

**The Talmud**  
**JUDS 1630/RELS1170B**  
**CRN 16766**  
**Fall, 2024**  
**Brown University**

This course will introduce you to the Babylonian Talmud. Compiled in the third through seventh centuries CE, the Babylonian Talmud (henceforth the Talmud) played a crucial role in the history of Judaism, perhaps rivaling even the Bible in importance. In addition to its religious importance, the Talmud is an unparalleled – if complex – source for the study of ancient history. As a text that at times seems foreign to our way of thinking, the Talmud also challenges us, as modern readers, to probe and interrogate our own logical assumptions.

We will spend much of our class time actually reading the Talmud, in English translation. In honor of the U.S. election, we will focus on passages that deal with politics and governance. There are no prerequisites and no prior knowledge is assumed.

**Goals**

By the end of this course, you should:

1. Have a basic knowledge of the basic facts about the Babylonian Talmud and related rabbinic literature, including acquaintance with its scope and contents and modern theories of its dating and authorship;
2. Have a good sense of Talmudic logic: what kinds of questions does the Talmud ask and how does it attempt to answer them?;
3. Question modern ways of reasoning and the connection of modern logic to issues of majority power;
4. Have familiarity with how the Talmud is read and used, both in traditional religious contexts and by modern academic scholars;
5. Have familiarity with ancient gender assumptions and be able to put this knowledge into conversation with modern assumptions;
6. Develop your ability to read closely; to write and revise; and to present orally.

**Instructor**

Professor Michael Satlow, Religious Studies and Judaic Studies.

I strongly advise you see me early in the semester, even if you think that you have nothing to discuss. You will be more engaged in the course and I will be more effective if we have had at least one private conversation. If you are uncomfortable meeting with your professors, don't be! You might want to read this article about getting the most out of college: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/opinion/college-students.html>.

I seek to cultivate a classroom of mutual respect, seriousness, and inclusiveness. Should you need accommodations, or if there is anything else that I can do to help you to thrive in this class, please talk to me early in the semester.

### **Texts**

You should purchase the following books, all available in the Brown Bookstore. The total cost will be around \$150:

Charlotte Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (paper, ISBN: 978-0521605083). Abbreviated below as *CC*.

Yerushalmi, Yosef, *Zakhor* (paper, ISBN: 978-0295975191)

Rubenstein, Jeffrey, *Talmudic Stories* (paper, ISBN: 978-0812247244)

Levinas, Emmanuel, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (paper, ISBN: 978-0253208767)

Boyarin, D., *A Traveling Homeland* (hardcover, ISBN: 978-0812247244)

Schaefer, P., *Jesus in the Talmud* (paper, ISBN: 978-0691143187)

It will also be important for you to bring a Hebrew Bible (in English translation) to most classes. I suggest *The Jewish Study Bible*, but any translation would be fine. The primary texts will be available on or through Canvas.

Other readings will be almost entirely available online.

### **Expectations**

I believe that learning is most effectively done by means of a process: (1) reading or engaging with other evidence with a particular question in mind; (2) individual thinking and articulation (usually in writing) of thoughts; (3) discussion with others; (4) self-reflection and revision. To succeed in this course, and to contribute to the learning of your classmates, for every class (unless instructed otherwise) you are expected:

(1) to have done the reading in advance.

(2) to attend class.

(3) to write a short (2-4 paragraph) response to a prompt on Canvas, usually due by Tuesday at 10 PM. These discussions will be open for the entire class to read.

Most of these responses will focus on the Talmudic text itself and will ask you to think about the implications of the passage for that week.

There are two other primary expectations for the class. First, we will learn to use a software package called CMap Tools in order to outline Talmudic logic. Each student (in consultation with the instructor) will choose a passage that has not been discussed in class and prepare a visualization, which will be accompanied by a short essay explaining and reflecting on the visualization. This is due on November 22.

The second expectation is preparation of a final project. This is typically a paper (10-12 pages) on a theme or specific text. You will consult with me and prepare a proposal and

bibliography in the first part of the semester. You will present (i.e., teach) your topic to the class at the end of the semester. The final project should be submitted in Canvas no later than December 18.

At the end of the semester, I will also ask you for a self-evaluation and the grade that you desire to appear on your transcript. I will be most likely to honor your grade request if you (1) have no more than two unexcused (see below) absences and (2) have never completed an assignment late, even by a minute.

### **Attendance Policy**

There are times when you can, or even should, miss class. If you are sick, I don't want you in class. If you have a family emergency, attend to it – it should take precedence. Maybe you'll have a conflict (rare, I hope) that simply cannot be avoided.

If you miss a class, I will normally not want to see a dean's or health note (I will let you know if I want to see one). Instead, you will have the option to take the class as an "excused" or "unexcused" absence. For an "unexcused" absence, do nothing. You should have no more than two of these for the semester. For an "excused" absence, you must submit, via email, an essay (750-1000 words) that synthesizes the readings for that week and makes an argument. This paper is due 72 hours after class

### **Time Expectations**

The following "good faith" estimate of time expectations is required on all Brown syllabi by the Dean of the College:

*Our accrediting agency requires an expectation of 180 hours of coursework in order to receive four credit hours. This figure will be reached in this class through the following expectations:*

- (1) Class meeting (36 hours);*
- (2) Reading for class (6 hours/week \* 12 weeks = 72 hours)*
- (3) Weekly writing assignments (2 hours/week\*10 weeks=20 hours)*
- (4) C-Map visualization (20 hours)*
- (5) Final project (32 hours)*

### **Grading**

I believe that grades neither give a good incentive for you to experience genuine learning nor that a single letter captures the totality of your learning. I would like, and I would like you to like, to see grading as an afterthought to your learning. I will not focus on your grade and I will help you to do the same.

