Jewish Ideas and American Democracy

Course Description
The purpose of this core course is to bring classic Jewish texts about government into conversation with the foundational works of American political thought. In so doing, we will consider the following questions: How did Jewish notions of politics, the social contract, and covenant impact the eventual structure and nature of the United States? How did the Bible figure in the debates about democracy and monarchy that took place during the time of America’s founding? What tensions exist between the notion of religious authority and the modern conception of personal autonomy? In what way is the United States different from European democracies, and what is the role of religion in American public life?

Attendance & Participation
Students will be expected to have read and reflected upon the readings of each week, and participate in class discussions about them. At the end of every week, students will be given a question to facilitate reflection on the readings for the week ahead, and will be asked to respond before the first session of the next week with several paragraphs of reflection in response to the question. In addition, students will write a paper, by the end of the term that will embody a sophisticated comparative reflection on Jewish and American sources on government.

Intellectual Opportunities
Students will be offered several extraordinary opportunities in addition to the class requirements. The first will be several trips to the Katz Center of the University of Pennsylvania, where students will encounter one of the most remarkable archives of early American Jewish writings in existence today, and hear from scholars whose expertise regarding those archives are unparalleled. While in Philadelphia, students will also be able to avail themselves of institutions near the Katz Center, including Independence Hall, the Constitution Center, Congregation Mikveh Israel, and the National Museum of American Jewish History. At the end of the term, students will also be offered the opportunity to study for several days with scholars of American and Jewish history and Harvard University.

Honor Code
Stern College maintains an honor code that these instructors take very seriously. The work you submit must be your own. All outside sources and references consulted must be properly cited. Cheating will not be tolerated and will result in university disciplinary action. If you are unclear in any way about what constitutes plagiarism, please do not hesitate to discuss it with either or both professors.

Writing Center
The College maintains a wonderful resource to help student improve their writing skills: The Stern Writing Center. It is located in room 714 of 215 Lexington, right around the corner from the Art History classroom. Tutors are on hand to help you on writing assignments, and to offer techniques for assessing your own work. Students can schedule
regular appointments online or drop-by to check if a tutor is available. We are more than happy to make the introduction for you. You can make appointments or learn more about the Center through: http://yu.edu/writing-centers/beren; email berenwritingcenter@yu.edu, or call 917-326-4981.

**Students with Disabilities and Special Needs**
Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services – (646) 592-4132 – during the first two weeks of class. After approval for accommodations is granted, please submit your accommodations letter to us as soon as possible to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

**Course Evaluation**

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Attendance and Participation</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readings Essay Questions</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>30%</td>
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**Course Outline**

**Week 1: Introduction**

*Sefer Shmuel Aleph* (I Samuel), chapters 8 & 12

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*.


Talmud Sanhedrin, Perek 2, Selections.

*Midrash Rabbah Devarim Parshat Shoftim*, Selections.

**Week 2: Divine Right of Kings, the Bible, and Political Philosophy**


**Week 3: King vs. Sanhedrin**


*Chatam Sofer, Likutei Teshuvot* #82

**Week 4: Isaac Abravanel and the American Idea**

Abravanel, *Commentary on the Book of Judges*, Introduction; *Commentary on Samuel*, Selections.

Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph B. “*BeInyan Takanat Moshe*”

James Madison, Federalist 10.

Netanyahu, B. *Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher*.

Strauss, Leo. “On Abravanel’s Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching.”

**Week 5: The Social Contract**


**Week 6: Covenant vs. Social Contract**


Sacks, Jonathan. *The Home We Build Together*.

**Week 7: Covenant and American Political Thought**


**Week 8: Federalism and the Bible**


**Week 9: Religious Authority and Democratic Liberty**

Soloveichik, R. Ahron *Parach Mateh Ahron Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah Perek i1*.


**Week 10: Religion and Democratic Society**


Morrison, Jeffrey. *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, Selections.


Week 11: Religious Freedom and the Public Good


Week 12: Jewish Law and Civil Disobedience


Week 13: Natural Law and Noahide Law

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah *Hilkhot Melakhim* Chapters 8 & 9.


Week 14: Orthodoxy, Democracy and Tradition
