The Body in Jewish Thought (SPJT205/48892)

Summer 2017

July 3 - 27, 2017

Class schedule: Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 13:30 - 16:30

Reception Hours: By appointment.

Dr. Eliezer Shore

Course Description:

Are we our bodies, or do we have bodies? Does G-d have a body, and if not, how do we understand the many depictions of Him found in scripture? Is the body a hindrance or a blessing to spiritual growth?

This course will examine the unique and variegated approach to the body in Jewish thought. Addressing five or six major body-related issues, we will examine their historical and philosophical development over the centuries. After a general introduction of the place of the body in ancient Jewish religious practice, we will learn about such topics as the Divine body, from its scriptural roots, through Rabbinic texts, down to medieval Kabbalah; issues of ritual purity and impurity (both men and women’s); asceticism, indulgence and the problem (or benefit) of food and sex; the body as a symbol and locus of meaning; and the gendered body and the “body of engenderment” in Jewish law and theology, among many other topics.
Students will see how issues of the body lie at the very heart of Jewish practice and belief, from the first bite of the proverbial apple to the long-awaited redemption and the final Resurrection.

**Grading System:**

1. Class participation is an integral part of this course. Both in-class participation and between-class preparation of texts count toward this. (A workbook of sources will be made available). (40%)

5. Final exam (60%). The final exam is comprised of short essay questions, drawn from classroom discussion and reading, and one long essay question, based upon student’s unique, independent research in the course of the semester.

**Syllabus:**

Lectures are topic based, with 2-3 session periods devoted to each topic, depending on student interest, discussion and involvement. Readings for each topic include those which provide basic, background knowledge (such as can be found in online encyclopedias) as well as academic books and articles and those written by religious scholars. Primary sources are provided in translation.

**Background Reading on Classic Jewish Texts:**


**Topic 1: G-d’s Body:** A discussion of various views, from Biblical to Kabbalistic literature on the possibility of the Divine having a body:

Reading:


**Topic 2: Made in G-d’s image**: Various discussions, from Talmudic to Modern, of what it means for human beings to be created in the Divine Image.

Reading:


**Topic 3: The body as a religious symbol**: Beyond the general concept of the body being created in the Divine image, numerous texts, see each separate component of the body as being a symbol for a multitude of concepts – from the homiletic to the mystical.

Reading:


**Topic 4: Circumcision:** A discussion of the history and meaning of circumcision, the ultimate “bodily symbol.”

**Reading:**

**Topic 5: Varieties of Desire:** Approaches to sexual desire from Biblical times until late Kabbalistic and Hasidic thought.

**Reading:**


**Topic 6: The Ascetic Turn:** The rise of asceticism in Talmudic, medieval and Kabbalah though.

Reading:


**Topic 7: The Modest Body:** The body in society, throughout Jewish history and the clothing that covers or reveals it.

Reading:


**Topic 8: Purity and Impurity:** Menstrual laws and their contemporary application. The laws of Biblical impurity and their implications for cognitive and spiritual experience.

**Reading:**

**Topic 9: The Resurrection of the Dead:** various understandings of this disputed Jewish “principle of faith”

**Reading:**