



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

## Shakespeare, the Bible, and Political Philosophy Fall 2020

Profs: Matthew Holbreich and Meir Soloveichik

Matthew's cell phone: 317-445-4637

Matthew's preferred email: matt.holbreich@gmail.com

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

Shakespeare's plays were composed and performed in a time of extraordinary religious ferment, debate, and war; he wrote not long after Luther, the Reformation, and the transformation of religion in England. The central text at the heart of these debates was the Bible, and as so many of Shakespeare's plays focus on political themes, the Bible and politics are often profoundly intertwined in his work. In this seminar, we will see how this is so in two of Shakespeare's most famous works. One, *The Merchant of Venice*, infamously utilizes a fictional, utterly unfair representation of a Jewish money-lender in order to allow the playwright to opine on some of the central questions of political philosophy: the relationship between justice and mercy, commerce and charity, and the meaning of the law in Hebrew and Christian Scripture. The text has therefore been utilized not only in literature classes but in seminars on law and political thought, but often without proper attention paid to the Biblical allusion in the play. Meanwhile, a second play, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's most cited work, is linked to a biblical and Talmudic debate that actually impacted the very course of British history, a fact unknown today but well-known in Shakespeare's era. In fact, it can be shown that Shakespeare wove questions of Biblical marital law into literature's most famous dramatic discussion of regicide, royalty, and kingship. We will consider how these biblical-political themes allow for a renewed understanding of these plays, and how the plays themselves can in turn inspire renewed reflections on these political and philosophical subjects.

**Expectations:** Prior to every class, students will be expected to have read and reflected upon the readings of that week, and to participate in class discussions about them. At the end of every class, students will be given a question to facilitate reflection on the readings for the week ahead, and will be asked to respond with several paragraphs. In addition, students will write a paper, by the end of the term, that will embody a sophisticated comparative reflection exploring one of the political and theological themes discussed in class. A final will conclude the semester.

### ACADEMIC HONESTY POLICY and DISABILITIES

All students are expected to be aware of and abide by Yeshiva University's academic honesty policy. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Plagiarism is the act of taking the words,



Yeshiva University

THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS  
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

ideas, data, illustrative material, or statements of someone else, without full and proper acknowledgment, and presenting them as one's own. Please just simply remember to cite your work.

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, rkohn1@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, contact me to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

## **GRADING**

**25%: Class Attendance and Participation**

**25%: Readings Essay Questions**

**20%: Paper**

**30%: Final**

## **Merchant of Venice**

The infamous image of Shylock lurks in any discussion of the history of Anti-Semitism in Europe; yet even as Jews have rightly and robustly criticized the play, they have also utilized it as a springboard for fascinating intellectual reflections. One of the most interesting Jewish reactions to the play was that of the great Shlomo Yosef Zevin, who was inspired to utilize the contract between Shylock and Antonio to reflect on the nature of personal autonomy in Jewish law. Others have been motivated by the play to not only point out the calumnies in Shakespeare's description of Jews, but to reexamine the Jewish notion of *tzedek*, a political and moral concept that defies attempts to accurately translate it. The following questions will be considered as we study the play: How does Shakespeare misrepresent the Jewish understandings of law and justice? What is the truly traditional Jewish way for understanding the relationship between *mishpat* and *tzedakah*? What is the biblical definition of *tzedek*, and how is that manifest in the Talmudic conception of *peshara*? Are there truly differences between Jewish and Christian theology regarding the definition of justice? What is the legacy of this play today, and what can still be learned from it?

### **Texts**

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Oxford World's Classics), found [here](#).

### **Movies**

Merchant of Venice, starring Al Pacino, found [here](#)

PBS Shakespeare Uncovered, "The Merchant of Venice" found [here](#)

### **Recommended Reading**



Yeshiva University

THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS  
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, found [here](#), “Merchant of Venice”

Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, found [here](#), “Merchant of Venice”

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*, found [here](#), “Merchant of Venice”

Kenji Yoshino, *A Thousand Times More Fair: What Shakespeare’s Plays teach us about Justice*, found [here](#), “Merchant of Venice”

James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, “A Pound of Flesh”

Allan Bloom, *Shakespeare and Politics*, “Merchant of Venice”

### For Guest Lectures by Meir Soloveichik

*Devarim*, selections

Shlomo Yosef Zevin, “*Mishpat Shylock Le-Or Hahalakha.*”

H. Ben Menahem, *Judicial Deviation in Talmudic Law*, selections.

Samuel Azjenstat, “Contract in The Merchant of Venice,” 21 *Philosophy and Literature* (1997).

