

Smicha Week 2011

Reinventing Theology: An Introduction to Classical Rabbinic Midrash

Rabbi Laura Duhan Kaplan

Course Description: An introduction to the art of *aggadic midrash* (narrative Biblical interpretation) as developed by our sages in Talmudic times. As they grappled with renewing Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and the spread of Christianity, they used the language and stories of Torah to create and express original theologies. To present ideas that were often remote from Torah's original meaning, they developed a disciplined yet open-ended method of re-reading words, verses, and stories in expanded contexts. We will study the historical challenges that informed their theologies, their assumptions about the nature of Torah, their radical theological ideas, and their interpretive techniques. Finally, we will learn to use the techniques to explore our own theological and spiritual creativity.

Fulfills a unit in Jewish Thought or Tanakh
Hebrew skills are helpful, though not required.

Advance reading:

In Torah:

Genesis 1-22 (Parshiyot Bereisheet, Noach, Lech-Lecha, Vayera)

The midrashim we study will be reflections on these portions of Torah.

In Secondary Sources:

Jill Hammer, "Midrash" from *JPS Guide to the Bible* (Jewish Publication Society, 2008)

Jacob Neusner, "Bereisheet Rabbah" from *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (Yale Anchor Bible Reference Series, 1999)

Simi Peters, "Mashal" and "Petichta" from *Learning to Read Midrash* (Lambda, 2005)

Michael Fishbane, "The Garments of Torah" from *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Indiana University press, 1992)

Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (Penguin, 2006)

***Reading from Secondary Sources will be posted on line by June 1.
Several short midrashim will be distributed in class each day.***

Tentative outline of Topics:

Monday: Introduction

Advance Reading: Hammer

Tuesday: Midrash as Theological Debate

Advance Reading: Neusner

Wednesday: Classical Midrashic Techniques

Advance Reading: Peters

Thursday: Kabbalistic and Hassidic Innovations

Advance Reading: Fishbane

Friday: Modern Creativity

Advance Reading: Findley

Requirements:

1. Completing the reading.
2. In-class participation.
3. In-class writing.
4. Group presentation (groups and assignments TBA by June 1)
5. Original paper, due in August, specific date TBA (5-7 pages; possible topics and formats discussed in class)

Recommended Resources to Purchase for your Home Library:

JPS Study Bible (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Shai Cherry, *Torah through Time: Understanding Bible Commentary from the Rabbinic Period to Modern Times* (Jewish Publication Society, 2007)

Please bring a Tanakh with Hebrew (if you are a Hebrew reader) and English. JPS translation preferred.