KtjsFk\\_kh8xpyceDo6kkqSSZijWzWfws4Q3lZuUIaAjCoEALw\\_wcB](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/04/adam-serwer-madison-grant-white-nationalism/583258/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6ar4BRDnARIsAITGzID3ho53yGKMyW2KtjsFk_kh8xpyceDo6kkqSSZijWzWfws4Q3lZuUIaAjCoEALw_wcB)

Questions: What is Whiteness? Scholars have noted how whiteness as defined in America emerged from pseudo-scientific concepts of race, but it also has origins in the history of American religion as well. In what sense can whiteness be understood as a religious idea?

Optional: For additional historical context, view Nell Irvin Painter, “The History of White People” (online): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDZUBX\\_nY\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDZUBX_nY_0) (to 35 minute mark);

Feb 11 (Thursday) *Guest lecture: J. Kameron Carter (Indiana University, Bloomington): “Jews and the Religion of Whiteness”*

### Feb 16. **How did Jews become White?**

Reading: Reading Eric Goldstein, *the Price of Whiteness*, pp. 1-8, 1-26, 41-50; 98-115, 189-208; Karen Brodtkin Sacks, “How did Jews become White Folks?,” selection reprinted in Bracey and Adams, *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Black and Jews in the United States*, 500-516; all available electronically via Penn Libraries.

Questions: Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jews would not have classified themselves, or been classified by others, as racially white. By contrast, when asked their racial identity, a significant majority of American Jews today identify as white. Based on the readings, how did Jews in the United States become white? (the readings suggest multiple causes—identify 3). What implications did this have for Black-Jewish relations in the U.S.

Feb 18 (Thursday) *Guest Lecture—Sophie Bjork-James (Vanderbilt): “Religion and White-Supremacy in the United States”*

### Feb 23 **Jews, Blacks, and Being the Chosen People**

Reading: A. Eisen, *The Chosen People in America*, 1-22, 173-182, available online electronically via Penn libraries; ESPN debate over Desean Jackson remarks:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEPGvp8B9R0>;

Andre Key, “Before We Scold DeSean Jackson and Others for Black Anti-Semitism, We Need to talk about Black Chosenness,” *Religious Dispatches* (July 15, 2020):

<https://religiondispatches.org/before-we-scold-desean-jackson-and-others-for-anti-semitism-we-need-to-talk-about-chosenness/>

Eric Sundquist, “The Black Nation Israel,” *iStrangers in the Land* (2005); 95-169, available electronically

James Baldwin, “Negros are Anti-Semitic Because They are Anti-White”:  
<https://movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-antisem.html>

As James Baldwin suggested in a well-known essay, Black antipathy to Jews should be understood as a response to White racism, and most scholars of Jewish-Black relations understand it within the context of race relations in the U.S. But might religion also play a role in Black-Jewish relations? A recent incident suggests that it does.

During the summer of 2020, Eagles wide-receiver DeSean Jackson sparked heated controversy after posting a fabricated quote falsely attributed to Hitler which claimed that the Jews had a plot for world domination that involved suppressing Blacks’ identity as the true Children of Israel. Jackson’s remark, and the controversy that followed, resurfaced anti-Jewish antagonism among some Blacks that goes back decades and has persisted despite efforts to cultivate a Jewish-Black alliance. It also illustrates that religion plays a role in shaping Black perception of Jews. What do the readings reveal about the religious background of Jackson’s claim?

Feb 25 (Thursday) *Guest Lecture: Marc Dollinger (San Francisco State University), “Black Power and Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s”*

Optional: We cannot in the context of this course cover the full extent of Jewish-Black relations in the United States, which can fill more than a semester. For this reason, it is highly recommended that you read all of Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters* (2006) as background for Jewish-Black relations in the twentieth century.

