

Professor Karla Goldman

4704 School of Social Work Building

kargold@umich.edu, 734-763-6583

Office Hours by Appointment

A History of Jews and Social Justice in the United States

Judaic Studies 440/640 / Social Work 513—001 / History 444 / AmCult 438

Tuesday, 2-5 p.m. / <https://umich.zoom.us/j/94788898586> / Winter 2021

Course Description:

American Jews have played vital roles in shaping the critical reform movements that have defined twentieth- and twenty-first-century American society. This course will explore the striking profile of Jewish engagement in broad social movements including labor, civil rights, and feminism. In addition, it will examine how efforts initially intended to address particular Jewish communal interests propelled Jews into the forefront of American municipal reform, social welfare, civil rights, and other progressive movements.

The persistently liberal politics of the majority of American Jews contradicts most hypotheses about American ethnic identity and separates American Jews from Jews of other nations, while also flouting conventional wisdom about American Jews and Israel. Still, recent tensions over civil rights and Israel/Palestine have called American Jewish progressivism into question. This course explores historic and current tensions over “appropriate” American Jewish stances on domestic questions of race and inequality, coalition politics, as well as on Israel and related questions of the U.S. role in the Middle East. The course will conclude by examining contemporary Jewish social justice activism which has emerged in response to these tensions and address whether calls to “repair the world” (*tikkun olam*) are intrinsic to Judaism or more accurately represent an effective *American* way to be Jewish.

This class asks students to consider the legacy of American Jewish social and political activism and the puzzling contemporary political profile of American Jews. As we consider twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Jewish historical experience and the current challenging political landscape, we will examine various explanations used to make sense of Jewish political behavior and historical overrepresentation in social activist movements.

We will use written and audio-visual primary sources, contemporary and historical analyses, and the practice of oral history to examine multiple potential sources of American Jewish social activism, evaluating the role and intersections of Jewish teachings or values with historical experience. We will also use class time to develop familiarity and skills in conducting oral history with the goal for each student of completing an oral history with individuals who fit into the historical narrative explored within the course. All along the way, we will ask what the study of American Jewish engagement with social justice and American Jewish political behavior can teach about the complex political, religious, class, social, and racial dynamics that have shaped the contours of varied American identities.

Course Objectives:

Completion of this course will result in the ability of students to:

1. Understand American Jewish engagement in the major social change movements of the twentieth century including labor, civil rights and feminism.
2. Describe American Jewish communal and individual political and social trends in relation to various influences of religious tradition, historical experience, American frameworks for Jewish identity (as related to race, class, gender, and politics), and contemporaneous international developments (e.g. pogroms, Holocaust, Israel, COVID-19).
3. Critically assess the place of progressive activism and diverse political identities within the overall continuum of American Jewish identities.
4. Follow the evolving relationship between Jewish communal and institutional efforts and American reform and progressive movements.
5. Translate consideration of how societal constructs have inflected American Jewish identity into understanding of how differing social positions have shaped the experience of other ethnic, national, and racial groups.
6. Examine the American Jewish community's evolving commitment to progressive causes and the concerns of African Americans and other U.S. minority communities in light of the upward historical trajectory of American Jewish socio-economic status and privilege.
7. Write and think critically about the political directions and communal challenges and possibilities shaping American Jewish experience today.
8. Examine the intersection of public and private identities and contribute to the preservation of communal memory and narrative through the practice of oral history.
9. Apply an additional lens of historical context in deepening understanding of coverage of contemporary American Jewish community and political behavior.

Required Texts, available for purchase:

Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton University Press, 2006)

Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

(optional) Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*

This course is conducted as a seminar and *requires active student participation*. Students should come to class having done the assigned readings and any pre-work; prepared to ask questions, share insight, listen to the instructor and fellow students with full attention; and provide leadership in the classroom, within large and small groups. *Specific reading assignments may shift* to accommodate the needs and interests of the class. Graduate students will be required to submit a longer final paper or one designed to address their particular academic or professional interests in consultation with the instructor.

Accessibility: If there are any special circumstances that I and/or the class should know to allow you to participate fully, please consult with me about them so that we can make appropriate adaptations.

I Introduction:

1. January 19: **The Puzzling Behavior of American Jews: Assumptions, Voting, and White Supremacy?**

II Immigrants, Radicalism, and the Creation of American Jewish Community, 1880-1940

2. January 26: **Immigrant Radicals and the Labor Movement**

Paula Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," in Pamela S. Nadell, ed., *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader*, pp. 116-128.

Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*, pp. 15-85

3. February 2: **If We are Only for Ourselves: Immigrant Aid and Beyond**

Boris Bogen, *Jewish Philanthropy*, pp. 1-26; 244-294.

Lillian Wald, [The House on Henry Street](#), pp. 1-29, 53-57, 97-116, 286-310.

Trends and Issues in Jewish Social Welfare, in the United States, 1899-1958, Services for Individuals and Families,' pp.52-66; 78-88.

Guest: Judith Rosenbaum, executive director, Jewish Women's Archive, on Oral Histories

4. February 9: **Settling In: Progressivism , Zionism, and Depression**

Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, pp. 121-168.

Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*, pp. 15-73.

Trends and Issues in Jewish Social Welfare, in the United States, 1899-1958, pp. 177-206.

Short readings on Louis Brandeis, Julius Rosenwald, and Henrietta Szold.

III. Acceptance and Insecurity, 1940-1985

5. February 16: **Destruction, Acceptance, and Insecurity: WWII and the 1950s**

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots, The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*, pp. 19-44.

Cheryl Greenberg, "And Why Not Every Man?" *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*, 114-168

6. February 23: **Let My People Go: Jews and the American Civil Rights Movement**

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, pp. 45-111.

Cheryl Greenberg, "Things Fall Apart," *Troubling the Waters*," pp. 205-234.

Jewish Women's Archive, [Living the Legacy](#) exhibit

Lila Corwin Berman, "From Neighborhood to City," *Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit* (2015), pp. 114-149.

7. March 2: **Neo-Conservatism, a “Broken Alliance,” and Counter-Culture: the Direction of Jewish Community**

Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 234-255

Bayard Rustin, “The Civil Rights Struggle,” 1965

Norman Podhoretz, “My Negro Problem – and Ours,” *Commentary*, February 1963.

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, pp. 153-193.

Barbara Smith, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Relationships Between Black and Jewish Women,” 1988

8. March 9: **Feminism and Gender Politics**

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Root*, pp. 241-279

Joyce Antler, “‘We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down’: Radical Feminism and Jewish Women,” in Diner, Kohn, Kranson, eds., *A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America* (2010), pp. 210-234.

Jewish Women’s Archive, [Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution](#)

Guest: Professor Kirsten Fermaglich, Michigan State University

9. March 16: **Israel’s role in Jewish communal and American Politics**

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Root* pp. 194-240; 280-308

J.J. Goldberg, “Six Days in June,” *Jewish Power: Inside the Jewish Establishment* (1997), pp. 133-162.

Ellen Willis, [“Next Year in Jerusalem,”](#) *Rolling Stone Magazine*, April 21, 1977.

Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (2017), pp. 138-164.

IV The Era of Tikkun Olam: the Struggle for the American Jewish Soul, 1985-2018

10. March 30: **The Continuity Crisis and the Emergence of Tikkun Olam**

Charles S. Liebman, “The Quality of American Jewish Life: A Grim Outlook,” in Steven Bayme, ed., *Facing the Future, Essays on Contemporary Jewish Life*, 1989, pp. 50-71.

Alan Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew*, 1997, pp. 256-287

Sidney Schwarz, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue*, 2000, pp. 11-49.

American Jewish Committee, [A Statement on the Jewish Future: Texts and Responses](#), 1996/97.

11. April 6: **Foundations for Justice and Community: Texts and Contexts**

Jane Kanarek, “What Does Tikkun Olam Actually Mean?” *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (2008), pp. 15-22.

Jill Jacobs, “Essential Terms: Tikkun Olam, Tzedek and Prophetic Judaism,” in *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law & Tradition* (2009), pp. 24-48.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pp. 224-226.

Hillel Halkin, "[How Not to Repair the World,](#)" *Commentary*, July/August 2008
Moshe Kornfeld, dissertation

12. April 13: **If Not Now, then When?:**

Jill Jacobs, *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community* (2011), excerpts.

Examine websites for a contemporary Jewish social justice organization, e.g. [American Jewish World Service](#); [Hazon](#); [Jewish Council for Urban Affairs](#); [Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps](#); [Repair the World](#); [Bend the Arc: a Jewish Partnership for Justice](#); [Jewish Community Relations Council, Boston](#); [Jewish Community Action](#) ; or others. What frameworks do they offer for Jewish identity and community? What relationships do they suggest exist between Jewish identity and social/political activism?

