



PSALMS & SONNETS

Meeting times: In-Person/Zoom Lecture Wednesday 11:55-1:10 PM 245 Lexington: Room 418
Monday – Asynchronous/Zoom (11:55-1:10pm)

Course Description:

This course will survey the interplay between poetry and prayer in Jewish tradition from Tanakh to the modern era. Using classical *meforshim*, we will examine the style and significance of biblical prayers and poetry to understand the important power Jewish tradition places on poetry and song as forms of personal and national religious expression. The centerpiece of our course will be *Sefer Tehillim* whose many lyrical and timeless psalms were recited as part of the Temple service and became the foundation and inspiration for the formalized liturgy of the *Siddur*. Group and self-study assignments will examine psalms traditionally utilized by Jews to express their joy or distress throughout the long exile. Building on our study of the relationship between Psalms and the liturgy, we will look at the literary genre of *piyyut* (liturgical poetry) beginning in the Land of Israel in Talmudic times. The impetus, impact, and inclusion of *piyyut* throughout the Jewish world as well as opposition to *piyyutim* by some Geonim and Rishonim will be examined. In our discussion of *piyyut*, important *kinnot* (poetic laments), composed to commemorate the destruction of the Temple and other national tragedies, especially in medieval Ashkenaz, will be considered, as well as the way Jews in the Middle Ages experimented with structure, meter, rhyme, and rhetoric to compose original works that expressed gratitude, love, longing, displacement, and grief in the Golden Age of Spain. Our survey will continue in the early modern period with the liturgical additions of the Kabbalists of Safed, such as *Lekhah Dodi*, and the heartfelt Yiddish prayers composed for and by Jewish women known as *tehinnes*. While these *tehinnes* continued to be recited by Jewish women daily, or at poignant moments in their lives into the 20th century, they have been all but forgotten with the widespread loss of Yiddish fluency. Indeed, poetry continues to be an important form of religious self-expression as will become apparent in our study of poetry and lamentations composed after the Holocaust and the more recent faith-filled poems and prayers composed by Jews living in the modern State of Israel facing an uncertain future.

In accordance with the Straus Center mission, in addition to tracing the impact of the poetry of Tanakh on the religious expression of Jews in varied lands and times in Jewish history, we will note their impact on secular Renaissance writers. It may surprise students that toward the end of his life, Italian humanist and poet laureate Francesco Petrarca (credited with the birth of the sonnet), selected King David over Virgil as the “poet” of his soul. Indeed, the Psalms were translated, paraphrased, and alluded to by virtually every author of the period, including but not limited to Sidney, Bacon, Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne, and Milton. These acts of literary adaptation and appropriation infused Renaissance and Reformation England with the lyricism and wisdom of ancient Israel that has profoundly shaped Western literature and culture to this day. Lectures on the impact of Psalms on Western literature will be presented by Dr. Shaina Trapedo.



Course Objectives:

- Students will gain an understanding of the unique features of biblical poetry, as well as fluency in reading and analyzing particular Psalms and prayers.
- Students will gain the tools to analyze a chapter of Psalms on their own and convey their analysis in writing.
- Students will gain an appreciation of the import of Psalms and its role in formalized and spontaneous religious self-expression throughout different periods of Jewish history.
- Students will gain awareness of the need for a uniform liturgical formulations and additional forms of self-expression, as well as the reception and controversies surrounding liturgical additions in different times periods in Jewish history.
- Students will gain an appreciation of larger influence of Psalms on Western literature.

Course Requirements:

Discussion/Participation: 10%

Quizzes/Assignments: 25%

Midterm Assignment (March 10): 30%

Final Assignment (May 21): 35%

Guide to Live/Synchronous Learning:

Every student is expected to attend the class meetings in person or through Canvas/Zoom and to participate in readings or class discussions that take place therein. When on Zoom, your cameras should be turned on throughout the meeting time, with no distracting backgrounds please.

Additionally, I respectfully request that you leave your cameras on, even if you need to briefly step away from the computer. Contact me if you are having technical difficulties so that your lack of video or sound is not misunderstood as inattentiveness.

I will try to take breaks during out live meetings to help you avoid Zoom fatigue. Attendance is a *crucial* component of your learning and class really should not be missed as I **do not intend to record these live meetings**. While I understand that there may be circumstances that require you to miss class please be sure to let me know in advance, if possible, and absence due to non-pressing issues (medical or familial emergencies) will affect your participation grade.

Asynchronous Learning may include assigned readings, text preparation, short lecture videos and comprehension questions.

Readings:

All primary and secondary readings will be provided on Canvas.



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

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Academic Integrity and Honesty:

All students are expected to follow and abide by the academic integrity and honesty policies of Yeshiva University in this course.

Library Support:

Get all the support you need with research for your courses. The Yeshiva University Libraries (library.yu.edu) offer individualized consultations that will help you locate and cite journal articles, books, and other credible sources for solid papers, presentations, and reports. Skilled information-seekers succeed academically and in the workplace. Prepare for the future by contacting the library at https://library.yu.edu/ask_the_library.

Disabilities Support:

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, rkohn1@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter and discuss any specifics with me to ensure the successful implementation of your accommodations.

Academic Support:

Academic support is available to you if you are having any difficulties that could include the following but are not limited to these: understanding assignments, navigating research papers, issues with time management of your schedule and your life or general college adjustment, please make an appointment with Dr. Beth Hait. She is available Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9am - 6pm. To make an appointment, go to yu2.mywconline.com. Click on the arrow next to "Academic Advisement" and scroll down to "Student Academic Support".



Weeks and Topics*

Monday (Asynchronous)	Wednesday (In-Person/Synchronous Zoom)
	1/20 Introduction to Course: Poetry vs. Prose
1/25 Prayer/Poetry in Tanakh	1/27 Sefer Tehillim (on Zoom for all)
2/1 Self-Study of Tehillim Selection	2/3 Sefer Tehillim: Structure and Style
2/8 Self-Study of Tehillim Selection	2/10 Development of Tefillah Bais I/Bais II/
2/15 Self-Study of Tehillim Selection	2/17 The Role of Tehillim after the Temple's destruction
2/22 Tehillim Project Selection	2/24 Piyyut - Early
3/1 Tehillim Project	3/3 Piyyut - Rishonim/Hasidei Ashkenaz
3/8 Tehillim Project	3/10 Midterm (Tehillim Project Due) Piyyut
3/15 Self-Study of Tehillim Selection	3/17 Piyyut/Jewish Poetry in Spain
3/22 Psalms and Western Literature (In person/Synch. Zoom)	Pesach Break
Pesach Break	4/7 Early Modern Poetry - Kabbalists
4/12 Psalms and Western Literature (In person/Synchronous Zoom)	4/14 Early Modern Poetry – תחינות
4/19 Psalms and Western Literature (In person/ Synchronous Zoom)	4/21 Holocaust
4/26 Psalms and Western Literature (In person/ Synchronous Zoom)	4/28 Modern State of Israel
5/3 Conclusion	5/5 Reading Day
Final Assignment: Friday 5/14	

*Subject to change and change of instructional method as we reevaluate over the course of the semester.

Looking forward to a Wonderful Semester Studying Together!