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 study 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 food laws 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 in reading, translating, and understanding the text of the Talmud.
2) To develop our ability to use collections of midrash, Yerushalmi, Bavli, and manuscripts to make sense of challenging moments in the text of the Talmud.
3) To develop an appreciation for the legal/religious thinking of independent of the Talmud text and to think about how their views about boundaries differ from each other and from those of the Rabbis.
4) 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.
5) 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.
6) To think about different approaches to Talmud study and what they offer (and what they obscure).

Required Texts
Massekhet Avodah Zarah. We will be studying the second chapter of Massekhet Avodah Zarah. We may, from time to time, explore passages in the that were not assigned prior to class, so bringing photocopies or printouts from Bar-Ilan is not sufficient. You should have a copy of the “Vilna Shas” edition with the “boys in the back,” e.g. Rosh, Rif, Mordokhai, etc. I highly recommend getting the Oz Vehadar edition (ideally) or the Shas Vilna Hadash (less so), which are more expensive, but any edition with commentators in the back will do in a pinch.

Peirush haRitva Massekhet Avodah Zarah, Mossad haRav Kook edition. We will regularly make use
of this excellent research, so I highly recommend owning this volume. Otherwise, you will be constantly making photocopies.

**Course Requirements**

1) Class participation/preparation (30%). Attendance is required; if you know that you must miss a class, please notify me in advance. When you miss class, you are expected 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) 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.

2) Outlines (25%). You will regularly be asked to prepare, in English or in Hebrew, outlines of passages in the assigned מנהיגים/(frågor/män) and/or מנהיגים, to be turned in. The outline should paraphrase each step of the מנהיגים and describe what function that step plays in the larger structure (e.g. attack, resolution, question, etc.).

4) End of semester paper (45%). You will select a מנהיגים that deals with boundary issues from anywhere in מנהיגים, ספנות. The paper will be an analysis not only of the מנהיגים, but of relevant parallel Rabbinic texts, and useful ספנות and מנהיגים. To the extent that these texts reveal different approaches, that should be described and, if possible, explained. As we spend more time together learning over the course of the semester, the goals of this paper will become clearer; we will speak more about it after Purim. The schedule for this paper is as follows:

1. You must have a מנהיגים selected and approved by me by Purim (in practical terms, this means by Friday, 14 March). Please schedule time to meet with me to begin discussing this well before Purim, especially if you have no idea how to go about choosing such a מנהיגים.

2. By Friday, 28 March, please share with me, either via email or through an in-person meeting, your initial thoughts about the מנהיגים you’ve chosen and what tools you plan on using in writing your paper.

3. By Friday, 25 April, please submit the argument of your paper and an outline of what you intend to do. (If you have parts already written, by all means feel free to submit those as well).

4. By Friday, 16 May, please submit a rough draft of your paper.

5. The paper is due Wednesday, 28 May. Please note that this date is after the end of the semester. I chose this date to give you more time to work on this if you would like, but if you do not want to have work hanging over you at the semester’s end, you should plan on having it done for Friday, 23 May.

**Schedule of topics and sugyot**

3 February: wine and vinegar (bAZ 29b)

10 February: liquor (bAZ 31a)

17 February: CANCELED—President’s Day

24 February: cheese (bAZ 34b-35b)

3 March: CANCELED—Schoolwide Day of Learning
10 March: milk and bread (bAZ 35b)

15 March: selection of sugya for final paper due

17 March: oil and rabbinic authority (bAZ 35b-36b)

24 March: intermarriage (bAZ 36b)

28 March: initial thoughts for final paper due

31 March: intermarriage (cont’d)

7 April: leniency and its anxieties (bAZ 37a-37b)

14 April: CANCELED—Erev Pesah

21 April: CANCELED—Pesah

25 April: argument and outline for final paper due

28 April: bishulei goyim (bAZ 37b-38a)

5 May: bishulei goyim (cont’d)

12 May: davar harif (bAZ 39a)

16 May: rough draft for final paper due

19 May: CANCELED—finals week