

AS.100.256 History of Kabbalah

Mondays 9:30pm-12 noon

Gilman Hall 308

Classroom:

Prof. Pawel Maciejko

Office: Gilman 338F

Office Hours: by appointment

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Course Description

This course offers a survey of the history of Jewish magic, mysticism, and esoteric traditions from the Middle Ages through the sixteenth century. We will explore the concept of *sod* (mystery) and its historical developments, reading excerpts from foundational texts of Jewish esotericism, including *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Bahir*, and the *Zohar*. We will also consider the domain of “practical Kabbalah”—the preparation and use of amulets and charms—as well as phenomena of demonic and angelic possession.

Learning Goals

The course is designed to familiarize students with the central concepts, key figures, and major currents in the history of Jewish mystical and esoteric traditions.

Course Requirements

This seminar emphasizes discussion and close textual analysis. All reading assignments listed under a given session should be completed by that date. The materials are often dense and require careful, repeated reading. You are expected to research any unfamiliar technical terms, names, or theological and theosophical ideas. **Please print and bring to class all readings marked as *primary*.**

To foster the kind of dynamic, engaged conversation this class is meant to encourage, you will be asked to put away laptops, phones, and other multi-use screens during our sessions. Fountain pens are not, strictly speaking, required—but they are highly recommended.

The final decision on any grade derives from my global assessment of your work and cannot be quantified exactly. Roughly speaking, however, the breakdown is as follows:

Participation: 40%

One 5-page paper, an analysis of a Kabbalistic source: 20%

One 10-page final paper: 40%

No extensions will be granted without my *prior* permission, and late papers will be graded lower at the rate of one grade-step per day (A to A-, A- to B+, etc). Needless to say, complete honesty and probity in your work is a must. For information, see <http://ethics.jhu.edu>

Schedule of Readings

8/25: What is Kabbalah?

- Jorge Luis Borges, “A Defense of the Kabbalah,” in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), 83–86.
 - Gershom Scholem, “Religious Authority and Mysticism,” in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 5–31.
 - Jacob Katz, “Halakhah and Kabbalah as Competing Disciplines of Study,” in *Divine Law in Human Hands* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 56–87.
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9/8: Histories of Kabbalah

- Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894), chap. 1.
 - Gershom Scholem, “Philosophy and Jewish Mysticism,” *Review of Religion* 2, no. 4 (1938): 385–402.
 - Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 1–34.
 - Boaz Huss, “Jewish Mysticism – The Invention of an Unbroken Jewish Tradition,” accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.academia.edu/19719457>.
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9/15: Foundations: Gnosis and Merkavah Mysticism

Primary:

- James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 255–302.
- A. E. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 182–187.

Secondary:

- Joseph Dan, “Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism,” in *Jewish Mysticism I* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 27–76.
- Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 70–92.

9/22: Sefer Yetzirah

Primary:

- Isidor Kalisch, *Sepher Yezirah* (New York: L.H. Frank & Co., 1877), 10–21.
- William Wynn Westcott, trans., *Sepher Yetzirah* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), 15–18.
- Peter Cole, ed., *The Poetry of Kabbalah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 42–47.

Secondary:

- Joseph Dan, “The Language of Creation and Its Grammar,” in *Jewish Mysticism I* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 129–154.

9/29: The Spanish and Provençal Kabbalah

Primary:

- Joseph Dan, ed., *The Early Kabbalah* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 71–108, 165–182.

Secondary:

- Daniel C. Matt, “Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Medieval Spain,” in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 67–109.

FIRST ASSIGNMENT GIVEN

10/6: The Book Bahir

Primary:

- Joseph Dan, ed., *The Early Kabbalah* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 57–69.

Secondary:

- Gershom Scholem, “Sitra Ahra,” in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 56–87.
- Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Tree That is All,” in *Along the Path* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 63–88.

10/13: Abraham Abulafia

Primary:

- Joseph Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain: An Anthology of Jewish Mystical Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121–138.
- “From the Book of the Sign,” in Peter Cole, ed., *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 113–120.
- “From Sefer ha-Ot,” in David Meltzer, ed., *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1998), 124–136.

Secondary:

- Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 13–52.

FIRST ASSIGNMENT DUE

10/20: Joseph Gikatilla

Primary:

- Joseph Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, trans. Avi Weinstein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 3–9, 349–371.
- “The Secret of the Marriage of David and Batsheva,” in Charles Mopsik, *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), 171–193.

Secondary:

- Charles Mopsik, “The Masculine Woman,” in *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), 5–52.
 - Gershom Scholem, “Shekhinah: The Feminine Element in Divinity,” in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 140–196.
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10/27: The Zohar I

Primary:

- *Zohar: The Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 107–111; 282–298; 313–314.

Secondary:

- Arthur Green, “The Zohar: Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Spain,” in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 27–66.
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11/3: The Zohar II

Primary:

- *Zohar: The Pritzker Edition*, vol. 5, 530–534; vol. 9, 245–254.

Secondary:

- Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 70–71 (1999–2000): 261–306.
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11/10: Christian Kabbalah

Primary:

- Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, selections from the *900 Conclusions*, in Brian Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico della Mirandola and His Oration in Modern Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 488–490, 496–501.
- Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Caponigri (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1956); or Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva, trans., in *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 186–189.

Secondary:

- Gershom Scholem, “The Beginnings of the Christian Kabbalah,” in Joseph Dan, ed., *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and Their Christian Interpreters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Library, 1997), 17–51.
 - Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280–1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 227–235 (“Jewish Kabbalah in Christian Garb”).
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11/17: Practical Kabbalah

Readings:

- Yuval Harari, “‘Practical Kabbalah’ and the Jewish Tradition of Magic,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 19 (2019): 38–82.
 - J. H. Chajes, *The Kabbalistic Tree* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2022), 290–306.
 - Theodore Schrire, *Hebrew Amulets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 17–19, 49–53, 91–122.
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11/24: Safed Spirituality

Primary:

- Hayyim Vital, “The Book of Visions,” in Morris M. Faierstein, ed., *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 43–75, 156–188.

Secondary:

- Louis Jacobs, “The Uplifting of Sparks in Later Jewish Mysticism,” in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 99–127.
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12/1: Lurianic Kabbalah

Primary:

- Isaac Luria, “Hymns for the Three Sabbath Meals,” in Peter Cole, ed., *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 149–161.
- Hayyim Vital, excerpts from *The Tree of Life*, *The Gates of Holiness*, and *The Book of Transmigrations*, in David Meltzer, ed., *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1998), 176–198.

Secondary:

- Shaul Magid, “From Theosophy to Midrash: Lurianic Exegesis and the Garden of Eden,” *AJS Review* 22, no. 1 (1997): 37–75.
- Shalom Rosenberg, “Exile and Redemption in Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century: Contending Conceptions,” in Bernard Dov Cooperman, ed., *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 399–431.