From God's Mouth to Our Ears: Torah Interpretation through the Ages
Pluralistic Rabbinical Seminary: Fall 2021
Instructor: Rabbi Jill Levy

Syllabus

About This Course:

The rest is commentary, but the commentary cannot be ignored. "When both feet are finally resting on the ground, then the task begins. Go and learn it." – Barry Holtz

Jews are known as "the people of the book". We are also a people of words, imagination, and boundless creativity. This class will examine three Biblical narratives in conjunction with classic commentaries, art, poetry, and contemporary thought to understand how textual interpretation has, at once, evolved and remained constant over time. We will discuss if questions, which lie at the heart of all commentary, are being asked or answered and why they matter.

Course Objectives:

- Students will take a deep dive into Biblical narrative
- Students will become familiar with classic and contemporary commentaries
- Students will discover new materials and ideas to use in their own teaching and future study
- Students will practice writing and delivering divrei Torah or study sessions on these topics

Required Reading:

Each student will need to purchase "Back to the Sources" ed. By Barry Holtz. Please have this before the first class.

Each student needs a Tanach.

Handouts as given.

Recommended (not required): My People's Passover Hagaddah, ed. Lawrence Hoffman and David Arnow

Assignments:

1) Each week students will submit a short (1-2-page max) written refection based on readings and/or class conversation. (9 reflections total). Reflections are

due each Sunday (first one due 10/10). **Late submissions WILL NOT be accepted.** Missing more than one reflection may result in failure of the class.

2) Each week one student will present on commentaries related to our Biblical narrative. Students will have an opportunity to sign up for their slot at the end of the first class. Presentations should be 20-30 minutes and include time for class participation and discussion. Rabbi Levy will be available to anyone who needs help with their presentation. Teaching and presenting are not only key skills for rabbis but they also enable learners to absorb the material in a deeper way. (1 presentation per student)

Final Exam:

Choose a Biblical narrative not included in the syllabus for a 5-10 page paper that traces commentaries from midrash through the present. Student's original interpretation should also be included in the paper. **The exam is due NO LATER than one week after the final class.** Late submissions WILL NOT be accepted and will result in failure of the course.

Topic I: The Akeidah

Tuesday, October 5th
Topic #1: Course introduction, Close reading of the Akeidah
Class Reading (due 10/12): Holtz, Chapters 1,3
Assignment (due 10/10): Reflection Paper #1, Outline of Presentation #1

Tuesday, October 12th
Topic #2: Presentation on Critical Interpretation & Akeidah, Akeidah & Midrash
Class Reading (due 10/19): Holtz Chapter 4, 5
Assignment (due 10/17): Reflection Paper #2, Outline of Presentation #2

Tuesday, October 19th
Topic #3: Presentation on Ibn Ezra & Akeidah, Akeidah & Medieval Commentaries
Class Reading (due 10/26): Rabbi Prof. Robbie Harris https://www.thetorah.com/article/on-the-origins-of-rashis-peshat-commentary; Sarna on Ibn Ezra
Assignment (due 10/24): Reflection Paper #3

Topic II: Cain and Abel

Tuesday, October 26th
Topic #4: Close Reading of Cain & Abel, Pshat & Drash
Class Reading (due 11/2): P. 1-40 The Origins of Human Violence and The Crisis of the Biblical First Family
Assignment (due 10/31): Reflection Paper #4, Outline of Presentation #3

Tuesday, November 2nd

Topic #5: Presentation on translation as interpretation in Cain & Abel, Cain & Psychology
Class Reading (due 11/9): P. 41-54 The Origins of Human Violence and The Crisis of the Biblical First Family
Assignment (due 11/7): Reflection Paper #5, Outline of Presentation #4

Tuesday, November 9th
Topic #6: Presentation on Artistic Representations of Cain & Abel, Poetry & Cain & Abel
Class Reading (due 11/16): Holtz Chapter 8
Assignment (due 11/14): Reflection Paper #6

Topic III: Ten Plagues

Tuesday, November 16th
Topic #7: Close Reading of the 10 Plagues & Textual Patterns
Class Reading (due 11/23): Greco-Roman Banquet as a Social Institution by Dennis E. Smith
Assignment (due 11/21): Reflection Paper #7, Outline of Presentation #5

Tuesday, November 23rd
Topic #8: Presentation on Plagues & Liturgy, 10 Plagues & Midrash
Assignment (due 11/28): Reflection Paper #8, Outline of Presentation #6, Final Exam Topic

Tuesday, November 30th
Topic #9: Presentation on 10 Plagues & Medieval Commentary, Plagued, Class Wrap Up
Assignment: Reflection Paper #9 (due 12/5), Final Exam (due 12/7)