Instructor:  
Rachel Adelman, PhD  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
Professor in Hebrew Bible at Hebrew College

Contact:  
E-Mail radelman@hebrewcollege.edu  
Or: adelmanr@gmail.com  
Office: 216  
Hours: Tuesday 9 - 11 a.m., or by appointment at other times.  
Phone: 617-955-7122

Spring Semester (meetings):  

Beit Midrash Thursday 9:15-11:15; Class 11:30 am – 1:00 pm

Description

In this course students will engage a deep reading of three of the Five Megillot: Esther, Song of Songs, and the Book of Ruth. We will consider the historical context and genre of their composition, as well as their significance with respect to the liturgical year (Purim, Passover, and Shavuot). Special attention will be given to the dramatic presentation and character development, along with accompanying classical parshanut, midrash, literary commentary, modern feminist readings and creative responses to these texts.

Requirements:

- Year 1 & 2 of Humash (plus parshanut), and one course on Prophets (navi) or the academic equivalent; Hebrew VII or above and/or the approval of the professor.

Goals:

- Reinforce text reading skills of Tanakh in the original Hebrew.
- Train ourselves in the distinction between peshat (plain meaning, contextual reading) and derash (applied or extended meaning of the text), and the tools each level of exegesis requires.
- Introduce students to traditions of interpretation and their respective forms: historical-contextual interpretation, as well as PARDES (peshat, remez, derash, sod), drawing from classical midrash and Medieval exegetes.
- Sensitize students to the literary patterns, biblical poetry (parallelism), feminist perspectives, as
well as major themes in the *Hamesh Megillot*.

- Develop students’ interpretive “voice” in reading *Hamesh Megillot* in the contemporary context.

**Required Texts:**

- *Tanakh* (complete) in Hebrew to be brought to Class each week
- *Hamesh Megillot* (Mosad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem 1973) OR *Miqra’ot Gedolot* on *Hamesh Megillot*.
- All other readings will be placed “on Reserve” in the library and/or uploaded to “Schoology”.

**Course Requirements and Evaluation:**

1. **Participation** (10%). Attendance and active involvement in discussion is critical to progress in this course. Preparation for class each week entails thorough Havruta study of a selection from *Hamesh Megillot* in the original Hebrew, plus a daf mekorot (source sheet with guideline questions for the Beit Midrash), and at least one secondary source, introducing a critical article/reading pertinent to the passage at hand.

2. **Three Short Papers** (60%). (3-5 pages each, 1,500-2,000 words).
   a) Thematic or literary exploration on Esther. Questions of intertextuality, composition, authorship, historical context, literary characteristics. **Due March 2nd** (before Purim)
   b) History of interpretation on Song of Songs. Take one chapter from *Song*, and make a study of one of the following interpretations: *Targum* (Aramaic), Song of Songs Rabbah, *Zohar, Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, or one Medieval Exegete (e.g. Ibn Ezra, Rashi, or Gersonides). **Due April 13th**, after Pesach.
   c) Modern Feminist Reading (either a creative piece or a short research paper) on Ruth. Due

3. **Oral presentation** (30%) based on any passage in *Esther, Song of Songs, or Ruth*. It can be a “mini-shiur” or an extended Devar Torah, based either on one of your short papers or on a new topic.
UNIT I: Esther (3 Weeks)

1. **Week 1**, Thurs. Feb. 5th: Introduction to Esther: genre, relationship to canon, historical context and composition. Setting the Stage of the Persian Court.

   **Primary Reading**: Esther chapters 1 & 2.


2. **Week 2**. Thurs. Feb. 12th: The Decree of Genocide; Haman’s Vendetta; interpretive traditions on Esther; **intertextuality & midrash**.

   **Primary Reading**: Esther chapters 3-6, plus *daf mekorot*; Targum I & II (Aramaic) and the Septuagint on Esther (“Additions to Esther” from the Apocrypha).


   **No Class on Feb. 19th**: School-wide day of learning

3. **Week 3**. Thurs. Feb. 22nd: Denouement; reversals.

   **Primary Reading**: Esther chapters 7-10.


   **Assignment #1 on Esther, due March 2nd** (before Purim)

   **No Class on March 5th**: Purim

Unit II: Song of Songs (4 Classes)

4. **Week 4**: Thurs. March 12th *Shir ha-Shirim* in the making of the biblical canon; the attribution to King Solomon; the plain sense (*peshat*), unique linguistic features of the Song; use of metaphor, imagery of flora/fauna/springtime.

   **Primary Reading**: Reading of chapters 1-2:7; 2:8-3:5; Bloch & Bloch’s commentary.

5. Week 5: Thurs. March 19th. Is the love consummated? The allegorical/midrashic reading: the four oaths to the Daughters of Jerusalem; the timing of Redemption – “leaping over hills, skipping over mountains”.

Primary Reading: Chapter 4:1-5:1. The allegorical/midrashic reading: the four oaths to the Daughters of Jerusalem; the timing of Redemption – “leaping over hills, skipping over mountains”. Other Sources: Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, Mekhita, Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, and so forth.

Secondary Reading: Daniel Boyarin, “The Song of Songs, Lock or Key: The Holy Song as a Mashal,” from Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990), 105-116, 154-155.


Primary Reading: Song of Songs ch. 5; selections from Soloveitchik’s Kol Dodi Dofek.


7. Week 7: Thurs. April 2nd “Love is as strong as Death” and the Return to Eden.

Primary Reading: Song of Songs chs. 6-8; selections from Franz Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption; selections of modern Israeli poetry & songs.

No Class on April 9th: Pesach

Assignment #2 on Song of Songs, due April 13th (after Pesach)

Unit III: Ruth (4 Classes)

8. Week 8: Thurs. April 16th “From the Plains of Moab”: The Context of the Book of Ruth (Period of the Judges); introducing the theme of geulah; origin of Moabites & attitude to Moab; the meaning of names.

Primary Reading: close reading of chapter 1; Gen. 18 (Lot and his daughters) & daf mekorot.

Secondary Reading: Selections from Eskenazi/Frymer-Kensky, JPS Commentary: Ruth (2011), xv-xxi, xxvii-xxxviii, xlv-xlvi; Ed Greenstein, ‘Reading Strategies in

9. Week 9: April 23rd “In the Fields of Bethlehem”: Introducing Boaz as “mod’a”, close kin/goel; background story of Judah and Tamar; levirate marriage, introducing the theme of hesed, and blessing in the name of God.
   Primary Reading: close reading of chapter 2 & daf mekorot.

10. Third Class (April 30th) “At the threshing floor”: study of kri/ktiv; the agricultural background of the harvest festival (leket & shikekha); meeting the stranger (ger).
    Primary Reading: close reading of chapter 3; Genesis 38 (Judah and Tamar).

    Primary Reading: close reading of chapter 4, plus daf mekorot.

12. Student Presentations May 14th

13. Student Presentations May 21st

Final Paper on Ruth Due on Last Week of Classes, Monday May 18th

Bibliography

Primary Sources and Classic Commentary:

- Miqra’ot Gedolot on Hamesh Megillot
- Midrash Esther Rabbah, Ruth Rabbah, Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah
- Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana
• Selections from the Babylonian Talmud, esp. *b. Megillah*.

• *Targum Rishon* and *Sheni* (Aramaic) to Esther

• *Septuagint* (LXX, also called “Additions to Esther” in the Apocrypha)

**Modern Commentary:**


Amos Chacham, *Hamesh Megillot [Da’at Mikra]* (Jerusalem: Mosad haRav Kook 1987). [Hebrew].


