



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

Rembrandt & the Jews – Art as Midrash in 17th-century Amsterdam
ARTS 1973H; JUDS 4931H
Stern College for Women / Fall 2015
Rabbi Meir Soloveichik and Professor Jacob Wisse

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Course Abstract

Acclaimed for his Protestant-influenced interpretation of Scripture, Rembrandt van Rijn's art – paintings, prints and drawings – demonstrate a rich sensitivity to specifically Jewish ideas and concerns. The artist's association with Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and other members of Amsterdam's Jewish community influenced his approach to Hebrew Biblical subjects, as well as his understanding of Christian theology. This inter-disciplinary course explores the character of Rembrandt's depictions of Hebrew Biblical and Christian subjects by examining their relationship to Jewish exegesis, including Talmudic, Midrashic and Kabbalistic literature, and to contemporary Jewish life in Amsterdam. We will examine Rembrandt's connections to the Jewish community of Amsterdam, his knowledge of and perspective on Jewish sources and customs, and the master's place within the larger context of art history and theological discourse.

Course Structure

In each section of the course, we will explore subjects and themes addressed by Rembrandt in his art, analyzing them both through an art historical/technical and philosophical/theological lens. Professors Soloveichik and Wisse, who will both be together with the students during all class meetings, will – in alternating sessions – address the same images and topics from different vantage points, invoking historical and contemporary sources to place Rembrandt's images and ideas in context. Students will be required to read primary sources (in translation) and will be called upon for at least one in-class or on-site presentation.

Special Museum & Collection Visits

In addition to classroom meetings and discussions, we will visit several world-class collections in the New York area, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection and New York private collections featuring Rembrandt works with Jewish and Biblical themes.



Course Readings

Readings will be assigned throughout the semester and will be distributed or posted through ANGEL. We recommend obtaining a copy of:

- Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Course Evaluation

Weekly Readings and Discussion	20%
4 Critical Responsa	40%
Class Presentation	15%
Research Paper on Work of Art	25%

Attendance & Participation

Students are strongly encouraged to attend **all** meetings during the term and to participate steadily and enthusiastically in class discussion. This is especially important in a topical class that moves briskly between themes and subjects. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class meeting. Promptness, attentiveness, participation and collegiality will be considered in the course evaluation at the instructors' discretion. Students are expected to keep up with weekly readings and to come to class prepared to discuss them.

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 our 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.

In-Class Behavior and Cell Phones

We place a very high premium on the behavior of students within the classroom. Several aspects of behavior to consider are: promptness, civility, decorum and respect for fellow students. All cell phones should be turned off before the class begins, and kept off for the duration of class meetings, including



museum visits. We do not distinguish between making calls, having a cell phone ring during class, texting or checking for text messages.

Students with Disabilities and Special Needs

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services – through Rochelle Kohn, Director of Disability Services, at rkohn1@yu.edu - during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodations letter to us to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

Class Schedule and Topics

Aug. 25 (T), 27 (Th): (Soloveichik) Introduction: Amsterdam in the 17th Century – the New Israel; the Spanish & Portuguese Community and the Jewish Context

Reading: Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, pp. 1-103 (chapter one: "On the Breestraat"; chapter two: "Graven Images")

Sept. 1 (T), 3 (Th): (Wisse) Baroque Art – Rembrandt & his Contemporaries; Rembrandt's "Jewishness"

Reading: Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, pp. 1-103 (chapter one: "On the Breestraat"; chapter two: "Graven Images")

Featured Works: Blinding of Samson (painting, 1636; Frankfurt); *The Angel Leaving the Family of Tobias* (painting, 1637; Paris); *The Blindness of Tobit* (print/drawing, 1651); Rembrandt's *Self-Portraits*

Sept. 8 (T): Special Guest Lecture

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Light of the First Day of Creation"

Sept. 10 (Th): (Soloveichik / Wisse) On Rembrandt's Abraham and Depictions of the *Akedah*

Featured Works: Sacrifice of Abraham (painting, 1635; St. Petersburg); *Abraham's Sacrifice* (print/drawing, 1655); *Abraham Casting Hagar and Ishmael* (print/drawing, 1637)

Sept. 13 – Oct. 7: No Classes – Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot

Oct. 8 (Th), 13 (T), 15 (Th): (Soloveichik / Wisse) On Blessings

Featured Works: *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph* (painting, 1656; Kassel); *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (painting, c. 1659; Berlin); *Joseph's Coat Brought to Jacob* (print/drawing, 1633); *Joseph Telling his Dreams* (print/drawing, 1638); *Joseph Accused by Potiphar's Wife* (painting, 1655; Berlin)



Oct. 20 (T), 22 (Th): (Soloveichik / Wisse) On *Jeremiah's Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* and the Question of Subject in Rembrandt

Featured Work: *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* (painting, 1630; Amsterdam)

Oct. 27 (T), 29 (Th): On the Image of Moses and the Question of Interpretation in Rembrandt

Featured Work: *Moses Holding the Tablets of the Law* (painting, 1659; Berlin)

Nov. 3 (T), 5 (Th): (Soloveichik / Wisse) (Soloveichik / Wisse) On Menasseh ben Israel / Visit to the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America

Reading: Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, pp. 104-143 (chapter three: "The Unhappy Rabbi")

Nov. 10 (T), 12 (Th): (Soloveichik / Wisse) On Rembrandt's *David and Saul* and the Image of Kingship

Featured Works: *Saul and David* (painting, c. 1655; The Hague); *Saul and David* (painting, 1631; Frankfurt); *David's Farewell to Jonathan* (painting, 1642; St. Petersburg); *Bathsheba at her Toilet* (painting, 1643; New York); *Bathsheba with David's Letter* (painting, 1654; Paris);

Nov. 17 (T): (Soloveichik / Wisse) On the Figure of Samson

Featured Works: *Blinding of Samson* (painting, 1636; Frankfurt); *Samson and Delilah* (painting, 1628; Berlin); *Samson Threatening his Father-in-law* (painting, 1635; Berlin)

Nov. 17 (T), 19 (Th), 24 (T): (Soloveichik / Wisse) On Feasts – Belshazzar and Others

Featured Works: *Belshazzar's Feast* (painting, c. 1635; National Gallery, London); *Samson's Wedding Feast* (painting, 1638; Dresden)

Nov. 26 (Th): No Class – Thanksgiving

Dec. 1 (T), 3 (Th): (Soloveichik / Wisse) On Other Artists and Other Biblical Themes & Subjects

Featured Works: *Adam and Eve* (print/drawing, 1638); *Susanna and the Elders* (1647; Berlin); *The Triumph of Mordechai* (etching, c. 1641)

Dec. 8 (T), 10 (Th), 15 (T): Student Presentations

Dec. 17 (Th): Conclusions and Questions

Dec. 22 (T): No Class – Fast of Tevet

Dec. 24 (Th), 29 (Th): No Scheduled Classes – Reading Days