Text and Context: Biblical and Rabbinic Periods
CG-HIST-541-W1
3 graduate credits
Dr. Barry Mesch, Instructor
Fall 2015-2016

Text and Context: Biblical and Rabbinic Periods is a course with multiple purposes. First of all, it is intended to introduce the student to these two periods of Jewish history and also to introduce the study of classical Jewish texts. There is no prior background required for this course. The only requirement is that one is a graduate student (or an advanced undergraduate). What this means is that this is an introductory course taught at the graduate level. In the course, we will be concerned not only with the historical narratives and the content of the texts but we will also focus on the historical and cultural context and the different strategies employed by scholars in making sense of these texts. We will be looking at the questions that scholars have posed and the kinds of answers that they have proposed. Each generation develops a new set of questions that allow the scholar to interrogate the text anew. We will spend some time trying to understand what these questions are, and the strategies and methodologies that have been utilized in finding answers to these questions. These strategies and methodologies might include archaeology, sociology, anthropology, philology, theology, comparative religion, philosophy, gender studies, history, literary analysis, etc.

This course will also be a kind of introduction to what graduate study in the field of Jewish Studies and/or religious studies can be. You will be reading a lot of texts but also reading an even larger amount of secondary studies – articles, chapters of books, etc. You will be asked not just to comment on what the person says but also what he is “doing”. What is she trying to prove? What questions is she asking? What are the central strategies she is using? We need to understand the fundamental assumptions of the different approaches and the kinds of evidence each approach brings to bear on its subject matter. We will also be peeking into the literature around Biblical and Rabbinic texts and history and looking at the scholarly discussion and controversies taking place in the academic world today. You may find that the academic discourse sometimes seems to be at odds with ways that you have thought about Torah or Mitzvot or Biblical or Rabbinic characters or other areas of your Jewish intellectual and spiritual life. In this course we will explore a variety of ways of encountering the text and the tradition including more traditional ways of experiencing Jewish texts. Hopefully, you will come away with an expansive frame of reference in which all of the approaches can be understood as complementary to each other as opposed to competing with each other.

Another objective of the course is to introduce you to the use of newer digital strategies in doing research in Jewish studies. The digital world has made possible new and more efficient ways of collecting bibliographic data and making use of this data in writing.
papers and doing research. Of course, there is no escape from the necessity of reading books and articles and texts but now you can gain access to a huge amount of material online without ever leaving your internet connection.

There are no text books for the course. Your readings will either be scanned or available in Ebrary an online full-text resource of books available through the library website (see assignment for Lesson 1). The only book you need to purchase is The Jewish Study Bible (Oxford University Press). This is a wonderful addition to your library and has excellent translations and commentaries on all the books of the Bible and up-to-date essays on many aspects of Biblical studies.

Each week you will be given an assigned set of readings with introductory comments and a series of directed questions related to the readings and the ongoing class discussions. This will provide the context for the discussion threads. Every student will need to post in these discussion threads. Along with posting your responses to the directed questions you should also try to enter into the conversation and respond to other students. No one needs to respond to all the questions or to all of the postings. One should also exercise a certain amount of discipline so that one’s postings are not overly long (or overly short).

There will be a similar set of introductions and comments related to texts from the primary sources. This will happen most weeks and your participation in this discussion is also required.

There is a final paper which is called a Bibliographic Essay. In this paper, students choose a topic related to either the Biblical or Rabbinic period and do research on how contemporary scholars and scholarship deal with that topic. You will receive more information on that assignment in a few weeks. About 5 weeks into the course there will be a short written assignment which will be a “tune-up” for the final Bibliographic Essay. You will be asked to choose a topic and submit a bibliography on that topic making use of digital software that we will learn how to use and master.