

## Contemporary Jewish Culture

American Studies: 050:337:01 / Jewish Studies: 563:346:01

### PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS

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#### Course description

This course is an introduction to the ethnography—that is, the close study of a cultural group through observation, participation, and analytic reflection—of contemporary Jewish life, especially in America, in local communities, institutions, rituals, personal histories, etc., through the approaches of writing, film, and field work. In addition to analyzing readings by anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, and other scholars, screening documentary films, and discussing research methodology, students will undertake two short fieldwork projects.

#### Learning goals

- Students will understand the nature of ethnographic approaches to studying contemporary culture, using Jewish communities as a case study.
- Students will consider the special implications of using ethnographic methods to study “one’s own” culture, using Jews as a case study.
- Students will learn about the internal diversity of contemporary Jewish life geographically and ideologically, as manifest in a variety of cultural practices.

#### Requirements

**1. Regular attendance and preparation for active participation in class sessions** (20% of grade). Regular attendance of class and active participation in class discussion is required, including individual preparation to lead discussion of readings or other assignments. Students are expected to come to class on time, having prepared the reading or other assignment due that day, with comments, questions, etc., regarding the assigned material; to respect the protocols of classroom conduct (e.g., turning off cell phones, not eating during class, avoiding distracting chatter); to check their Rutgers email regularly for class announcements (e.g., changes in assignments); and to turn in written work on the dates due. Students may not use their laptops during class without permission from the instructor. Students with three unexcused absences will have their course grade reduced by one full grade (e.g., from A to B). Students with six or more unexcused absences will receive an F for the course. Students should be prepared to provide the instructor with documentation of excusable absences, such as family emergencies, illness, religious observance; these must be submitted by the due date for the final exam. Students who are unable to attend class regularly for some pressing reason must notify their dean as well as the instructor.

**2. Purim ethnography** (20% of grade): a 1,000-1,200-word (ca. 4-5 double spaced pages) ethnographic report on some aspect of the celebration of the holiday of Purim, which takes place some time in February or March. Ethnography guidelines will be distributed at least one week before Purim.

**3. Tourism ethnography** (20% of grade): a 1,000-1,200-word (ca. 4-5 double spaced pages) ethnographic report on a walking tour of the Jewish Lower East Side, which will take place in March or April. Ethnography guidelines will be distributed at least one week before walking tour.

**4. Midterm** (15% of grade) **and final examination** (25% of grade): essay exams (ca. 3-4 pages of writing each) based on course readings, film screenings, and class discussions.

All written work that a student submits must be his/her own independent effort. Students must cite properly all outside sources (readings, media works, websites, etc.) consulted in preparing written assignments. Students should review the university policy on Academic Integrity. Failure to comply with this policy can result in failure of the course or more severe penalties.

### **Class schedule**

**NOTE:** Class schedule is subject to change. Announcements of any changes will be made in class as well as by email; students should check their Rutgers email accounts regularly for these announcements. If students miss a class, they should be sure to check with the instructor about possible changes in assignments.

#### **Key to readings:**

**[\$]** = in RU bookstore  **[#]** = online at Sakai.rutgers.edu **[R]** = on reserve in Alexander

#### **Books to buy:**

- Harvey Goldberg, ed., The Life of Judaism (University of California Press, 2001), ISBN: 9780520227538
- Jerome Mintz, Hasidic People: A Place in the New World (Harvard University Press, 1998), ISBN: 9780674381162
- Barbara Myerhoff, Number Our Days (Touchstone, 1978), ISBN 9780671254308

### **Session 1. Introduction to Jewish ethnography**

#### **Sessions 2-5. The work of Barbara Myerhoff**

Barbara Myerhoff, Number Our Days (Touchstone, 1978) [\$] [R]

Barbara Myerhoff, "Surviving Stories: Reflections on Number Our Days," in Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds [#]

Screening of films Number Our Days and In Her Own Time.

#### **Sessions 6-8. Synagogues**

Goldberg, The Life of Judaism [\$]; Chapters 4,5,6

#### **Sessions 9-12. Rituals**

Goldberg, The Life of Judaism [\$]; Chapters 2,8,9

Ruth Cernea, "Flaming Prayers: Hillula in a New Home," in Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds. [#]

Screening of the films Mayor of the West Side and The Last Marranos

### **Session 13. Purim\***

"Between Two Worlds: Notes on the Celebration of Purim among New York Jews, Marck 1985," in Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds. [#]

Discussion of Purim ethnographies. Ethnographies due the following week.

### **Sessions 15-16. Language**

Sarah Bunin Benor, "Do American Jews Speak a 'Jewish Language'? A Model of Jewish Linguistic Distinctiveness." Jewish Quarterly Review 99, no.2 (Spring 2009): 230-269. [#]

Deborah Tannen, "New York Jewish Conversational Style," International Journal of the Sociology of Language 30 (1981): 133-149. [#]

### **Session 16. Midterm examination**

### **SPRING BREAK**

### **Sessions 17-19. Hasidim**

Jerome R. Mintz, Hasidic People: A Place in the New World (Harvard University Press, 1992); chapters TBA. [\$] [R]

Janet Belcove-Shalin, "Becoming More of an Eskimo: Fieldwork among the Hasidim of Boro Park," in Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds. [#]

Screening of films A Life Apart and Divan

### **Sessions 20-22: Tourism\***

Jack Kugelmass, "Turving the Slum: New York City's Tenement Museum and the Politics of Heritage," in Hasia Diner, et al., eds., Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections (Indiana University Press, 2000), 179-211. [#] [R]

Seth Kamil, "Tripping Down Memory Lane: Walking Tours on the Jewish Lower East Side," in Diner, et al., Remembering the Lower East Side, 226-240. [#] [R]

Discussion of ethnographies of Lower East Side walking tour. Ethnographies due the following week.

### **Sessions 23-26. Sites**

Goldberg, The Life of Judaism [\$], pp. 156-171 (Jackie Feldman)

Joelle Bahloul, "Remembering the Domestic Space: A Symbolic Return of Sephardic Jews," YIVO Annual 21 (1993): 133-150. [#]

David Mayer Gradwohl and Hanna Rosenberg Gradwohl, "That Is the Pillar of Rachel's Grave Unto This Day: an Ethnoarcheological Comparison of Two Jewish Cemeteries in Lincoln, Nebraska," in Persistence and Flexibility: Anthropological Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience, ed. Walter P. Zenner (SUNY Press, 1988), 223-259. [#]

Screening of film Return to Oulad Moumen

## Sessions 27-28: Foodways

"The Diet of Lithuanian Jews," in Hirsz Abramowicz, Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II (Wayne State University Press, 1999), 99-108. [#]

Eve Jochowitz, "'Send a Salami to Your Boy in the Army': Sites of Jewish Memory and Identity at Lower East Side Restaurants," in Hasia Diner, et al., Remembering the Lower East Side, 212-225. [#] [R]

Sharon Sherman, "The Passover Seder: Ritual Dynamics, Foodways, and Family Folklore," in We Gather Together: Food and Festival In American Life, Theodore C. Humphrey and Lin T. Humphrey eds. (Utah State University Press, 1991), 27-42. [#]

Screening of films Gefilte Fish, Makolet

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**\*NOTE: Scheduling of these sessions is determined by the dates when the holiday of Purim and the Lower East Side walking tour take place.**