Moshe Taragin , “The Role of Peshara Within the Halakhic Judicial System”

Nahshon and Shapiro, eds., *Jewish Responses to the Merchant of Venice*

Part 1: *The Merchant of Venice: Jews, Christians, and Justice vs. Mercy*

Meir Soloveichik, “The Virtue of Hate.”

Richard Posner, *Law and Literature*, Selections

Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Selections

Michael M. McConnell, et. al., *Christian Perspectives on Legal Thought*, selections

R. R. Reno, “Loving the Law,” *First Things*

## HAMLET

Hamlet is Shakespeare’s most studied play. What is often unknown today- but was well-known to all of England at the time- was that the themes of regicide, marriage and legitimacy was profoundly connected to Elizabeth’s claim to the throne, to Henry VIII’s marriages to Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, and to the very legitimacy of the English throne. Strikingly, the biblically knowledgeable reader will also understand something that could not have been lost on someone as biblically literate as Shakespeare: that the Davidic dynasty, the most celebrated royal family of both Jewish and Christian scripture, descended from a series of relationships that are linked to the concept of *Yibbum*. The careful reader of David’s story will also see how David struggles to balance family and policy, his love of his children and his responsibility for the wellbeing of the country and the monarchy. It is impossible to study the book of Samuel, or Hamlet, without considering one of the central questions discussed in politics today: how does the personal impact the familial?

### Texts

Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Oxford World’s Classics), found [here](#).



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

### **Movies and Podcasts**

Hamlet, starring Kenneth Branagh, found [here](#)

In our time with Melvin Bragg, "Hamlet" found [here](#)

### **Recommended Reading**

Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, found [here](#), "Hamlet"

Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, found [here](#), "Hamlet"

Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, found [here](#)

Kenji Yoshino, *A Thousand Times More Fair: What Shakespeare's Plays teach us about Justice*, found [here](#), "Hamlet"

### **Texts for Meir Soloveichik Guest Lectures**

Biblical Selections: Genesis, The entire book of Ruth, The book of Samuel on Saul vs. David

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot, selections

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, selections.

David Katz, *History of the Jews in England*, Chapters 1-2

Jason Rosenblatt, "Hamlet, Henry, Epicoene, and Hebraica: Marriage Questions," in *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden*

A.Haverkamp, *Law and Literature*, "The Ghost of History: Hamlet and the Politics of Paternity"

Robert Cooper, *The American Interest*, "Shakespeare's Politics"

Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, selections

Stuart Halpern (ed.), *Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth*, selected essays.

Michael Walzer, et. al., *The Jewish Political Tradition*, et. al. "Authority."

J. David Bleich, "Jewish Law and the State's Authority to Publish Crime."

### **SCHEDULE OF CLASSES:**

#### **WEDNESDAY AUGUST 26: Introduction to Shakespeare I: Why read Shakespeare?**

David Bevington, *Shakespeare's Ideas: More things in Heaven and Earth*

#### **WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 2: Introduction to Shakespeare II: Shakespeare's Life and Times**

Guest Lecture by Shaina Trapedo

Folger Library, Shakespeare Unlimited, "Recounting Shakespeare", found [here](#)

Folger Library, Shakespeare Unlimited, "London's Triumph" found [here](#)



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

**WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 9: No Class (Monday Schedule)**

Merchant of Venice, Al Pacino film  
Merchant of Venice, please read the whole play

**WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 16: Guest Lecture by Shina Trapedo**

Jews in the time of the Merchant of Venice

**WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 23: Guest Lecture by Meir Soloveichik**

Additional Readings to be provided

**SEPTEMBER 30 TO OCTOBER 14: NO CLASS**

Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, found [here](#), “Merchant of Venice”  
Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, found [here](#), “Merchant of Venice”  
Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*, found [here](#), “Merchant of Venice”  
Jay Shapiro, “A Pound of Flesh” excerpt from *Shakespeare and The Jews*

**WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 21**

Merchant of Venice Act 1-3

**WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 28**

Merchant of Venice Acts 4-5

**WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 4**

Hamlet, Kenneth Branagh production  
Hamlet, please read the whole play  
Hamlet Act 1

**WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 11**

Hamlet Act 2  
Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, found [here](#), “Hamlet”

**WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 18**

Hamlet Act 3  
Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, found [here](#), “Hamlet”

**WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 2**

Hamlet Act 4



Yeshiva University

THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS  
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

Kenji Yoshino, *A Thousand Times More Fair: What Shakespeare's Plays teach us about Justice*, found [here](#), "Hamlet"

**WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 9:**

Hamlet Act 5

**WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 16:**

Meir Soloveichik, guest lecture, readings to be provided

**WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 23:**

Hamlet Acts 4-5