Very often, religious boundaries get a bad rap, as boundaries lead so often to insularity that it is easy to conflate the two. But all values-based communities have to consider how to respond to challenges to group identity and core values or risk values-assimilation (in the case of too few or too weak boundaries) or cultural impotence (in the case of absolute insularity).

In this course, we will learn the second half of the second chapter of Tractate Avodah Zarah, which deals with a selection of food restrictions. We will (try to) avoid the blunt (and binary) question of whether boundaries are “good” or “bad,” and instead (try to) ask more nuanced questions, such as: Whom is this boundary intended to keep separate? What is the means of boundary maintenance? Is it effective? Does it err on the side of excessive insularity, or dangerous permeability? (How) can it be usefully translated to other cultural settings? We will also (try) not (to) assume that all boundaries in our chapter have the same goals, means, effectiveness, etc. and will think about why legislators choose different means of boundary maintenance in different cases.

Objectives
1) To increase our facility and speed in reading, translating, and understanding the text of the Talmud.
2) To increase our ability to draw out underlying concerns/religious impulses in the Talmudic text and analyze the ways in which Talmudic language illuminates and/or obscures those underlying concerns/religious impulses.
3) To develop our ability in reading Tosafot and reduce feelings of intimidation when encountering long medieval commentaries.
4) To consider seriously the intents, means, unintended consequences, and effectiveness of various strategies in constructing religious/values-based boundaries in Talmud and Tosafot, and to see continuities and/or disjunctures between the two.

Required Texts
Massekhet Avodah Zarah. We will be studying the second half of פרק де ב of זרה. You must have a copy of the “Vilna Shas” edition of the tractate we are studying and not a Steinsalz (Hebrew/Hebrew) edition. We may, from time to time, explore passages in the מסכת that were not assigned prior to class, so bringing photocopies or printouts from Bar-Ilan is not sufficient. In addition, though it is not required, you are strongly encouraged to own a relatively recent copy of the tractate, for two reasons: a) editions printed in roughly the last 20 years or so will have bold-faced דיבורים מתחילים in the פירוש, which will make you a much happier student. b) Education scholarship has shown how much students' experience of Talmud is influenced by the material nature of learning; old copies of Talmud, with dry, thin, and/or yellowed pages, affect the way many people think about the content of our study in negative ways. It’s thus worth the extra money to buy yourself a copy of the tractate that you will enjoy touching and looking at. Israel Bookstore has ordered a variety of copies, including many copies of the עץ Vehadar edition, which, while expensive and not required, is highly recommended for its helpful tools.

Course Requirements
1) Class participation/preparation (25%). Attendance is required; if you know that you must miss a class, please notify me in advance. When you miss class, you are expected to find out what you missed from your hevruta and/or me and to submit, within a week of the missed class, one page (or more, if you choose) summarizing your understanding of what was discussed that day.

You will be regularly called on, and your ability to read and explain the text will be a primary component of this grade. Please be aware that many people can read fluently without understanding what they are reading, while others may stutter and sound unprepared despite complete comprehension. You will be graded based on your comprehension and ability to explain, not your charismatic (or uncharismatic) reading style. If you are concerned that your reading is inaccurately conveying your preparation, please seek me out to talk about it.

2) Tosafot presentations (25%). For each long Tosafot, one student will be assigned to teach in class. The list of long Tosafots, the anticipated date of studying it in class, and the student assigned to each will be on a document on our Schoology site. When we get to that Tosafot in class, the student assigned will be expected: a) to walk us through the Tosafot, that is, to explain each step of the argument (though not necessarily to translate word-by-word); b) take and answer technical questions from the class on unclear phrases, steps in the argument, etc.; c) offer one or two brief thoughts about the Tosafot and/or its relationship to the Talmud text; and d) guide our discussion (this includes making clear pedagogical choices about how to structure conversation, e.g. whether to require hand-raising or allow more free-flowing conversation, etc.). Obviously, this means that for a Tosafot to which you are assigned, you must be even more prepared than usual, since you will be answering your colleagues' questions. You will receive feedback from me via email no later than our next class meeting.

3) Midterm review (25%). חזרה is essential to learning gemara, and in lieu of a midterm exam, you will be responsible for a review assignment, which will involve answering questions about content, translating passages, displaying understanding of technical terms, etc. This review will be graded on a high pass, pass, fail system, and anyone who fails is strongly encouraged to redo it for a passing grade. It will be handed out on Wednesday, 30 October, and due, in hard copy, at the beginning of class on Monday, 4 November.

4) End of semester oral evaluation (25%). Each student will have a 30-minute slot of time, in which we will learn one or two passages (focusing on Tosafot) together and discuss them. Your grade will be based equally on your understanding of פשט of the passage(s) as well as your demonstrating in our conversation, through comments that are rooted in the text, that you have thought about the relevance and meaning of these texts to a thoughtful Jewish life.

**Benchmarks**

By the end of this semester, you should:

1) Be able to learn a sugya for basic understanding with greater ease and speed.
2) Be able to prepare many or most comments of the Tosafot and not feel intimidated by longer Tosafots.
3) Be familiar with the most significant named authorities in Tosafot (e.g. Rabbeinu Tam, Ri, Rashbam) and say something both about their biography (when and where they lived) and their literary/legal approach.
4) Be able to speak more thoughtfully about the various kinds of boundaries communities can choose to erect, their costs and benefits, and the costs and benefits or not establishing such boundaries.