

JEWISH STUDIES

Overview and Contact Information

The curriculum in Jewish studies provides course offerings in a range of fields and disciplines, including English, German, history, international relations, politics, and religion. Courses represent a variety of methodological approaches and are intended to introduce students to the broad and rich diversity of Jewish culture and experience.

See Also

- Religion (<http://catalog.mtholyoke.edu/areas-study/religion/>)

Contact Information

Lisa Sullivan, Chair

Natalina Tulik, Academic Department Coordinator

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<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/academics/find-your-program/jewish-studies> (<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/academics/find-your-program/jewish-studies/>)

Learning Goals

Jewish Studies is an interdisciplinary field that critically examines the global diversity and historical varieties of Jewish experience. A minor in Jewish Studies is an organic component of a liberal arts education and provides a lens through which to understand the human experience. Students who minor in Jewish studies at Mount Holyoke College are expected to:

1. Critically examine the varieties of Jewish cultural, religious, and literary expression from ancient Israel to contemporary times.
2. Incorporate subject matter and modes of inquiry from across the college, including religious studies, literature, history, anthropology, and politics, in order to understand the global Jewish diaspora and its contact with other civilizations.
3. Study one of the languages in which Jews have expressed themselves throughout the centuries, especially Hebrew and/or Yiddish.

Faculty

This area of study is administered by the Jewish Studies Committee:

Mara Benjamin, Irene Kaplan Leiwant Professor of Jewish Studies, On Leave 2024-2025

Sohail Hashmi, Professor of International Relations on the Alumnae Foundation and Professor of Politics

Jeremy King, Professor of History, On Leave 2024-2025

Madeleine Cohen, Visiting Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies

Requirements for the Minor

A minimum of 16 credits:

Code	Title	Credits
12 credits in Jewish Studies at the 200 or 300 level		12
At least 4 credits in Jewish Studies at the 300 level		4
Total Credits		16

Additional Specifications

- Those choosing a minor in Jewish studies should consult as early as possible with the program chair in order to devise a course of study in consultation with the chair and other members of the program.
- Students should consider taking Hebrew language as part of the Jewish studies minor and, in addition to the approved Jewish Studies courses at Mount Holyoke, are encouraged to consider Jewish studies offerings at the other Five Colleges.
- Elementary Hebrew is offered regularly at Smith College. The course will be conducted in person at Smith and through a simultaneous video connection for students at Mount Holyoke. Mount Holyoke students can register for this Smith class (JUD-101) through regular Five College interchange procedures, and then will have the option to participate in the class directly from Mount Holyoke via simulcast without regularly having to travel to Smith for class meetings.
- Other courses in Jewish studies are offered regularly on campus. Consult with the program chair for a list of current courses in other departments that may be taken for credit toward a Jewish Studies minor. Students are encouraged to take advantage of the Jewish studies course offerings at Smith College (<https://www.smith.edu/academics/jewish-studies/>), the University of Massachusetts (<http://www.umass.edu/jne/courses-judaic-studies/>), Hampshire College (<https://www.hampshire.edu/jewish-studies/jewish-studies-at-hampshire/>), and Amherst College (<https://www.amherst.edu/>).

Related Courses in Other Departments

For a list of current courses that may be taken for credit toward a Jewish studies minor, consult with the chair of the program.

Course Offerings

JWST-112 Introduction to Judaism

Fall. Credits: 4

Judaism is a 3,500-year-old tradition that has developed over time as Jewish communities all over the world creatively interacted with the different cultural and historical milieus in which they lived. This course explores the ways in which Judaism has sought to transform ordinary life into sacred life. What are the ways in which Judaism conceives of God, and what is the meaning of life? What roles do study, prayer, ethics, sex, marriage, family, rituals of the life cycle, and community play in Judaism? These and other questions will be taken up through study of diverse types of religious literature and historical evidence.

Crosslisted as: RELIG-112

Applies to requirement(s): Humanities; Multicultural Perspectives

M. Benjamin

JWST-203 Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*Spring. Credits: 4*

This course examines the many different kinds of texts within the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) including stories, legal codes, prophecies, proverbs, and poetry. We'll situate these texts in the context of the historical periods in which they were written and uncover the religious and political worldviews they articulate. Students trace the processes through which this diverse collection of ancient literature was gradually gathered together into something called a "Bible" and will reflect on how and why these texts have come to be interpreted in so many different ways over the course of the last two millennia.

*Crosslisted as: RELIG-203**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities; Multicultural Perspectives**E. Branton***JWST-213 The Gender of Yiddish***Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4*

Yiddish and questions of gender have a long history. The language was called "mame-loshn" (mother tongue); it was associated with home and family. Jewish women were the primary intended readers of Yiddish, beginning with religious literature for those who could not read Hebrew and developing into a modern, secular, often moralizing literature. Despite the strong connections between Yiddish and women, women writers have been marginalized and underestimated. This course will explore the gendered history of Yiddish, including through the lens of queer theory. We will also read English translations of literature by modern Yiddish women writers who are being rediscovered today through new translations and scholarly attention.

