Theology of Jewish Prayer
Course Syllabus
Ebn Leader, Instructor
RB-JTHT-100
Fall 2014-2015

Hebrew College Rabbinical School
Shanah Aleph

A one-semester course for rabbinical students in their first year. In the context of the Shanah Aleph theme of tefillah this course provides exposure to Jewish writings on the inner life of prayer as taught by various masters and the theologies that both underlie prayer and proceed from it. While there is a historical element to the course (particularly in the first half) it is also meant to provide an opportunity for students to think through, articulate, and discuss with others their own theology of prayer. The course will thus hopefully provide a bridge between the theoretical study of the traditions and history of prayer and the student’s personal practice.

EXPECTATIONS:
- Students should have read and thought about the listed readings in preparation for each session. In the week following each session students should reflect on the implications of the discussion for their personal practice.
- Due November 3: Mid-term paper, critique and personal response to The Art of Public Prayer. 5 pages.
- Due December 19: Final paper describing your own thoughts on the theology of prayer. 10-15 pages.

CLASS SCHEDULE:
- Monday, 11:30 AM – 1:00 PM, 9/8/14 – 12/15/14

NO CLASS:
- September 29 – HH break.
- November 24 – Yom Iyyun.
- December 15 – Reading and writing week.

Session 1 – WHAT IS PRAYER?
- “Prayer” from The Encyclopedia of Religion.
- Selection of prayers (to be distributed).
Session 2 – BIBLICAL PRAYER
- Selection of biblical prayers (to be distributed).

- Raphael Patai – “Symbolism and Function of the Temple”.
- Mishna Berachot, Ch. 4.

Session 4 – DIFFERENT MODES OF RABBINIC PRAYER
- Selection of talmudic texts (to be distributed).

Session 5 - JEWISH PHILOSOPHY: MAIMONIDES ON PRAYER
- Kenneth Seeskin – “Why is Anyone Perplexed” and “Describing God”.
- Marvin Fox – “Prayer and the Religious Life”.

Session 6 – MYSTICAL PRAYER: THE ZOHAR
- Isaiah Tishbi – “Prayer and Devotion”.

Session 7 – PRAYER IN HASSIDUT: THE BAAL SHEM TOV
- Selection of Hassidic texts (to be distributed).

Session 8 – LOVE AND FEAR: SOLOVEITCHIK AND HARTMAN
- Joseph Soloveitchik – Reflections on the Amidah”.
- David Hartman –“Fundamentals of a Covenantal Anthropology” and “The Spirit of Judaic Prayer”.

Session 9 – OBEDIENCE VS. COVENANT: LEIBOWITZ AND HARTMAN
- David Hartman – “Individual and community in Prayer”.

Session 10 – THE THEOLOGY BEHIND “MISHKAN TEPHILA”
- Guest teacher: Rabbi Elaine Zecher, Temple Israel, Boston. Texts for preparation will be announced.
Session 11 - DAVVENOLOGY: REB ZALMAN


Session 12 - PRAYING TO THE ONE: GREEN AND FALK

- Marcia Falk – selections from *The Book of Blessings*.

Articles for the Course (posted on Schoology)

Midterm Assignment


Most of our study this semester is focused on *tefilah* as an expression of a relationship with God, mostly from the perspective of individual experience. Hoffman’s book offers an interesting contrast. He is attempting to write an ecumenical book and thus attempts to avoid specific descriptions of the relation to God that are culture-specific. His focus is on the nature of public worship, and most specifically the forms and structures that enable it.

Please write a response to Hoffman’s book, focusing on the following two categories:

1. Respond to Hoffman on his terms. Identify 1-2 themes or underlying premises of Hoffman’s work that were useful for your thinking about prayer and 1-2 themes or underlying premises that you disagree with or question. Explain how these ideas were helpful or why you question them.

2. Try to apply Hoffman’s ideas and structures to your own personal theology of prayer. Which of his suggestions might enhance your personal experience of prayer as you understand your relationship with God and which would not? How and why?

If you would like to focus your writing on something else in the book please discuss it with me ahead of time.

Length: Approximately 5 pages.

Due: November 3.
Final Assignment

Articulate your own theology of prayer:
• How do you understand God?
• How do you understand having a relationship with God?
• What is the role of prayer in this relationship?
• What are your goals in prayer?
• What are the main challenges you face?

Set your understanding of prayer in the context of everything we have studied this semester.
• What trends and ideas are you continuing?
• What are you responding to?
• What are you re-interpreting?
• What are you leaving behind?
(You can also introduce other theologies of prayer that we have not discussed in class)

Give examples of the ways your understanding of prayer interacts with traditional Jewish forms of prayer – particularly a siddur, but other communal or individual forms of prayer as well.

Length: 10-15 pages.
Due: December 19th.