

On Constructing a Jewish Liberation Theology and Theological Praxis:  
Indigeneity, (Anti)-Zionism and Diaspora

HRFT-

3 units

Starr King School for the Ministry - Graduate Theological Union

Tuesdays 6:10-9:00 p.m. High-Residency

Fall 2018

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 4:00 p.m.-6:00 p.m. or by appointment

Course description

In this course, through the use of scholarly writing, news articles, opinion and blog pieces, multimedia, Jewish liturgy, Torah (Hebrew Bible), Talmud (Rabbinical exegesis), and Midrash (rabbinical commentary and interpretation) we will collectively strive to answer the question: In an era of relative Jewish nationalist power and self-determination, what is a Jewish liberation theology and theological praxis that engenders liberation of both self and other? And what does it even mean to pursue a liberation theology or theological praxis, both squarely Christian constructs, within a Jewish context? In order to answer this question, we must start at the beginning and trace the roots of Jewish theological, halakhic (legal) and communal formation and galut (exile or diaspora) in order to develop our own understanding of the Jewish divine and Jewish ritual and ethical practices that breed liberatory possibility for not just the Chosen people. This will include discussions of Jewish relationships to indigeneity, land, Zionism, ethnicity, race, diaspora, culture, secularism, intellectual inquiry and liturgical and ethical practice.

This course relates to the SKSM thresholds 2- Prophetic Witness and Work, 4- History of Dissenting Traditions and 4- Thea/ological Quest and Thea/ology in Culture and Context and MFC Comps.

There will be a community fellowship available for this course for non-degree seeking community members to take this course at a discounted rate.

Teaching Philosophy

I believe that religious and theological learning comes through experience, practice and engagement. Therefore, each class will not only be grounded in lecture and discussions of the

reading materials for the day, but also in Jewish ritual practice. Judaism as religion, faith or theological belief system is a construct, and one that was projected onto Judaism under Christian hegemony. Therefore in this course we are going to reclaim, practice and engage in traditional Jewish pathways of learning and engagement as a revolutionary act of challenging Christian hegemony within academia that prescribe that we learn through top-down, vertical teaching styles in which one person holds the knowledge and bestows it upon empty vessels. Rather, we will learn through traditional Jewish horizontal studyways, including but not limited to *beit midrash*-style horizontal text study, *chevruta* (partner) text study, Jewish liturgy and collective prayer practice, *halakha* (Jewish Law/ethical system) and praxis-based Judaism, sensory engagement and the marking of festivals. Each student will be assigned a *chevruta* (study partner) who they will work with throughout the course.

Each week, we will begin class with one prayer or ritual practice associated with both the time of year according to the Hebrew calendar and/or the course content for that day, situating our learning squarely within that which has engendered Jewish continuity over time--liturgy and practice. This course will also take place during the High Holidays season and throughout the course we will have the opportunity to mark the holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah and Hanukkah. These holidays will be woven into the fabric and construction of the course itself, and students will be asked to engage with these holidays both inside and outside of the classroom.

My teaching philosophy is also grounded in the Praxis model of Liberation theology, as articulated by Gustavo Gutierrez, who argues that it is praxis (practice or action) rather than doctrine that liberation theologians should be concerned with, which I argue was always already the traditional model of Jewish religiosity. Therefore, the course focuses less on metaphysics and constructing concrete understandings of the nature of divinity that are liberatory than it does on just and liberatory action within a Jewish framework.

### Learning Objectives

Through this course, students will:

- Engage with Judaism as it is and as it could be through specifically Jewish modes of learning and inquiry.
- Question base assumptions and founding myths of Judaism through critical intellectual engagement and practice.
- Mark the Jewish Holidays as ways of learning and unlearning Jewish tradition and the Jewish prophetic.
- Grapple with the ways in which Liberation Theology and Theological Praxis are Christian constructs and collectively consider Jewish alternatives.

- Deconstruct and reconstruct Jewish praxes of liberation for all.

### Learning Outcomes:

- Students will gain proficiency in how to read and dissect Jewish sacred texts, including Torah, Talmud and Midrash through horizontal Jewish modes of inquiry and exegesis.
- Students will be able to map a rough outline of Jewish history/ies through the lens of the relationship between Judaism and liberation.
- Students will understand the import of Jewish models of cyclical time and the holiday cycle as well as participate in and engage critically with the holidays as portals into Jewish sacred time, space and inquiry.
- Students will engage in Jewish modes of prayer and better be able to navigate Jewish liturgical contexts.
- The class will construct a framework of Jewish Liberation Theology, Theological praxis or an equivalent model using Jewish terminology and frameworks through a collective exploratory process.

### Learning Styles and Special Needs

With understanding of the ways that everyone learns differently, learning in this course will come through a variety of different modalities, including reading, multimedia, lecture, class discussion, prayer, experiential field-based learning and embodied exercises. Students with any special needs should contact the instructor, preferably before the first day of the course, to make the instructor aware of these special needs and the instructor will make the appropriate accommodations.