*Crosslisted as: GRMST-213, GNDST-210YD**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities**M. Cohen**Notes: Taught in English.***JWST-218 Yiddish Nation: Language as Homeland***Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4*

For roughly 1000 years Ashkenazi Jewish culture has existed in exile. Since these stateless people were living in diaspora, without a sovereign territory, the Yiddish language itself became a symbolic homeland. This course will explore how some Yiddish-speaking Jews embraced their stateless existence not as a historic tragedy but as a revolutionary form of identity called diaspora nationalism. We will explore Yiddish cultural identity through literature, music, film, and politics. We will read works of history and cultural theory and seek points of intersection with other migrant, refugee, stateless, and diasporic cultures.

*Applies to requirement(s): Humanities**M. Cohen**Notes: All readings will be in English, prior knowledge of Yiddish is not required.***JWST-219 Translation Theory and Practice in Jewish Literature***Fall. Credits: 4*

This course examines translation as a mode of cultural transmission, creativity, and theoretical inquiry for Jewish literature and thought. Topics include: translation as a means of mediating access to the sacred; women's roles as readers and creators of translations; enduring debates about what may be "lost" in translation; and whether translation into "Global English" helps or hurts the survival of literatures in Yiddish, Ladino, and other minoritized languages. Students put theory into practice by reading translations of Jewish literature critically and comparatively and by producing their own translations.

*Crosslisted as: GRMST-231TR, ENGL-217TJ**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities**M. Cohen**Advisory: Knowledge of any language other than English is helpful but not required.***JWST-225 Topics in Judaism****JWST-225EC Topics in Judaism: 'Ecology, Crisis, and Renewal in Ancient Near Eastern Mythology'***Fall. Credits: 4*

Environmental crises like global warming, deforestation, and pollution are pushing ecosystems to the brink of collapse and endangering populations around the globe. Our present, though challenging to an unprecedented degree, is not the first time humans have faced crises related to climate, depletion of natural resources, and mass migration. In this course, we'll delve into the culture and mythologies of ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Levantine societies to see how they understood their relationships with their indigenous ecosystems, how they interpreted natural disasters and anthropogenic environmental destruction, and how they imagined starting over again after the end of the world.

*Crosslisted as: RELIG-225EC, CLAS-230EC**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities; Multicultural Perspectives**E. Branton***JWST-225HH Topics in Judaism: 'The Habsburgs, Hitler, and the Law'***Fall. Credits: 4*

This course explores the complex, often comic, and ultimately tragic history of Bohemia, a territory located today in the Czech Republic, but previously a part of the Habsburg Monarchy, then of Czechoslovakia, and then of Hitler's Third Reich. Students will complement historical studies with autobiographical material and contemporary fiction, beginning with the Revolution of 1848, progressing through the achievements and worrisome trends of Emperor Francis Joseph's 68-year reign, and concluding with the world wars. Emphasis on the interplay among Czechs, Germans, Jews, and other pivotal players: the House of Habsburg and its supporters, and the political elites of neighboring countries.

*Crosslisted as: HIST-260HH, GRMST-231HH**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities**J. King*

JWST-225PV Topics in Judaism: 'The Prophetic Voice from the Bible to the Present'*Fall. Credits: 4*

Is speech primarily a vehicle for ideas or is it an action that shapes societies and catalyzes power relations? In this course, we'll examine kinds of speech that have always pushed the boundaries. Students explore depictions of prophets and prophetic speech in the Hebrew Bible and in early Jewish literature, and will analyze how this ancient mode of harnessing the power of words has been given new life in modern American society, from the Civil Rights movement to viral video content. In doing so, we'll explore different ways of thinking about speech, protest, and the power of words to change the world.

*Crosslisted as: RELIG-225PV, CLAS-230PV**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities; Multicultural Perspectives
E. Branton***JWST-225ST Topics in Judaism: 'Stalinism in Central Europe'***Fall. Credits: 4*

This course explores the use of revolutionary terror by the state. More specifically, it examines policies of terror pursued by Communist dictatorships in Hungary and Czechoslovakia during the early years of the Cold War. Who did what to whom, and why? What insights do secret police work and public propaganda, knitted together in macabre show trials, allow us into Stalinist rule, European politics, and maybe ourselves? How did memories of terror shape politics after Stalin's death? Students should deepen their understanding for the discipline of History, improve their reading and writing, and develop a working knowledge of Central European politics at the middle of the twentieth century.

*Crosslisted as: HIST-262**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities
J. King***JWST-234 Women and Gender in Judaism***Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4*

This course examines gender as a key category in Jewish religious thought and practice. Students examine different theories of gender and intersectional feminisms, concepts of gender in a range of Jewish sources, and feminist Jewish responses to those sources. Students work with the Judaica collection at the MHC Art Museum and consider material culture as a source for women's and gender studies. Topics may include: how Jewish practice and law regulate sexuality and desire; feminist, queer and trans methods of engaging patriarchal texts; methods of studying women and gender in Jewish cultures; racialization.