Jewish Voice for Peace, *On Anti-Semitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice* (2017), excerpts.

Guest: Rabbi Alana Alpert, executive director, Detroit Jews for Justice

13. April 20: **Reflections on Troubled Times**

Covid 19, Israel/Palestine, Black Lives Matter, and Anti-Semitism in the Age of Trump

Readings = TBD

Student Responsibilities and Assignments:

All students are responsible for the highest level of academic integrity. Students must submit only their own work and cite all sources of ideas and information taken from other sources. Plagiarism will not be tolerated.

Class Participation (140 points) The course will depend upon active participation from all students. This includes regular, prompt attendance. Please let me know if you must miss a class. Active participants

come prepared, offer informed, thoughtful contributions; listen carefully and respectfully; and ask probing, challenging questions of the instructor and each other. Students may be asked, individually or in small groups, to present material from assigned or optional reading assignments and to speak about completed or prospective written assignments. Assigned readings are subject to change as the class discussion and interest evolves. All participants should be on the lookout for historical or contemporary sources that speak to Jewish connections to issues of social justice and are invited to bring this material to my attention before class for possible group discussion.

Weekly Response Papers (160 points)

You should keep a running “journal” of responses to the assigned readings. For the 12 weeks in which readings are assigned, you must submit 8 journal entries. Entries of 2 to 3 pages should be submitted on the course Canvas site by 10 a.m. on the day of class.

These entries are not meant to be polished works of prose. They are meant to encourage you to give some structured thought to the week’s reading assignment before class meets and to connect the week’s readings to each other and to previous readings or discussion. I will provide a few specific questions each week that you might want to address, but you should use these papers to consider questions that particularly interest or challenge you, to connect individual readings to the larger themes of the course, connect a given week’s articles to each other, and /or to say whatever you like about what you have read. Generally, the response paper should address more than one of the readings assigned in a given week. Do not just summarize. Take advantage of the response questions, or relate material to class discussions, or compare different readings to develop thoughtful responses to the assigned texts.

An updated reading list and discussion questions will be provided for each week’s assignment on Canvas. General questions you might consider for these short submissions:

1. In what way do these readings challenge or add to your prior understandings of American Jewish identity and social and political behavior.
2. Are there particular social concerns or ideological positions that inform the analysis presented in the readings? Are the readings reflective of a particular historical moment?
3. How do the issues that arise in one week’s readings relate to themes that have emerged in assignments and discussion from previous weeks?
4. What do the readings suggest about how the broad categories of racial, religious, and ethnic identity operate and evolve within the American context?

Assignments:

“Mini Oral History” (50 points, recording, transcript, release form, 1-page summary, due: January 23)
Students will conduct an audio mini- oral history, and submit the final products of such an interview, audio or video recording, transcript, and release form, as well as a one-page narrative summary of the oral history. Refer to oral history/Story Aperture materials provided by the Jewish Women’s Archive. Choose someone of your acquaintance (family, friend, colleague, professor, clergy member, mentor,

etc.) with whom you will conduct a ten-minute oral history interview. Your interview should focus on a particular theme or question in the narrator's life and experience. You could ask them to focus on some aspect of public activism, community involvement, or political or religious identity, for example. *Full credit will be given as long as all materials are submitted.*

American Jews, Liberalism, and 2020 (250 points, 5-10 pages, due: March 9)

Many authors have attempted to provide explanations for the persistence of American Jewish liberalism, often as either advocates or opponents of this persistence. This assignment asks you to analyze current media conversations about American Jewish political identities (related to things like Covid 19, Black Lives Matter, Israel/Palestine, or the 2020 election) within the context of previous historical and academic conversations about American Jewish liberal identities. Read at least one of the following articles (you may also propose other articles or chapters for this purpose, other than the ones offered here) and consider them in relationship to each other and to the perspectives you have gained from your study in this class. Choose the article(s) you use carefully so that they provide intriguing counterpoints to issues of interest to you. Next, find at least three current articles or media treatments of American Jewish political behavior and identities in the context of the 2020 and its aftermath. Place the contemporary pieces within the context of the analysis of American Jewish liberalism that you read. How do the contemporary pieces raise, address, confirm, or contradict assumptions, analysis, and/or conclusions presented by the earlier piece(s) that you chose? What kinds of interests seem to shape the explanations that are provided for American Jewish identity, activism and political behavior in these different approaches? Keep in mind when the different pieces were written. What do you attribute to changing historical dynamics or to differing political ideologies? What do these articles add to your understanding of the topics in this course? Your paper should reflect an understanding of the themes we have read about and discussed in class.

