

**Introduction to Jewish America**  
**AS.100.132.01**  
**Johns Hopkins University**  
**Spring 2026**

**Syllabus**  
**(Jan. 20, 2025)**

**Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:30pm - 2:45pm**  
**Krieger 300**

Instructor: Prof. James Loeffler

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Office hours: Tuesdays 12:30-1:30PM and by appointment

**Course Description**

*Introduction to Jewish America* examines the five-century history of the Jewish people in colonial North America and the United States from 1654 to 2025. Beginning with the arrival of Jewish refugees fleeing European persecution, the course tracks the growth of Jewish community in the complicated emerging racial and religious landscape of pre-1776 American society; the drive for legal equality in the early American Republic; Jews and the Civil War; mass migration and the Jewish entrance into the modern American economy; the late nineteenth-century rise of racial antisemitism and Jewish political responses; Jewish participation in Hollywood, Wall Street, Broadway, and other new sectors of American commercial and cultural life; the emergence of modern Jewish politics in the labor movement, socialism, Communism, Zionism, and the civil rights movement; the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel; and American Jewish involvement in the Cold War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and post-2010 American politics.

The course surveys the social, religious, cultural, economic, and political life of Jews, while also noting the comparative dimension with other American minority groups and Jewish communities around the world. It also uses the Jewish experience to examine larger questions of migration, race and religion, law, politics, and philanthropy, law, and American transnationalism in historical perspective.

The course learning outcomes are four-fold: (1) an introduction to critical historical methods of examining the past and its relationship to present-day legal, political, and moral questions; (2) training in primary source reading and written interpretation; (3) acquisition of core knowledge of U.S. history, Jewish history, and the interrelationship between these two areas of study; and (4) an introduction to the field of Jewish Studies, and its multidisciplinary approach to Jewish thought and experience.

## **Requirements and Grading**

The course features twice-weekly lectures with discussion built into the regular meeting period. The lectures will be interactive and class sessions will also feature some small-group reading and music listening exercises.

Class Attendance and Active Participation in Discussions and Exercises 20%

Two Primary Source Analysis Assignments (300 words each) 20%

Two Term Definition Assignments (300 words each) 5%

Midterm Exam 25%

Final Exam 30%

The above notwithstanding, to pass the course it is necessary to complete all assignments, including acceptable papers on approved topics, and to attend all class sessions. Multiple repeated absences will be grounds for failure. Students who need to miss class for religious holidays, family emergencies, athletic commitments or other reasons must obtain permission from the instructor prior to the date in question. The same applies to the submission of written assignments and exams. Late assignments will be penalized.

If you have a recognized accommodation, please let me know. If you are experiencing difficulties that affect your ability to participate in this course, you should feel free to discuss it with me at any time.

Grading Guide:

A+ 99-100 A 94-98 A- 90-93

B+ 87-89 B 84-86 B- 80-83

C+ 77-79 C 74-76 C- 70-73

D+ 67-69 D 64-66 D- 60-63

F Below 60

## **Required Reading**

The textbook will be Eli Lederhendler, *American Jewry: A New History* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017), which is available for purchase at the bookstore and on e-reserves. All other readings will be on e-reserves. Some are listed below and a few more will be added in the final version of the syllabus.

## **Class Schedule**

### **Week 1**

T 1/20 Introduction: The History of Hope

TH 1/22 Ambiguous Freedom: New Amsterdam & New England, 1654

Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, Preface, xi-xxi

### **Week 2**

T 1/27 Ambiguous Tolerance: Jewish Life in Revolutionary and Early Republic America

TH 1/29 German Jewish Migration and Community

Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, Chapter 1: First Encounters, New Beginnings, 1-55

George Washington and his Letter to the Jews of Newport website (1790)

The Virginia Act of 1786

### **Week 3**

T 2/3 Southern Jews, Northern Jews, and the Civil War

TH 2/5 1881: Economic Migrants or Religious Refugees?

Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, Chapter 2: Changing Places, 56-131

"The Slaveholders' Bible" and "The Abolitionists' Bible," in M. Schappes, ed., *A Documentary History of the United States, 1654-1875* (1952), 405-28

*First Term Definition Assignment due by F 2/6 at 5PM*

### **Week 4**

T 2/10 Platforming American Liberal Politics and Religion

TH 2/12 Immigrant Life in the Ghetto: New Roles for Men and Women

The Pittsburgh Platform (1885)

Writings of Josephine and Emma Lazarus (1880s)

Paula Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York city Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902" *American Jewish History* 70 (Sep. 1980): 91-105

Yiddish Theater article from the YIVO Encyclopedia

Recordings of American Jewish music

### **Week 5**

T 2/17 Pluralizing (American) Nationhood

TH 2/19 World War I: The American Jewish Constitutional Moment

Israel Friedlander, "The Problem of Judaism in America" (1907)

Anzia Yeziarska, "America and I" (1923)

Judah Magnes, "A Republic of Nationalities" (1909)

Louis Brandeis, "The Jewish Problem" (1915)

Horace Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot: A Study of American Nationality," *The Nation* (Feb. 18 and 25, 1915), 190-94, 217-20

*First Primary Source Analysis Assignment due 2/20 by 5PM*

### **Week 6**

T 2/24 The Power of the Image: Hollywood and the Jews

TH 2/26 The Holocaust: Jewish/American Knowledge and Responsibility

Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, Chapter 3: Finding Space in America, 1920s-1950s, 132-89

### **Week 7**

T 3/3 Our American Israel: Refugees and Nationalism in 1948

TH 3/5 Singing Hava Nagila & Planting Trees: Inventing Liberal Zionism

Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, Chapter 2: Changing Places, 56-131

David Ben-Gurion and Jacob Blaustein, "An Exchange of Views," (1950) in *American Jewish Yearbook* 53 (1952): 564-68

*Second Term Definition Assignment due by F 3/6 at 5PM*

### **Week 8**

T 3/10 Blind Justice: Civil Rights in Postwar America

TH 3/12 Inventing Judeo-Christian America: Separating and Connecting Church and State

Will Herberg, "Triple Melting Pot," *Commentary* (1955), 101-08

Nathan Glazer, "The Jewish Revival in America: I and II," *Commentary* (1955), 493-99 and (1956), 17-24

*Take-home midterm exam available from T 3/10 at 5PM*

### **Week 9**

***No Classes – Spring Break***

### **Week 10**

T 3/23 Four Jewish Comedians: Irony & Nostalgia in Postwar America

TH 3/25 The Sixties Ended Early: Religion and Politics after 1967

Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, Chapter 5: Recapitulations and More Beginnings, 1950s to the Twenty-first Century, 248-305

Irving Howe, "Tevye on Broadway," *Commentary* (Nov. 1964), 73-75

Arthur Waskow, "Judaism and Revolution Today" *Judaism* (Fall 1971): 404-15

Norman Podhoretz, "My Negro Problem--And Ours," *Commentary* 35:2 (Feb. 1963), 93-101

James Baldwin, "Negroes are Antisemitic because they are anti-white," *New York Times Magazine* (1967)

Michael Lerner, "TIKKUN: To Mend, Repair and Transform the World," *Tikkun* 1:1 (1986): 3-13

Ruth Wisse, "A Light unto the Nations?" *Commentary* (Dec. 1987), 30-35

*Take-home midterm exam due by M 3/22 at 12PM*

**Week 11**

T 3/30 Human Rights in the Global Cold War World

TH 4/2 No Class – Jewish Passover holiday

**Week 12**

T 4/7 The Skokie Affair: Neo-Nazism, Free Speech and Jewish Security in Post-Civil Rights America

TH 4/9 No Class – Jewish Passover holiday

*Second Primary Source Analysis Assignment due 4/10 by 5PM*

**Week 13**

T 4/16 Holocaust Lesson(s): Liberalism, Conservatism, and Jewish/America

TH 4/18 From McDavid's to McDonalds: Global Culture and Conflict in the Middle East

Lederhendler, *American Jewry*, Epilogue, 306-12

**Week 14**

T 4/21 The Returns of Antisemitism

TH 4/23 Conclusions & Occlusions

*Take-home final exam due 5/8 by 5PM*