*Crosslisted as: RELIG-234, GNDST-210JD**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities; Multicultural Perspectives
M. Benjamin***JWST-240 The Holocaust in History***Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4*

An attempt at understanding the Nazi-led assault on Europe's Jews. Course units include an exploration of origins, both German and European; an analysis of the evolving mechanics of genocide (mobile killing squads, death camps, etc.); comparisons (Germany proper vs. Poland, the Holocaust vs. other instances of state-sponsored mass murder); legal dimensions; and an introduction to the politics of Holocaust remembrance since 1945.

*Crosslisted as: HIST-240**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities
J. King***JWST-257 OMG: God and Her Critics, from the Bible to Ecological Crisis***Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4*

For a being often said to be immutable, God has been imagined in myriad, often contradictory, ways over the centuries – even within a single religious tradition. Using Jewish studies as a springboard, this course examines the idea of God through the writings of philosophers and poets, mystics and rationalists from ancient to contemporary times. Topics include: body/spirit dualism and feminist and ecological critique thereof; cross-cultural encounter, diaspora and cultural mixing as generative forces; superstition and other kinds of heterodoxy; and ritual performance.

*Crosslisted as: RELIG-257**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities
M. Benjamin**Notes: Students who wish to take this course as a 300-level class in Jewish Studies may do so with permission of with the instructor.***JWST-269 Citizens and Subjects: Jews in the Modern World***Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4*

This course examines key themes in Jewish intellectual, religious, and political life from the late 17th century to the present. We examine: the effect of civil emancipation and the Enlightenment on Jewish philosophy and theology; Jews as both architects of modern thought and the paradigmatic Other in European liberal nation-states; the transformation of traditional Jewish religious rituals and belief systems in response to dramatic social and political life; new patterns of gender and family organization; the effect of antisemitism, Zionism, and imperialism on Jewish politics; and contemporary Jewish intellectual innovation, including feminist and queer thought.

*Crosslisted as: RELIG-269**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities
M. Benjamin***JWST-295 Independent Study***Fall and Spring. Credits: 1 - 4**The department
Instructor permission required.***JWST-343 The Sabbath***Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4*

The practice of a weekly sacred day of rest has organized Jewish life for millennia. In this seminar, students will examine the Sabbath using narrative, folk, and legal primary sources from the biblical, Second Temple, rabbinic, medieval, and modern periods. Key themes include sacred time, cultural identity, and the transformation of religious practice. Experiential learning, and critical thinking about your experiential learning, are integral to this seminar.

*Crosslisted as: RELIG-343**Applies to requirement(s): Humanities
M. Benjamin**Restrictions: This course is open to juniors and seniors*

JWST-350 Special Topics in Jewish Studies

JWST-350HB Special Topics in Jewish Studies: 'The Human Body in Jewish Thought'

Spring. Credits: 4

How have ancient and modern Jewish thinkers imagined the body, its purposes, and the diversity of embodied forms and experiences? In this course, students explore these themes through a range of textual case studies related to creation, ability and disability, appearance, gender and sexuality, aging, death, birth, and love. Through texts drawn from the full range of Jewish religious literature, we will also get to know some of the major Jewish textual corpora and the cultural contexts in which they developed. Throughout the course, we explore critiques of, engagements with, and renewals of these discourses from the perspective of contemporary feminist, Queer, and Disabled scholars.

Crosslisted as: RELIG-331HB

Applies to requirement(s): Humanities; Multicultural Perspectives

E. Branton

Restrictions: Course limited to sophomores, juniors and seniors

Prereq: 8 credits in humanities.

JWST-350MA Special Topics in Jewish Studies: 'Mayhem Under Nazi Rule: Who Whom, Why and How?'

Not Scheduled for This Year. Credits: 4

Nazi tyranny inspired heroic opposition across Europe, but also attracted many collaborators. Some resisters engaged in mass murder of their own. Many Germans embraced the fascist regime, but far from all. Working often against stereotypes and myths, historians have occasionally dug up deeply controversial truths and complexities about the Second World War. Ranging from France to Ukraine and from the 1930s to the present, this course probes both a mayhem-filled past and postwar national reckonings with it. Each student will help to frame one of the weekly discussions with a short essay, and will complete a substantial research essay by the end of the semester.

Crosslisted as: HIST-327

Applies to requirement(s): Humanities

J. King

Instructor permission required.

Prereq: 8 credits in History, written application, and permission of instructor.

Notes: Application required. See "Forms and Applications" on the History department website (<http://tinyurl.com/historydeptpage/>).

JWST-395 Independent Study

Fall and Spring. Credits: 1 - 8

The department

Instructor permission required.