### Assignments

1. **Weekly Assignments:** There will be readings and multimedia engagement assigned each class, including but not limited to scholarly writing, news articles, opinion and blog pieces, videos, Jewish liturgy, Torah (Hebrew Bible), Talmud (Rabbinical exegesis), and Midrash (rabbinical commentary and interpretation). Students are expected to have read and/or engaged with the content and come to class prepared for class discussion.
2. **Holidays:** Students are expected to attend and engage with three of the six Jewish Holidays that take place throughout the timeline of the semester (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret, Simchat Torah and Hannukah) outside of class, either in their traditional context and format (which is different for each holiday) or in alternative setting that push the boundaries around what marking this holiday means, and write an

approximately 500-word reflection on each of these experiences. This reflection should be posted to Moodle for their classmates to read and engage with.

3. **Shabbat:** Students are expected to attend one Kabbalat Shabbat And Ma'ariv (Friday evening) service over the course of the semester and write a 500-word reflection, in any format, and post it to Moodle for their classmates to read and engage with.
4. **Interview:** Students are required to interview one person in their life who identifies as Jewish about their Jewish identity and their relationship to the topics we are discussing in class, including but not limited to indigeneity, diaspora or *galut*, Zionism, ethnicity, religious practice (or lack thereof), theology and family/ancestral history. Things to consider when choosing who to interview include: age, ethnicity, race, family history, country/land of origin, gender, sexual orientation, pathway to Judaism (ancestral or conversion), denomination, religiosity, etc. Post your key takeaways from the interview to Moodle, in any format, for your classmates to read/view and engage with.
5. **Chevruta study:** Each chevruta pair will be assigned one Jewish denomination to research and will be asked to present on this denomination's theology and ritual practice back to the class, including one ritual that is specific/special to this denomination during the "prayer" section of class in Week 10. Denominations we will study will include: Hasidism, Modern Orthodoxy, the Reform Movement, the Conservative Movement, Jewish Renewal and the Reconstructionist Movement.
6. **Final Project:** At the end of the course, students will be asked to present on their interpretation of the phrase "Jewish Liberation Theology" that they have come to through engaging with the course material, and are asked to do so with an eye toward praxis. This could take the form of a research paper, statement of belief, poem, spoken word, dance, song, public or private, ritual, nonviolent direct action, and much more. This project could be individual or collective. Please consult with the Professor about your idea before beginning this process.

### Grading/Evaluation

This 3-credit, graduate level course will be assessed on a credit/no-credit basis, in keeping with Starr King School for the Ministry's educational philosophy of educating to counter oppressions and build just and sustainable communities. Therefore, the most essential element to receiving credit is engagement with the course content and engagement with the learning community. Students are expected to attend all classes unless they have notified the instructor ahead of time with good reason. Students are expected to complete all five Moodle Postings and both present and turn in their own work on Jewish Liberation Theology and Theological Praxis at the end of the semester.

### Required Course Materials:

Course materials for each week will be uploaded to Moodle prior to the start of the semester. There are no required texts for purchase at this time.

### Course Schedule (subject to change):

#### Week 1 (Sept. 4): What is Judaism? What is liberation theology? Can the two even go together?

*What is Judaism?*

- When did Judaism start?
- Where did Judaism start?
- What is Judaism's founding myth?
- Who are the Jews?

*What is Liberation Theology?*

- When was liberation theology first articulated?
- Where was liberation theology first articulated?
- In what political, cultural and religious context did liberation theology arise? Where has it spread?
- Who are liberation theologians?
- What is Jewish Liberation Theology?

*Class Ritual: Shema, Elul and Selichot*

#### Week 2 (Sept. 11): Are Jews an indigenous people/s, and if so, to where?

- What does it mean to be indigenous?
- What are different models of indigenous origin stories globally?
- What are some Jewish myths around indigeneity and are they true?
  - indigenous to Eretz Yisrael
  - indigenous to Haran
  - indigenous to Eastern Europe/Southern Europe/Persia/North Africa/etc.
  - Ethiopia/Beta Israel
- What was/is the Zionist movement's role in the creation of a mythos of Jewish indigeneity?

*Class Ritual: The High Holidays (chag ends as the sun sets at 7:23 p.m. We will perform ritual to mark the end of chag, but if it is your practice, please feel free to not arrive until 7:30 p.m.)*

**There is no class on Tuesday, September 18 due to Erev Yom Kippur**

#### Week 3 (Sept. 25): Exile/Galut/Diaspora

- Why, how and when did Jews spread over the globe? Where did they end up?
- Where were Jews able to survive, thrive and create continuity, and where were they oppressed and marginalized?

- Did Judaism appear uniform or act in uniformity across diaspora?
- What were the distinct historical, cultural, theological and ritualistic experiences of Jews living in Southern Europe, the Near East, North Africa, and Ethiopia?

*Class Ritual: Sukkot*

Week 4 (Oct. 2): The Jews of Europe, Antisemitism and Holocaust theology

- How did some Jews get to Europe and what are the specific cultural and religious practices that they built for themselves in this context?
- What role did language, particularly Yiddish, play, in construction of Ashkenazi identity?
- What phenomena does the word antisemitism describe and out of what context does it emerge?
- How did (Ashkenazi) Jews grapple with divinity and religiosity in the wake of the Holocaust?
- How does Ashkenazi-normativity erase the existence of Jews from different parts of the world?

