

**Spring 2012**  
**Julian 111**  
**TR 12:40-2:10**

**Drs. Beth Benedix and Russ Arnold**  
**Emison 214, 212**  
**Office Hours: T 230-4pm; other times TBA**

### **Modern Judaism in Literature: Contested Identities**

*Midrash: a way of interpreting biblical stories that goes beyond simple distillation of religious, legal or moral teachings. It fills in many gaps left in the biblical narrative regarding events and personalities that are only hinted at.* (Wikipedia)

The history of Judaism in the US (and elsewhere) might be described as a history of contested identities. It is a tradition that embraces and encompasses multiple approaches, from the wholly observant to the vehemently secular. While these approaches may seem incompatible on the surface (and perhaps they are), the spirit of Midrash (the rabbinic practice of expanding and puzzling through gaps and mysteries in scripture) in many ways is the thread that ties everything together. Midrash--whether it entails digging into a biblical text or digging into a literary one--assumes an unshakable reverence for the text itself, for the act of writing and the oral discourse it engenders. And, similarly, as we enter into a range of literature that introduces sometimes conflicting voices and that raises numerous questions, Midrash will inform our engagement with these texts.

This course is an opportunity to enter into the history, discourse, and experience of contemporary Jewish life through the works of various Jewish writers. The course will involve a regular interplay between the works themselves, the historical and cultural realities of modern Judaism in the United States, and ourselves as a diverse community of readers.

#### **Reading List:**

*As A Driven Leaf*, Milton Steinberg

*The Chosen*, Chaim Potok

*Foreskin's Lament*, Shalom Auslander

*Hyperlinks of Anxiety* (excerpts), Daniel Y. Harris

*Street of Crocodiles*, Bruno Schulz

*Messiah of Stockholm*, Cynthia Ozick

*The History of Love*, Nicole Krauss

## **Learning Activities and Assessment:**

### **1) Attendance and Participation in Discussion**

The most important expectation we have of you (which also happens to be the most basic requirement) in this course is that you come to class prepared, with an open mind, and ready for an engaged and lively discussion. Discussion really is the most crucial component to honing and refining your own interpretations of the literature we will be reading—rather than passive recipients of the one “right” interpretation of each work, your role in this class is to be active participants in uncovering multiple meanings of the pieces we address. We expect your questions, concerns, and even confusion with the material to be our starting point for discussion. A rule of thumb in this class: speak up often and without reserve— each one of you has something unique and worthwhile to bring to our discussion.

### **2) Weekly Midrash - posted to moodle by 7pm Friday of each week**

**25%**

Each of us will write a weekly midrash, reflecting, commenting, and filling in the gaps of our reading and class discussions for that week. The format is up to you, and the length will also be variable from week to week. The goal is to engage creatively and reflectively on our class discussions as another layer of text to be encountered. These will not be graded individually, but at the end of the semester, you will be asked to choose 10 from among them to be assessed as a collection. You may only use midrashim that were originally submitted on time as part of your final collection.

### **3) Group Presentation**

**25%**

For each of the major books we will be reading, a group of three or four students will give a short presentation to the class. In this presentation, your group will supplement and facilitate our discussion of the work with a piece of relevant historical, cultural, political, literary or religious (etc.) information. The intent here is to make this literature live, to show how it is the product of the world around it, or how it speaks to the world in which you/we live. We highly recommend that your group come meet with us at least a week before your presentation to discuss your ideas.

### **4) Communal project - presented during final exam period**

**25%**

In groups of three or four, students will bring together their collections of midrashim and use them to construct a communal midrash to be presented to the class.

### **5) Portfolio Prologue - Posted to moodle by Thursday May 17.**

**25%**

Your final task will be to write a prologue to your individual midrash collection that will draw on your experience with the communal project, and tie together your work from across the semester.

Note about grading - As a class we will be establishing rubrics for assessing each assignment, which we (the professors) and you (the students) will use to assess our work. Grades will be based on our collaborative assessment of the work submitted.

**Class Schedule:** (This is a plan that may be adjusted during the semester)

Jan	31	T	Introduction to course	
Feb	2	R	Examples of Midrash	
	7	T	<i>As a Driven Leaf</i> , Prologue through Chapter XII	
	9	R	<i>As a Driven Leaf</i> , Chapter XIII through Chapter XXVI	
	14	T	<i>As a Driven Leaf</i> , Chapter XXVII through Part 2: Chapter X	
	16	R	<i>As a Driven Leaf</i> , Part 2: Chapter XI through the end	<b>(Presentation)</b>
	21	T	<i>The Chosen</i> , Chapters 1 and 2	
	23	R	<i>The Chosen</i> , Chapters 3 through 6	
	28	T	<i>The Chosen</i> , Chapters 7 and 8	
Mar	1	R	<i>The Chosen</i> , Chapters 9 through 13	
	6	T	<i>The Chosen</i> , Chapters 14 through the end	<b>(Presentation)</b>
	8	R	Discuss film, "The Chosen" (Purim)	
	13	T	<i>Foreskin's Lament</i> , Chapters 1 through 8	
	15	R	<i>Foreskin's Lament</i> , Chapters 9 through 13	
	20	T	<i>Foreskin's Lament</i> , Chapters 14 through the end	<b>(Presentation)</b>
	22	R	Discuss film, "The Believer"	
*****Spring Break: March 24-April 1*****				
Apr	3	T	Harris, excerpts from <i>Hyperlinks of Anxiety</i>	
	5	R	Skype with Daniel Y. Harris	
	10	T	<i>Street of Crocodiles</i> (Passover)	
	12	R	<i>Street of Crocodiles</i> (Passover)	<b>(Presentation)</b>
	17	T	<i>Messiah of Stockholm</i>	
	19	R	<i>Messiah of Stockholm</i> (Yom HaShoah/Holocaust Memorial Day)	<b>(Presentation)</b>
	24	T	<i>History of Love</i> , pps 3-64	
	26	R	<i>History of Love</i> , pps 65-109 (Yom Ha'atzma'ut/Israeli Independence Day)	
May	1	T	<i>History of Love</i> , pps 110-159	
	3	R	<i>History of Love</i> , pps 160-202	
	8	T	<i>History of Love</i> , pps 203-end	<b>(Presentation)</b>
	10	R	Conclusions (Lag B'Omer/Day 33 of Counting Omer)	
Finals Week			Communal Project Presentations	