

Jewish American Studies Course Outline: The Jewish American Experience in the United States and California

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Course Title: The Jewish American Experience in the United States and California

Course/Unit Overview: This course is an introduction to the Jewish American experience, teaching about Jewish identity, community, and history. Students will explore the shared history, traditions, religion, and culture that unites Jews, and also learn about the diversity that exists within the Jewish American community. The course will explore the forces – social, cultural, religious, economic, and political – that have shaped the Jewish American experience in California and in the United States. Examining similarities and differences to other American religious and ethnic groups adds another lens to the study of race, religion, ethnicity, and intersectionality.

Course Content: This course explores a broad range of topics about the facets of Jewish American identity. The course specifically examines ways in which immigration, discrimination, racialization, assimilation, cultural continuity, antisemitism, prejudice and privilege have impacted Jewish American self-identities and how Jews are perceived by others. It covers Jewish American history and the cultural geography of the Jewish American community today, with an emphasis on the diversity of California's Jewish community. The course explores Jewish Americans' complicated relationship to whiteness, and Jews of color's experiences of racism. Depending on context, outward markers of Jewishness, and skin color, Jews can experience privilege and prejudice, conditional whiteness, and racialization. The course will explore how Jewish American experiences mirror and differ from those of other ethnic groups. The Jewish American experience demonstrates broader dynamics of how ethnic, religious, or racial minorities interact with majority society, and how varied social constructions of race and ethnicity position Jews and other groups within American society.

Sample Topics:

Identity and Diversity

1. The Jewish people and communal identity: Ethnicity? Religion? Tribe? Race?
2. Jewish Americans' personal identity, defining who is a Jew, and how Jews see themselves and are seen by others.
3. Jews of color: intersectionality, racism, multiracial households, multilayered identities, and diversity within families and communities.
4. Jewish ethnic subgroups: Mizrahi (racially diverse Arabic- and Farsi-speaking Jews indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa for over 2,500 years); Sephardic (Ladino-speaking Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal to North Africa and the Ottoman Empire in the 1492 Spanish Expulsion); Ethiopian (Amharic-speaking Jews originally from Ethiopia); and Ashkenazi (Yiddish-speaking European Jews).

Complicating Ideas of Race

5. Race as a social construction: at different times and places Jews have been racialized as an outsider and have experienced conditional whiteness.
6. Changing experiences of American Jews: prejudice, discrimination, antisemitism, racialization, passing, assimilation, privilege, target of white supremacists, conditional whiteness, how Jews are viewed within systemic racism, and challenges to cultural continuity.
7. “The Hebrew race”: racializing Jews in U.S. immigration and naturalization law 1898-1941.
8. Antisemitism from across the political spectrum, including white supremacism and the 21st-century resurgence in anti-Jewish hate crimes. What is antisemitism and what are its different manifestations?

Jewish American History

9. Waves of Jewish immigration to the U.S. and migration within the U.S., from Ellis Island and the Lower East Side of New York to the Sun Belt of California and Florida.
10. Jews as targets of white racism: persecution by the KKK; Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 restricting Jewish and Catholic immigration from Eastern and Central Europe; discriminatory university quotas; discriminatory hiring practices led Jews to enter new industries; Jews targeted in the McCarthy Era red scare and blacklisted; Jews targeted by 21st century white nationalists.
11. Jewish refugees: fleeing pogroms; fleeing Nazis from 1930s to 1945; stateless displaced persons following WWII and the Holocaust; fleeing persecution in Middle Eastern and North African countries; and fleeing religious persecution in Iran and creating in Los Angeles the largest Jewish Iranian diaspora community.
12. Reaction to the Holocaust: U.S. refugee and asylum laws, the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1948 Convention on Genocide, and the 1951 Convention on Refugees.
13. Activism and allyship: Jews and social justice (tikkun olam/repair of the world); Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS); Rosenwald Schools (Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington); Anti-Defamation League (ADL); Labor Movement, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, and Samuel Gompers (AFL); second wave feminist movement (Betty Friedan, Representative Bella Abzug, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Gloria Steinem, Letty Cottin Pogrebin); LGBTQ civil rights and Harvey Milk; Jewish allyship and the civil rights movement (NAACP, Southern Poverty Law Center, Mississippi Freedom Summer murders of activists Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney).

Jewish American Cultural Geography Today

14. Languages and literature of Jewish expression (English, Hebrew, Arabic, Yiddish, Ladino, and Farsi).
15. American Judaism and religious denominations (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and more).
16. Judaism and Jewish community celebrations today: Shabbat, rest and renewal; Passover, the journey from slavery to freedom; Chanukah and religious freedom; and Yom Kippur, atoning and repair.
17. Jewish food traditions from the Middle East and North Africa and Eastern Europe to the American table.

18. Geography of Jewish California: The San Francisco Bay Area, from the Gold Rush, to the summer of love, to Silicon Valley and new media. Los Angeles's Jewish diversity today: from Boyle Heights and Pico-Fairfax to suburban sprawl, and the L.A. Iranian Jewish community, one of the largest Middle Eastern diaspora communities in the U.S.
19. Jews and Music: the Great American songbook, Tin Pan Alley, Broadway musicals, protest music, rock and rap (Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Aaron Copland, Benny Goodman, Sammy Cahn, Leonard Bernstein, Herb Alpert, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Arlo Guthrie, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Paul Simon, Art Garfunkel, Malvina Reynolds, Peter Yarrow, Cass Elliot, Country Joe McDonald, Leonard Cohen, Carole King, Billy Joel, Ramones, Idina Menzel, Pink, Adam Lambert, Drake, Nissim Black, Matisyahu, and Maccabeats).
20. Entertaining America: from cultural outsiders to pioneers in the new film industry, to insiders and studio heads. Vaudeville and Yiddish theater to Broadway, Hollywood blacklist, and the images and representations of Jews in American popular culture.
21. Passing in Hollywood: name changes, internalized identity problems, hidden Jewish identities and "writing Yiddish and casting British."
22. Cultural continuity: Jewish Americans and the quest to maintain identity and challenges to community retention.

Potential Key Figures (this is in no way an exhaustive list and it has a particular emphasis on Californians)

1. Barbara Boxer
2. Louis Brandeis
3. Sammy Davis Jr.
4. Daveed Diggs
5. Bob Dylan
6. Albert Einstein
7. Dianne Feinstein
8. Eric Garcetti
9. Ruth Bader Ginsberg
10. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
11. Elena Kagan
12. Harvey Milk
13. Daniel Pearl
14. Tracee Ellis Ross
15. Jonas Salk
16. Steven Spielberg
17. Gloria Steinem
18. Levi Strauss
19. Barbra Streisand
20. Elie Wiesel