**Course title:** A History of Jews and Social Justice in the United States
Judaic Studies 440/640 / Social Work 513 – 001/ History 444 / AmCult 438

**Course #/term:** Winter 2023

**Time and place:** Tuesday, 2-5 p.m. 1794 School of Social Work Building

**Credit hours:** 3

**Instructor:** Karla Goldman

**Pronouns:** She/Her/Hers

**Contact info:** Email: kargold@umich.edu

**Office Hours:** 4704 School of Social Work building or Zoom, by appointment

**Course Description:**

American Jews have played vital roles in shaping the critical reform movements -- including labor, civil rights, and feminism -- that have defined twentieth- and twenty-first-century American society. Moreover, the persistently liberal politics of the majority of American Jews contradicts most hypotheses about American ethnic identity and separates American Jews from their Jewish counterparts in other nations, while also flouting conventional wisdom about American Jews and Israel. Still, recent tensions over civil rights and Israel have called many aspects of American Jewish progressivism into question. This course asks how evolving identities (e.g. of "race" and social class), tensions between African Americans and white American Jews, and the American Jewish relationship to Israel have influenced Jewish communal and individual engagement in social justice issues over this time.

We will ask whether contemporary American Jews can maintain a meaningful distinctive voice on social issues while navigating the growing diversity of their own community and the challenging contours of today's progressive politics. We will examine contemporary Jewish social justice activism which emerged in response to these tensions and consider 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. In reviewing twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Jewish historical experience and exploring the current challenging political landscape, we shall examine the 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, the Holocaust, the creation and history of the State of Israel).
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. Think about how differing social positions have shaped the experience of varied American ethnic, national, and racial groups.
6. Examine the American Jewish community’s evolving commitment to Israel and the impact of the upward historical trajectory of American Jewish socio-economic status and privilege upon relationships with African Americans and other U.S. minority communities.
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. Consider the reconfiguration of entrenched white American Jewish assumptions about identity and community demanded by the emerging voices and growing profile of Jews of Color.
10. Think critically about how growing awareness of the centrality of white supremacy in American history may shift understandings of the historical and contemporary experience of white American Jews.
11. Develop writing skills through close attention to short thought pieces and skills and experience in conducting oral histories.

Required Texts:


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. 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.

Health-Related Class Absences

Please evaluate your own health status regularly and refrain from attending class and coming to campus if you are ill. You are encouraged to seek appropriate medical attention for treatment. Students who miss class due to illness of any kind will be given opportunities to access course materials online or provided with alternative learning opportunities. Please notify me by email about your absence as soon as practical, so that I can make accommodations. Please note that documentation (a doctor’s note) for medical excuses is not required.

Additional School and University policies, information and resources are available here: https://ssw.umich.edu/standard-policies-information-resources Links to an external site. They include:

- Safety and emergency preparedness
- Mental health and well-being
- Teaching evaluations
- Proper use of names and pronouns
- Accommodations for students with disabilities
- Religious/spiritual observances
- Military deployment
- Writing skills and expectations
- Academic integrity and plagiarism

Class Schedule

1 Introduction:

1. January 10: The Puzzling (political and otherwise) Behavior of American Jews

   Texts, contexts, and the “Jewish vote”
II Immigrants, Radicalism, and the Creation of American Jewish Community, 1880-1940

2. January 17: Immigrant Radicals and the Labor Movement


3. January 24: If We are Only for Ourselves: Immigrant Aid and Beyond

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


4. January 31: 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.


Maurice J. Karpf, Jewish Community Organization in the United States (1938), pp. 136-151.


5. February 7: 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 14: Let My People Go: Jews and the American Civil Rights Movement**


   Jewish Women’s Archive, [Living the Legacy Links to an external site](http://example.com) exhibit


   MLK responded to this letter in his *Letter to Birmingham Jail*, excerpt here: [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.htm](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.htm)


7. **February 21: Neo-Conservatism, a “Broken Alliance,” and Counter-Culture: the Direction of Jewish Community**

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


   Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, pp.112-152

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

8. **March 7: Session with Al Haber, founder of Students for a Democratic Society**


   Port Huron Statement, 1962
9. **February 28: Feminism and Gender Politics**

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

Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, pp.31-70.