### **March 2 (Tuesday) Blacks and Jews/Israel and Palestine**

Readings: Emma Green, “Why do Black Activists Care about Palestine?”, *The Atlantic* (August 18 (2016): [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/why-did-black-american-activists-start-caring-about-palestine/496088/?gclid=CjwKCAjwxqX4BRBhEiwAYtJX7RuXfzknSjyioRcJWoE7-I5dWQsJBe1mnXJ6Ejt3RAjSkOUv5q23GRoCT7kQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/why-did-black-american-activists-start-caring-about-palestine/496088/?gclid=CjwKCAjwxqX4BRBhEiwAYtJX7RuXfzknSjyioRcJWoE7-I5dWQsJBe1mnXJ6Ejt3RAjSkOUv5q23GRoCT7kQAvD_BwE)

Harold Cruse, “Negroes and Jews—the Two Nationalisms and the Bloc(ked) Plurality,” in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, pp. 476-497 (for a perspective from 1967).

Michael Fischbach, “Transnational Peoples of Color: Black Power in America and the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52 (2020): 167-172, available online electronically via Penn libraries/.

Michael Williams, “Pan-Africanism and Zionism: the Delusion of Compatibility,” *Journal of Black Studies* 31 (1991): 348-371.

Questions: Recent antagonism between Jews and Blacks in the US has revolved around condemnation of Israel for its treatment of Palestinians, as demonstrated by criticism from some Jewish organizations of the Black Lives Matter movement for accusing Israel of committing genocide against Palestinians. We will not try to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but we will use this class to explore the role of this conflict as *a factor in Black-Jewish relations in the United States*, not seeking to resolve who is right or wrong but trying to understand the different perspectives at play. Is anti-Zionism within the Black community a new position? Does it reflect anti-Semitism as critics contend? Is it only a response to Israel’s actions?

*March 4 (Thur): Guest lecture: Sylvester Johnson (Virginia Tech University): “Limpieza de Sangre and the ‘Clash of Civilizations’; Or, What Hath the Soul to Do with Racialized Bodies?”*

*Extra-credit Option (3 points):* We will not have a chance to study the interaction between Jews and Native Americans, but that has become the focus of recent, fascinating research. For some extra credit points, read David Koffman, *The Jews’ Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism and Belonging in America*, available electronically via Penn libraries, and address in 2-4 pages an aspect of the book’s analysis that you find particularly interesting.

***March 9. Midsemester reflections and discussion***

***March 11, no session because of spring break***

### **Unit III. Intersectional Approaches to Jewish Identity**

In this section we will move beyond the black-white polarity imposed by American culture to focus on the racial diversity within the contemporary Jewish community, exploring questions that bear on intersectionality, intermarriage, and inter-racial or hybrid modes of identity.

March 16 (Tuesday): *Intersectionality and Jewish identity*

Reading: Kimberly Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,”

<https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>;

Melanie Kaye, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Politics*, 1-32, available through Penn libraries

David Schraub, “White Jews: An Intersectional Approach,” *AJS Review* 43 (2019): 379-407, both available electronically through Penn libraries.

Questions: What can the concept of “intersectionality,” introduced by legal scholar Kimberly Crenshaw in the 1980s, help us to understand about contemporary Jewish identity today?

*March 18 (Thurs): guest lecture Laura Limonic (College of Old Westbury, State University of New York): “Race, Class and Privilege: How Latino Jews Navigate Life in the United States”*

March 23 (Tues). **Black and Jewish**

Reading: Bruce Haynes, *The Soul of Judaism*, 86-166; available electronically via Penn libraries.

Question: What does the tacit identification of Jews with Whites in the U.S leave out of the picture of contemporary American Jewish life? What has made it difficult for Black Jews to be recognized as part of the American Jewish community?

*Recommended:* A debate has erupted among recent sociologists of American Jewish life about how to count the number of Jews of color within the American Jewish community. If you read the following, try to understand what makes it hard to resolve this question and what is at stake?

