Readings in Masechet Berakhot:
Striving for Community and Kavod in Ancient Judaism

CG- RAB 552
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Fall semester 2014, offered online
4 graduate credits

The Rabbis describe the period before the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem as a time of "causeless hatred" between different sects of the Jewish people. We will explore how Rabbinic Judaism after the destruction tried to establish a community committed to Kavod as a primary value, while at the same time balancing the values of dignity and community against other Jewish values. We will explore a variety of Rabbinic texts, primarily from the first three chapters of tractate Berakhot in the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud with parallels from the Tosefta and the Talmud of the Land of Israel. Throughout, we will focus on the various ways the Rabbis use narratives alongside legal texts in order to create a complex conversation with the reader. Texts will be studied in Hebrew and in English.

Required Secondary Readings:

Students should purchase one of the following three “background” books. My favorite is Katz and Schwartz, but choose whichever one you want. Each of these books provides interesting selections from Talmud, with explanations and background to the nature of the Talmud.

All primary texts will be provided by the instructor in a bilingual format, although, at the request of the student, the texts can also be provided with vocabulary but without a full translation in order to stretch the student’s language skills.

Course Requirements:
Each week includes both a written “lecture” as well as a selection for chevrutah (paired) study. Students will engage in regular study in chevruta (online paired learning) with written responses to the chevrutah texts on the discussion board.
- Leading an online discussion about a text from one of the three background books.
- One essay due 11/2.
- One essay due 12/19.

Office hours: Each chevrutah pair will arrange for a time for study, and the instructor will participate in that study at some point during the study time.
Unit 1 (9/8-9/21) Laying the Groundwork
During this two-week unit, we’ll be looking at some foundational rabbinic texts that will help us understand and put into context the materials we will be studying from Masekhet Berakhot.

Primary texts: mAvot 1:1, mRosh haShanah 2:8-9, mEduyyot 1:3-6

Unit 2 (9/22-10/12) Syag laTorah and Rabbinic Pluralism
During this three-week unit, we'll study Mishnah Berakhot 1:1 and 1:3 about reciting the shema, and we'll examine three very different kinds of responses to these mishnayot found in the Babylonian Talmud.

Primary texts: mBerakhot 1:1, mBer 1:3, bBer10a-11a

Unit 3 (10/13-11/2) Yohara--Exceptionalism and Rabbinic social control
In this three-week unit, we'll explore the various rabbinic voices on whether a person can behave in a way that is more strict than his/her community. We'll conclude by looking at a discussion of Jewish mourning and see if there is a connection with the discussion of strict behavior.

First essay due.

Unit 4 (11/03-11/09) Kvod haMet
In this one-week unit, we'll look at an interesting case of conflicting values surrounding an exceptional circumstance: What happens to halakhic observance when there is a death and a dead body to be taken care of. We will also look at our conception of the work of the editor in the Talmud.

Unit 5 (11/10-11/24) Niddui al Kvod haRav--the Limits of Community
During this two-week unit, we'll explore how and when the rabbis considered banning people from their community. This is a long, sustained unit, which will require us to carefully compare different versions of rabbinic narratives, concluding with the famous story of the banning of R. Eliezer, known as the story of the Akhnai Oven.

Primary texts: bBer 19a, mEd 5:6-7, mTaan 3:8, mBetzah 2:6-7, tBetzah 2:16, bBM 59b

Unit 6 (11/24-12/19) Kvod haBriyot, Human Dignity
In this four-week unit, we'll study our most complex text, the rabbinic discussion of the conflict between the observance of mitzvot and the value of human dignity.

Primary texts: bBer 19b-20a, yBer 3:1

Final essay due.