Articles on Liberalism for use in American Jews, Liberalism and 2020 paper:

Lawrence H. Fuchs, "Sources of Jewish Internationalism and Liberalism," *The Political Behavior of American Jews*, (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1956), pp. 171-203.

Harold Cruse, "Jews and Negroes in the Communist Party," *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (NY: Quill, 1967, 1984), pp. 147-170.

Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), pp. 134-159.

Stephen Steinberg, "the Myth of Ethnic Success: The Jewish Horatio Alger Story," in *The Ethnic Myth, Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981, 1989), pp. 82-105.

Irving Howe, "A Time for Compassion and Commitment"

Michael Walzer, "Liberalism and the Jews"

Steven M. Cohen, "Liberalism and the Politics of Group Integration," in *American Modernity and Jewish Identity*, pp. 134-153; 186-189 (1983).

- Seymour Martin Lipset, "A Unique People in an Exceptional Country," in Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *American Pluralism and the Jewish Community*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), pp. 3-29.
- David Levering Lewis, "Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites from 1910 to the early 1930s," in Jack Salzman, ed., *Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews*, (1992), pp. 17-35.
- Nathan Glazer, "The Anomalous Liberalism of American Jews," in Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen eds., *The Americanization of the Jews* (NY: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 133-143.
- Henry L. Feingold, "From Equality to Liberty: The Changing Political Culture of American Jews," in Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen, eds., *The Americanization of the Jews* (NYU Press, 1995).
- J. J. Goldberg, "'Not for Myself': Liberalism and the Jewish Agenda," in *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1996), pp. 21-46; 376-377.
- Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman, "American Jewish Liberalism: Unraveling the Strands," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (1997): 405-430.
- Irving Kristol, "On the Political Stupidity of American Jews," *Azure* (1999)
- Stephen J. Whitfield, "Famished for Justice, The Jew as Radical" in L. Sandy Maisel, ed., *Jews in American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), pp. 213-230
- Norman Podhoretz, *Why are Jews Liberals?* (2009)
- Rachel Kranson, "What Now Supports Jewish Liberalism?" in *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (2017).

Note: Students who are particularly interested in looking into the history of Jewish involvement with a particular movement may propose an alternative mid-term paper focused on such a theme in consultation with the instructor.

Oral History Project and Final Paper (400 points, transcripts, documentation, and 10-20 page paper, due April 23 at 5 pm)

This assignment will require students to develop broader understandings of a particular movement or event in American Jewish experience and to examine the intersection between individual identity and public activism. Each student will identify and contact (in consultation with the instructor) one individual selected from a list provided to explore the history, sources, and legacy of their activism. Students may identify their own oral history subjects, but the area of interest and narrator must be approved in

consultation with the instructor. *Graduate students will be required to submit a longer final paper or one designed to address their particular academic or professional interests in consultation with the instructor.* All students will offer brief reports on their work during the last few weeks of class. Oral history transcripts and recordings will become part of an appropriate local or national oral history collection or historical archive. Where appropriate, they will be added to the Jewish Counter Culture collection at the American Jewish Historical Society.

Students will be responsible for studying the background of relevant movements, reaching out to potential oral history narrators, creating a pre-interview questionnaire, conducting an oral history lasting about one hour, and creating a transcript and interview log, securing relevant permissions, and documenting their work for preservation purposes. Interviews will focus on the narrator's experience within a particular movement and examine the range of motivations for their activism. One central focus for questioning should be the relationship between the subject's activism and their Jewish identity

We will use the resources of LSA Instructional Support Services for assistance and consultation in recording the interviews. Students may also draw upon media support from SSW Audio-Visual Services.

We will spend class time developing the tools of oral history, thinking about its limitations and strengths in the capturing of historical experience, and share the results of our interviews. Final products will include a transcript of the interview and a written report (10-20 pages) that provides a narrative of your subject's activist history, contextualizes it within the history studied in the course as well as of the relevant social movement of which he or she was a part, and identifies the relationship of the individual's Jewish identity to their activism, as reflected in motivation, saliency in their activism, and whatever retrospective associations they make between identity and activism.

Point totals:

Class participation: 140

Weekly Response papers: 160

Mini Oral History: 50

American Jewish Liberalism and Politics paper: 250

Oral History Project and Final Paper: 400

Total: 1000