You should think about how I weight your learning along the following rough percentages: preparation, weekly writing responses (40%); C-Map project (30%); final

project (30%). I am open to other suggestions, though, if they would be more effective in helping you to learn. Please do not hesitate to speak to me about this in the first month of the semester.

### **Accessibility and Wellness**

If you are sick, take care of yourself, do not come to class, and follow the attendance policies noted above.

I believe strongly that this should be a space accessible to all. We seek to cultivate an atmosphere that is fully inclusive and open to all kinds of diverse viewpoints; it should be both safe and challenging. If anything, at any time, is hindering your learning, please let us know immediately and we will seek to make whatever adjustments are required. Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures. You may speak with me after class, during office hours, or by appointment. If you need accommodations around online learning or in classroom accommodations, please be sure to reach out to Student Accessibility Services (SAS) for their assistance (seas@brown.edu , 401-863-9588). Undergraduates in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact an academic dean in the College by emailing [college@brown.edu](mailto:college@brown.edu).

### **Academic Integrity**

"A student's name on any exercise (e.g., a theme, report, notebook, performance, computer program, course paper, quiz, or examination) is regarded as assurance that the exercise is the result of the student's own thoughts and study, stated in his or her own words, and produced without assistance, except as quotation marks, references, and footnotes acknowledge the use of printed sources or other outside help." (*Academic Code*, p. 5).

I have no tolerance for academic dishonesty. Any violations whatsoever will result in an automatic NC for the course and a referral to the Dean of the College for further disciplinary action.

### **Schedule**

Below is our tentative schedule. Note that we will meet during Reading Week and perhaps add an additional session or two.

#### **September 4**

#### **Introduction**

What is the Talmud and who were the rabbis who behind it?

**Recommended Reading:** CC, pp. 58-96; M. Satlow, *Creating Judaism*, pp. 115-139.

#### **September 11**

#### **The Talmud: An Overview**

What is "the Talmud"? How does the Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmud differ from the Babylonian Talmud? What is the character of the

Babylonian Talmud, and how do scholars account for it?

*Readings:*

1. L. Moskovitz, "The Formation and Character of the Jerusalem Talmud," in *CHJ* 4:663-677.
2. D. W. Halivni, *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, pp. 1-62.
3. M. Heller, "Earliest Printings of the Talmud," in *Printing the Talmud*, pp. 61-78
4. Primary texts

**Assignment:** Reading Response

**September 18**

**Mishnah and Midrash**

What are the Mishnah and midrash, and how do they formally differ? What is the "Oral Law"? What role did orality and anonymity play in rabbinic literature?

*Readings:*

1. *CC*, 17-57.
2. B. Holtz, "Midrash," in *Back to the Sources*, pp. 177-211.
3. D. Kraemer, "The Mishnah," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism (CHJ)* 4:299-315
4. Selected primary text selections

**Assignment:** Reading Response

**September 25**

**Traditional Study of the Talmud**

How have Jews traditionally studied the Talmud? How does that way of study differ from the academic study of the Talmud?

*Readings:*

1. Flatto, "Tradition and Modernity in the House of Study".
2. J. Boyarin, *Yeshiva Days*, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6
3. Primary texts

**Assignment:** Reading Response

**October 2**

**Canceled: Rosh HaShanah**

**October 9**

**Legal Approaches**

The Talmud has often been read as a source of religious law. What is the relationship between the Talmud and law, both in the past and in modern Israel? How does one read the Talmud as a legal text?

*Readings:*

1. *CC*, 144-63.
2. H. ben-Menahem "Talmudic Law: A Jurisprudential Approach," in *CHJ* 4:877-98.

3. D. Sinclair, "Jewish Law in the State of Israel," in N. Hecht et al., *An Introduction to the History and Sources of Jewish Law*, pp. 397-419

4. Primary sources

**Assignment:** Reading Response

**October 16**

### **Historical Approaches**

How did the rabbis of antiquity understand "history"? Was it important to them? How can modern historians use the Talmud?

*Readings:*

1. CC, 295-312
2. Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Memory*
3. W. S. Green, "What's in a Name? – The Problematic of Rabbinic 'Biography,'" in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice*, pp. 77-96
4. Shaye Cohen, "Patriarchs and Scholarchs," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 48 (1981): 57-86
5. Primary sources

**Assignment:** Paper proposal and bibliography

**October 23**

### **Literary Approaches**

How does one read the Talmud as literature?

*Readings:*

Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture*

**Assignment:** Reading response

**October 30**

### **Ethical Approaches**

Is the Talmud an ethical book? Might it be a resource for ethics?

*Readings:*

1. E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*
2. Mishnah Avot.
3. CC, 313-335.

**Assignment:** Reading Response

**November 6**

### **Cultural Approaches**

How does the Talmud interact with culture?

*Readings:*

1. CC, 243-294
2. D. Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland*
3. Primary texts

**Assignment:** Reading Response

**November 13**

**Christianity and Zoroastrianism**

How did the authors of the Talmud interact with their larger cultural surroundings?

*Readings:*

1. Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud*, chapter 3
2. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*
3. Primary texts

**Assignment:** Reading Response

**November 20**

**Text Study**

This class will be entirely focused on engaging with the text.

**Assignment:** CMap visualizations due, November 22

**December 4**

**Presentations**

**December 11**

**Presentations and Conclusions**