

## English 399-05: Special Topics: Jewish Literature of Exile and Return

Pr. Bizzell—Spring 2009—Stein 316

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Hours: M 2-4, W 11-3, by appointment (I am often available in late afternoon T, R)

Please feel free to consult me about any aspect of our course work.

### Required texts:

Aciman, André, editor. Letters of Transit. New York: New Press, 2000.

Aciman, André. Out of Egypt. New York: Picador, 1994.

Antin, Mary. The Promised Land. 1912; rpt. Champaign, Illinois: Book Jungle, n.d.

Eve, Nomi. The Family Orchard. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.

Hoffman, Eva. Lost in Translation. New York: Penguin, 1989.

Scheindlin, Raymond P. A Short History of the Jewish People. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Scliar, Moacyr. The Centaur in the Garden. 1980; trans. Margaret A. Neves 1984; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

Yehoshua, A. B. Mr. Mani. 1989; trans. Hillel Halkin, New York: Harcourt, 1992.

Yeziarska, Anzia. Bread Givers. 1925; rpt. New York: Persea Books, 1999.

### Recommended text:

Berlin, Adele, and Marc Zvi Bretler, editors. The Jewish Study Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. (You may use any edition of the Bible.)

### Course Plan

This course groups together a wide variety of texts (poetry, nonfiction prose, and fiction) written in many different times (from pre-history to the present) and places (the Middle East, Europe, South and North America) and languages (Hebrew, Arabic, English, Brazilian). Why? Because all these texts were written by Jews.

You may ask whether this is a sufficient reason. Certainly, our authors have identified as Jews in very different ways, and some have wished to abandon that identity altogether. Yet all have discovered, in one way or another, that Jewish identity—or identities—are

almost impossible to eradicate. Non-Jews may think of Jewishness only in terms of Judaism, one of the world's religions (and internally diverse). But adhering to a particular religious practice is only a small part of being Jewish. For centuries there has been a culturally and racially distinct Jewish people—and those centuries unfold a variegated history whose unbroken record stretches from the present day back to early human times. Anyone who knows that he or she is Jewish, or has a Jewish parent or grandparent, carries some connection to this complex history.

Jewish national identity is unusual in that it has persisted over the centuries due to this shared consciousness of a common history and culture—including, especially, the Hebrew language—in spite of the fact that Jews have mostly not lived in their own land. There is a Jewish homeland, so designated in the foundational texts of Jewish identity in the Bible: that land today known as Israel and as Palestine. And Jews have lived there more or less continuously since Biblical times, but mostly not as its rulers or even as its majority population. Jews have had to learn to survive in many different, and often hostile, places.

Thus the Jewish experience is marked to an unusual degree by dislocation, emigration, exile, and sometimes, return to a “promised land,” whether the one designated in the Bible or somewhere else. The texts collected for this course have this experience in common: not only are the authors all Jews, but they are also all exiles. We shall see what they have made of that experience in literary art. We shall also make connections with the exilic experiences of other peoples—in our era, displacement is becoming a common fate.

### **Assignments and Grading**

Because you need to understand Jewish history to understand Jewish literature, we will read a short history of the Jewish people and I will give you a total of six quizzes on the material in this book. Your grades on these quizzes will be averaged together and will constitute 20% of your final grade.

You will also have the opportunity to write two seven-page papers, for which I will give you detailed assignment sheets later. Each paper will count for 20% of your final grade. You may rewrite either or both of these papers if you wish, in which case I will record for that assignment the average of the original grade and the grade on the rewrite.

You will also write a final exam that will count for 40% of your final grade. It will include short-answer historical questions similar to material covered in the quizzes and literary-critical essay questions.

Please feel free to consult me about any writing assignment, quiz or exam for this course. You should also feel free to consult Writers' Workshop tutors; they are an excellent resource. I expect you to adhere to the College's policy on academic honesty in all your work for me, and I will call you on it if you don't. Any questions about whether you are following this policy correctly can certainly be addressed to me, without penalty.

## Syllabus

All reading should be completed by the first class meeting of each week. Assignments in “RPS” refer to A Short History of the Jewish People and there will be a quiz on each of these assignments.

### I. A History of Exile

Jan. 18:

Introduction; discuss Hoffman, “The New Nomads” (in Letters of Transit).

Jan. 20, 22:

Read in RPS Chapters 1, 2, 3; in the Bible, Genesis Chapters 3 and 12-50, Exodus Chapters 1 and 13-17, Jeremiah Chapter 31, Ezekiel Chapters 47-48, and Psalms 74, 79, 105, 106, 137, and 147.

Jan. 27, 29:

Read in RPS Chapters 4, 5; hand-out on medieval Jewish poetry will be provided.

### II. Living in Exile

Feb. 3, 5:

Read in RPS Chapter 7; in Antin, The Promised Land, Chapters I-VII.

Feb. 10, 12:

Read in RPS Chapter 6; in Aciman, Out of Egypt, Chapters 1, 2, 3.

NO CLASS on Feb. 10 (I will be away at a professional meeting), but you are asked to screen the film The Disputation, which will be included in your first paper assignment; it is on reserve at the Media Resource Center in Stein.

Feb. 17, 19:

Read in Aciman, Chapters 4, 5, 6; in Scliar, The Centaur in the Garden, pp. 1-98.

Feb. 24, 26:

Read remaining sections of Scliar; Said, “No Reconciliation Allowed” (in Letters of Transit).

DUE on 2/26: first paper.

### SPRING BREAK

Mar. 10, 12:

Read Mukherjee, “Imagining Homelands” and Simic, “Refugees” (in Letters of Transit)

NO CLASS on Mar. 12 (I will be away at a professional meeting), but you are asked to screen the film Hester Street, which will be included in your second paper assignment; it is on reserve at the Media Resource Center.

### **III. Women Come to America**

Mar. 17, 19:

Read in RPS Chapters 8, 9; remaining chapters in Antin.

Mar. 24, 26:

Read Yeziarska, Bread Givers.

Mar. 31, Apr. 2:

Read Hoffman, Lost in Translation.

### **IV: Return to Israel**

Apr. 7:

Read in RPS Chapters 10, 11; hand-out on Martin Buber's letter to Mahatma Gandhi, other early Zionist documents will be provided.

DUE: second paper.

### **EASTER/PASSOVER BREAK**

Apr. 14, 16:

Read Yehoshua, Mr. Mani.

Apr. 21, 23:

Finish Mr. Mani; read Eve, The Family Orchard.

Apr. 28:

Eve, continued.

Final exam date/time tba.