

Nature and the Jewish Imagination

(a new course designed as part of the Piedmont Project at Emory University for Spring 2012)

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Introduction

This course was developed as part of Emory's Piedmont Project, which promotes teaching about sustainability and the environment across the curriculum. The project involved attending a two-day seminar that exposed participants to myriad questions and problems having to do with sustainable living and the natural world. Before the seminar took place, the instructor proposed this course in the following terms:

The movement that ushered in Jewish modernity—known as the Jewish Enlightenment or Haskole—took up as one of its chief complaints the traditional Jew's alleged alienation from the natural world. The “grandfather” of Yiddish fiction, Mendele the Book Peddler, railed against a paucity of precise Yiddish terms for even familiar flora and fauna, let alone exotic species. The story of the Jewish emergence into the modern period is largely a story of urbanization and secularization. The vectors produced by these phenomena pointed in different directions with respect to the Jewish relation to Nature. The concentration of Jews in urban centers meant that an unfettered experience of nature was ever more remote, which meant, in turn, that “nature” grew fetishized. Secularization saw particularistic, religious worship of the God of Israel give way to universalistic, spiritual images of divinity—underpinned by a deistic understanding of God as Creator of the natural world. This course will consider these transformations in modern Jewish thought through close study of literary texts, websites, and primary historical documents.

The Piedmont seminar immediately raised two sets of questions about the course as proposed. First, how might the issues at stake “jump off the page” and point the way to a more experiential learning process? So much of sustainability has to do with a very specific awareness of place. Given that fact, how could course participants be led to cultivate a specific understanding of texts set mostly in Eastern Europe *as students living and studying in Atlanta, Georgia in 2011*? Points of tangency between the experience of an Emory undergraduate and the worlds that we would be reading about began to emerge: Yiddish fiction has forests and railroads, and so does Emory. Perhaps these overlaps could be incorporated into the experience of the course. The second set of questions had to do with the course's structure. Would a chronological or a thematic approach work best to create a vivid yet ordered learning experience? The course had been proposed with a straight chronological organization in mind; the seminar opened up the possibility of an overwhelmingly thematic one. The optimal scheme, finally, has been to integrate the two, using a rough skeleton of chronological nodes and thinking thematically within these.

Grades will be based on attendance, participation, reading/viewing quizzes, a mid-term exam, and a final project. This project may be either a conventional analytic or research paper of 6-8 pages, or it may be a creative work of high quality, in media such as creative writing (fiction or non-fiction), film,

performance, dance, music, or the visual arts. Creative projects may involve pairs or small groups of students, as long as the division of labor is explained well and there is a clear basis for evaluation of each student's contribution. Students are encouraged to meet with the instructor at any phase of the brainstorming, research, or production process.

Without a doubt, the assignments are exciting enough to compel students to finish them on time and in their entirety. However, in order to provide an additional source of motivation, the professor reserves the right to administer unannounced 5-minute reading/viewing quizzes throughout the term.

Reading material for the Course

Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales, ed. Arnold Band and Joseph Dan

Tevye the Dairyman & Railroad Stories, Sholem Aleichem

Y.L. Peretz Reader

Benjamin III (or Dos kleyne mentshele)

A Guest for the Night, S.Y. Agnon

God In Search of Man, Abraham Joshua Heschel (critique of nature worship)

Poetry by Moyshe Leyb Halpern and Y.L. Gordon will be photocopied for students and distributed in class.

Short stories will be available online from Reserves Direct. These may include Cynthia Ozick's "The Pagan Rabbi."

Rough Schedule of Assignments (Once the course is scheduled, dates and exact assignments will be filled in.)

*Readings/viewings should be **completed** by the date indicated on the syllabus.

The Turn of the 19th century

Hasidism and Haskalah. *Hisboydedus* (seclusion in nature). Nature, religion, and spirituality.

-Tales of Rabbi Nahman, Joseph Perl's maskilic critique (excerpt of *Revealer of Secrets*)

-Moses Mendelssohn on nature (still need to find right source)

-"The Tip of the Yud," Y.L. Gordon

Turn of the 20th century

*This segment of the course will involve one or two on-campus field trips.

The Yiddish Haskole. Jewish urbanization, secularization, and emigration. Railroads and forests.

-Excerpts from *Tevye the Dairyman* by Sholem Aleichem (?)

-*The Railroad Stories* by Sholem Aleichem

-*The Mare* or *The Little Man* or *The Travels of Benjamin III* by S.Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele the Book Peddler)

-*Notes from a Provincial Journey through the Tomashev Region of Poland*, Y.L. Peretz

-neo-Hasidic stories, Y.L. Peretz

-M.L. Halpern and Mani Leyb's urban poetry

-Isaac Bashevis Singer on vegetarianism. Critique of Jewish ritual slaughter. *Satan in Goray?* Or just some short stories?

-*A Guest for the Night*, S.Y. Agnon

Turn of the 21st century

The Ethical Shekhita (Jewish Ritual Slaughter) Movement. The Rubashkin's slaughterhouse investigation.

The Jewish Farming Movement. Responses to hunger and to agri-business. Adamah. Uri L'tzedek.

The Jewish Camping Movement.

For this section of the course on contemporary problems and organizations, we will rely on much online material. Instructor will also try to arrange a visit from a representative of at least one of the organizations involved, or perhaps from one of the investigative journalists who uncovered the unethical and in some cases illegal slaughterhouse practices at Rubashkin's and ConAgra Foods.

Course Policies

1. Arriving in class punctually, ready to discuss the assigned material, counts towards the participation grade.
2. Students are responsible for procuring all handouts and catching up on all vital information that they miss when late or absent.
3. After three absences, the final grade will drop half a letter grade for each day missed. Exceptions are discouraged, but will be considered with proper documentation.
4. Writing should be turned in punctually. However, it is better to ask for an extension when needed than to skip class because the written assignment is not yet complete. If an absence is anticipated when writing is due, please arrange in advance to turn the assignment in electronically.
5. The University Honor Code is in full effect in this course. Plagiarism will result in an automatic zero and immediate referral to the Honor Council; for information on how to avoid plagiarism, see <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/WC/plagiarism.html>.

Grade Distribution

Attendance and participation	15%
Mid-term exam	25%
Final project	35%
Reading/viewing quizzes	25%

Attendance at lectures and cultural events relevant to the course and announced in class will count for extra credit. Students may elect to count the credit toward their attendance and participation grade or their reading quizzes.