*Class Ritual: Simchat Torah/Bereishit (chag ends as the sun sets at 6:50 p.m. If it is your practice, feel free not to arrive until this time)*

Week 5 (Oct. 9): The Zionist Movement pre-state

- When, where and why did the Jewish liberatory movement of Zionism emerge?
- Who was Theodor Herzl and what role did he play in the creation of political Zionism?
- When were the immigration waves/aliyot, and who was immigrating?
- What were the different forms of and justifications for Zionism?
  - socialist Zionism
  - secular nationalist Zionism
  - religious Zionism
- Were all Jews included in Zionism?
- What was and is the role of Christian Zionism? Predates Jewish Zionism by 300 years
- Did all Jews desire to participate in Zionism? Why or why not?
  - Orthodox anti-Zionism
  - the Bund

*Class Ritual: Jewish secular anti-ritual, Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan*

Week 6 (Oct. 16): The establishment of a Jewish nation-state, Nakba (catastrophe) and Naksa (occupation and siege)

- When was the Jewish nation-state founded and under what conditions?
- What was the Jewish relationship with Christian and Muslim peoples and nations in the decades leading up to the establishment of the state of Israel, during the establishment of the state, and after the establishment of the state?
- What is the *Nakba*? What is *naksa*?
- What did Israel look like between 1948-1967?
- What happened in 1967? What is the occupation?

-What were the intifadas and why did they take place?

-What is BDS and why is it called for?

*Class Ritual: salaat*

### **Reading Week (Oct. 23)**

#### Week 7 (Oct. 30): The Experience of Sephardi, “Mizrahi”, and Ethiopian Jews under Zionism

-Where/from whom did the terms Sephardi and Mizrahi come?

-How were Jews from Southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa socially and politically situated within the general context in which they lived?

-What role did language, such as Ladino, Judaeo-Persian and Judaeo-Arabic, play, in construction of Sephardi and Mizrahi identity?

-How are Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews currently situated and treated, both in diaspora and in Israel?

-When did the Zionist movement exclude Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, and when did it include them?

*Class Ritual: Shir HaShirim*

#### Week 8 (Nov. 6): American Jewry, Ashkenazi Assimilation into Whiteness and Racism in the American Jewish Community

-How and why did different Jews from different parts of the world end up in the United States?

-How are the immigration stories of Ashkenazi Jews different than those of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews?

-What role does Ellis Island play in the American Jewish imagination?

-How have Ashkenazi Jews assimilated into whiteness and how does that change the face of the American Jewish community?

-What dynamics does Ashkenazi assimilation into whiteness create in relation to Sephardi Jews, Mizrahi Jews and Jews of Color who are both Ashkenazi and not Ashkenazi?

-The experience of JOCMS (Jews of Color, Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews) in the U.S. today

*Class Ritual: Motzi over bagels, Rosh Chodesh Kislev, Sigd (Ethiopian Holiday)*

#### Week 9 (Nov. 13): Practice in Jewish Liberation Theology: The Denominations

-Presentations on each of the denominations by assigned groups:

- Hasidism
- Modern Orthodoxy
- Conservative Movement
- Reform Movement
- Reconstructionist Movement
- Jewish Renewal

*Class Ritual: Ritual Practice of each of the denomination led by the assigned chevruta pairs*

Week 10 (Nov. 20): Practice in Jewish Liberation Theology: Feminist, Priestess and Jewitch

- Is patriarchy an inevitable or inherent part of Judaism?
- Can Judaism be liberated from patriarchy and still be Judaism?
- When did Judaism become a patriarchal religion and what pre-dated this?
- What roles have women, priestesses and witches played in Judaism historically, and what role do they play today?

*Class Ritual: Kiddush Levana*

Week 11 (Nov. 27): Practice in Jewish Liberation Theology: Queer(y)ing

- In what ways do Jewish sacred texts articulate queerness?
- In what ways is Judaism already always queer, and in what ways does it traditionally oppress people who are queer?
- What work is being done to rediscover queer roots in Judaism and liberate Judaism from patriarchy and homophobia?

*Class prayer or holiday: Mikveh*

Week 12 (Dec. 4): Practice in Jewish Liberation Theology: Anti-Zionist, Decolonial and Diasporist

- What is the difference between political and religious anti-Zionism?
- How is anti-Zionism practiced today within the Jewish community?
- What is diasporism, and why do people embrace it?
- What would it look like to decolonize Judaism? Why might it be important to do so?
- How do we, as Jews, practice accountable diasporist Judaism while honoring the land that we are on is also colonized land, and land of which we are participating in the colonization?

*Class prayer or holiday: anti-militaristic, diasporic Chanukkah*

Week 13 (Dec 11): Articulating your own Jewish Liberation theology

- Student Presentations

*Class prayer or holiday: Collective Closing*