**Watch:** videos from 2019 Conference: Jewish Feminisms/American Visions: Perspectives from 50 Years of Activism

Videos are found at: [https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/jewish-feminisms/videos/](https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/jewish-feminisms/videos/)

**Watch**: The First video (skip thank yous!): Karla Goldman and Joyce Antler introduction and From Radical to Feminist with Heather Booth, Vivian Rothstein, Miriam Hawley, with Moderator Deborah Dash Moore

**Watch one oadditional video** of your choice.

9. **March 15: Israel’s role in Jewish communal and American Politics: Dream or Nightmare?**

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


Thomas Friedman, "American Jews: You Have to Choose Sides on Israel," _New York Times_, March 7, 2023. [If you have access to the New York Times, it is worth looking at Friedman's other columns over the last few months focusing on Israel and Netanyahu].

Look for a few other current articles besides Friedman's above about American Jews and Israel -- about current protests, unrest in the West Bank, or the BDS (Boycott, Divest, and Sanction movement) on American campuses, or other subjects.

**IV Continuity and Tikkun Olam: A Struggle for the American Jewish Soul, 1985-2021**

10. **March 22: The Continuity Crisis**


Steven M. Cohen, "The Shrinking Jewish Middle and What to Do About It," [Links to an external site. Belin Lecture, University of Michigan, March 17, 2017.](https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/jewish-feminisms/videos/)
Kate Rosenblatt, Ronit Stahl, Lila Corwin Berman, "How Jewish Academia Created a #MeToo Disaster," The Forward, July 19, 2018. (Lots of links in this article worth exploring. If you hit a pay-wall, download is included in module for this week.)


Elliot N. Dorff, The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World), pp.7-20.


Hillel Halkin, “How Not to Repair the World,” Links to an external site, Commentary, July/August 2008


12. April 5: If Not Now?


13. April 11: Student Presentations

14. April 18: Reflections on Troubled Times

COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, Israel/Palestine, White Supremacy, Jews of Color, and Antisemitism

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 (160 points)** The course depends 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 will 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 (210 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 responses 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 or to readings from another week, and /or to say whatever you like about what you have read. A grading rubric for this assignment will assess:

1. Evidence of having done the reading;
2. Understanding of the texts;
3. Clarity and flow of writing;
4. Showing connections across readings;
5. Use of framing question/overall coherence of response.

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. 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?

Additional Assignments:

“Mini Oral History” (50 points, due: January 31)

Students will conduct a mini-oral history via Zoom, and submit the final products of such an interview, audio or video recording, transcript, sample release form, as well as a one-page narrative summary of the oral history. Refer to In Our Own Voices: A Guide to Conducting Life History Interviews with American Jewish Women from the Jewish Women’s Archive website: http://jwa.org/mediaobject/In-Our-Own-Voices-PDF Links to an external site.. Read Chapter 1 on “Conducting a Life History Interview,” and download and adapt forms in appendix (pp. 87-96). Choose someone of your acquaintance (family, friend, colleague, professor, clergy member, mentor, etc.) with whom you will conduct a 10 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.

“This Week in History” (180 points, Due March 9)

The Jewish Women’s Archive has a weekly feature that highlights events from each day of the year. Entries focus on a particular historic event and often uses dates like births, deaths, publications to highlight particular individuals. We will bring selected relevant entries into the classroom and examine how they are constructed and used to add to the breadth of information about individuals and communities that JWA can provide.

Each week, one student will be asked to look at dates for next week in advance and select one entry to present briefly (3 - 5 minutes) to the rest of class as a way to share (sometimes) small events and details and think about their relationship to our larger narratives. Dates chosen may focus on events in the history of social justice or reflect something important about the identity, culture, or contributions of American Jews.

Once familiar with the structure and character of these short (generally less than 500 words) entries, each student will identify a date or subject of interest to them (in consultation with instructor) and will research and write an entry. Student submissions that focus on women and receive an “A” will be added to JWA’s on-line collection and appear in This Week in History. Students who choose to redo and resubmit will be able to receive an adjusted grade and possible on-line publication.
**Final Project:**

**Option 1:**

**Oral History Project and Final Paper** (400 points) transcripts, documentation, and 10-20 page paper, **due April 23** at 10 pm. Drafts submitted by Friday, April 14 will receive substantive feedback and suggestions for resubmission by April 18.)

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 of their own choice or selected from suggestions from instructor to explore the history, sources, and legacy of their activism or Jewish identity. 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 Bentley Library, Jewish Women’s Archive, or American Jewish Archives.

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 spend class time developing the tools of oral history, identifying potential interviewees, 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.

**Option 2: Research Paper** (same as above, 400 points, due April 23 with substantial comments and feedback if submitted by April 14).

Those students who would rather pursue some subject that has caught their interest in class may opt to complete a research paper. Topics will be developed in consultation with the structure. 10-20 pages.