



**YESHIVA UNIVERSITY – THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS CENTER  
FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT**

**JPHI-4935H-M - PSYCHOLOGY & JEWISH THOUGHT – FALL 2021**

***Instructor: Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman - Email: [mordechai.schiffman@yu.edu](mailto:mordechai.schiffman@yu.edu)***

**Course Description**

This course will explore the connections between Torah sources and modern psychological theories and research on essential topics of human nature. Topics will cut to the core of what it means to be human, including whether we are born good or evil, the nature of evil, the relationship between cognition and emotion, the necessary ingredients to flourish and live the good life, the components of developing good character, and the nature of mental illness and the challenges of therapeutic treatment. An array of opinions in both the Torah and psychological sources will be presented and analyzed, noting inter and intradisciplinary similarities and differences. Areas of synthesis will be highlighted, and conceptual conflicts accentuated.

**Course Objectives**

- Students will understand the different approaches taken within the fields of psychology and Jewish thought on topics related to human nature.
- Students will appreciate the diversity of responses to these questions of human nature in both fields, while analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.
- Students will be able to point to similarities and differences within the psychological and Judaic approaches, while noting areas still open for debate.
- Students will reflect on how these topics and approaches influence their understanding of themselves and how they relate to the world.

**Course Values (To be discussed in detail during the first few classes)**

- Communication
- Community
- Growth Mindset
- Grit
- Honesty

**Grading**

- Attendance/Participation/Effort/Communication (20%)
- Weekly assignments on readings and class material before, during, and/or after class (short answers, reflections, discussions, quizzes etc.) (40%)
- Midterm (November 11<sup>th</sup>) (20%)
- Final (January 4<sup>th</sup>) (20%)



## Attendance Policy and Class Structure

- Attendance is required for each class. If you cannot make a class with an excusable reason, please e-mail me to let me know in advance. You are required to make up the work you missed. Even 1 unexcused absence will impact your grade. More than 2 excused absences will impact your grade (barring special circumstances).
- The ideal learning experience requires punctuality. You are expected to be on time for every class. Lateness detracts from your ability to learn optimally, can negatively affect the classroom environment, and will also impact your grade. If you foresee this being an issue, please discuss with me in advanced.
  - Classes meet **in person** every Tuesday from 1:45-3:00 PM
  - Classes meet **on Zoom** every Thursday from 1:45-3:00PM
    - Cameras need to be on throughout the class for credit. If you have a particular concern, please let me know in advance.

## Tentative Outline

Below is a tentative schedule for when we will cover the various topics.

- **Weeks 1-2 – Introduction**
  - What is Torah? What is Psychology? How do they interact?
    - The psychology and Torah of our class values
      - Communication, Community, Growth Mindset, Grit, Honesty, Humility
- **Weeks 3-4 – Human Nature**
  - Are we born good, bad, both, or neither? What distinguishes us from other animals? How do we understand the soul? What is free will, and do we have it?
- **Weeks 5-6 – Evil Inclination**
  - What is the yetzer hara? Is it natural or supernatural? If natural, how can it be conceptualized psychologically?
- **Weeks 7-8 – Cognition and Emotion**
  - What are the roles of thinking and emotion in Judaism? Is one more important than the other? How do they relate psychologically?
- **Weeks 9-10 – Flourishing**
  - What are the elements of the good life? What ingredients are important to flourish religiously or psychologically?
- **Weeks 11-12 - Character Development**
  - Why is character important? Which traits are promoted? What are the ingredients to effective character cultivation?
- **Weeks 13-14 – Mental Illness & Therapy**



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- How should we conceptualize mental illness? What are some halachic issues with treatments? Are there some treatments that are more attuned to Torah values than others?

### Selected Reading List

Readings will be drawn from primary Torah sources, the listed works and scholarly articles, among others.

**\*All readings will be provided on Canvas\***

- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of general psychology*, 5(4), 323-370
- Etkes, I. (1993). *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the mussar movement: seeking the Torah of truth*. Jewish Publication Society
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Pinker, S. (2003). *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. Penguin
- Power, M., & Dalgleish, T. (2015). *Cognition and emotion: From order to disorder*. Psychology Press.
- Tirosch-Samuels, H. (2003). *Happiness in premodern Judaism: Virtue, knowledge, and well-being*. Hebrew Union College Press
- Seligman, M. E. (2012). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Simon and Schuster.
- Shachter, J. F., Weinreb, T. H., Schechter, Y., Spero, M. H., & Carmy, S. (2000). Judaism and Mental Health: A Fictional Case with Commentaries. *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, 9, 133-133
- Soloveitchik, J. D. (2003). *Out of the whirlwind: Essays on mourning, suffering and the human condition* (Vol. 3). KTAV Publishing House, Inc
- Soloveitchik, J. D. (2005). *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (Vol. 5). KTAV Publishing House, Inc.
- Spero, M. H. (1980). *Judaism and psychology : halakhic perspectives*. Ktav Pub. House : Yeshiva University Press.
- Spero, M. H. (1975). Thanatos, Id and the Evil Impulse. *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 15(1/2), 97-111.
- Zimbardo, P. G. (1995). The psychology of evil: A situationist perspective on recruiting good people to engage in anti-social acts. *Japanese Journal of Social Psychology*, 11(2), 125-133



### **Academic Integrity and Honesty:**

All students are expected to follow and abide by the academic integrity and honesty policies of Yeshiva University in this course. <https://www.yu.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/Academic%20Integrity%20Policy%20-%2026June2020.pdf>

### **Disabilities Statement:**

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should be in touch with the Office of Disability Services, [rkohn1@yu.edu](mailto:rkohn1@yu.edu) during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter and discuss any specifics with me to ensure the successful implementation of your accommodations.

### **Academic Support:**

*Academic support is available to you if you are having any difficulties that could include the following but are not limited to these: understanding assignments, navigating research papers, issues with time management of your schedule and your life or general college adjustment, please make an appointment with Dr. Beth Hait. She is available Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9am - 6pm. To make an appointment, go to [yu2.mywconline.com](http://yu2.mywconline.com). Click on the arrow next to "Academic Advisement" and scroll down to "Student Academic Support".*

### **Library Support:**

Get all the support you need with research for your courses. The Yeshiva University Libraries ([library.yu.edu](http://library.yu.edu)) offer individualized consultations that will help you locate and cite journal articles, books, and other credible sources for solid papers, presentations, and reports. Skilled information-seekers succeed academically and in the workplace. Prepare for the future by contacting the library at [https://library.yu.edu/ask\\_the\\_library](https://library.yu.edu/ask_the_library).