Ari Kelman, et al, “*Counting Inconsistencies: An Analysis of American Jewish Studies with a Focus on Jews of Color*: <https://jewsofcolorfieldbuilding.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Counting-Inconsistencies-052119.pdf>

Arnold Sheskin and Ira Dashefsky, “How many Jews of Color are There,”

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/how-many-jews-of-color-are-there/>; Ari Kelman, “Counting Jews of Color: Are We Asking the Right Questions? *Jewish News of Northern California*:

<https://www.jweekly.com/2020/05/21/counting-jews-of-color-are-we-asking-the-right-questions/>

March 25 (Thurs): Guest lecture: Professor Judith Weisenfeld (Princeton University): “We are the Ethiopian Hebrews: Race, Religion, and Jewish Identity in Harlem.”

### **March 27-April 4, No class because of Passover**

#### **April 6 The Politics of Marriage: Race and Religion within the Family**

Reading: Shaye Cohen, “From the Bible to the Talmud: The Prohibition of Inter-marriage,” 23-36 (to be distributed); Ira Sheskin and Harriet Hartman, “The Facts about Inter-marriage,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 8 (2015): 149-178; Keren McGinity, *Still Jewish, A History of Women and Inter-marriage in America*, 171-195: all available electronically via Penn Libraries; Michal Knopf, “Renewing Our Vows: a New Approach to Inter-marriage,” *e-Jewish Philanthropy* (Jan 1, 2019): <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/renewing-our-vows-a-new-approach-to-intermarriage/>;

Questions: A ban against marriages between Jews and non-Jews has deep roots in Jewish tradition, but in American society such marriages have become much more common. How has this change impacted conceptions of Jewish identity and the Jewish future. What role, if any, does race and gender play as a part of the American Jewish debate over inter-marriage?

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#### **April 8. Jews, Race and Inter-marriage**

Guest Lecture: Helen Kim and Noah Leavitt, “Funny—You Don’t Look Jewish: Intersections of Race, Religion and Jewish Identity in the contemporary mix-raced American Family”

### **Unit III Jews and Anti-Racism**

In this final section, we turn to the present and future as we consider efforts to combat racism within the Jewish community, and the role of Jews as part of the larger struggle against racism.

#### **April 13 (Tues) Race, Racism and Anti-Racism in Israeli Jewish Society**

Reading: Uri Ben Eliezer, “Becoming a Black Jew: Cultural Racism and Anti-Racism in Contemporary Israel,” *Social Identities* 10 (2004): 245-266

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1350463042000227371>

Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims,” *Social Texts* 19/20 (1988): 1-35, available through Penn Libraries

Questions: In what ways are race and racism operative in Jewish life within Israel? How have those affected by such a discrimination responded?

Recommended: This unit is focused on the role of race within Israeli Jewish Society, but of course, there is also the relationship between Jews and Palestinians where each group has leveled



charges of racism against the other. For one brief attempt to describe and address the situation for Jews and Arabs within Israel, see Ephraim Lavie, Meir Elran, and Muhammed Abu Nasra, "Hatred and Racism between Jews and the Arab Palestinian Minority within Israel"

<https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/20506238469.pdf>

April 15 (Thurs) *Guest lecture Claris Harboun (University of Morocco):*

"From Minneapolis to the Streets of Jerusalem: Race, Belonging, Dislocation and Identity for Mizrahi Jews"

April 20 (Tuesday). **Jews, Race and Gender**

Joyce Antler, "Women's Liberation and Jewish Feminism after 1968," *American Jewish History* 102 (2018); Marla Brettschneider, "Critical Attention to Race: Race Segregation and Jewish Feminism," *Bridges* 15 (2010): 20-33, available electronically via Penn Libraries.

\*April 22 (Thurs): Guest Lecture Shana Sippy (Centre College): "Purity, Politics and the Problem of Jewish Solidarity"

April 27 **Conclusion: Jews and the Struggle Against Racism**

We will use this final session to draw some larger implications, including addressing the following question: is the struggle against racism and the struggle against anti-Semitism the same struggle? How are they the same and how they are different?

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