
Kabbalah versus Rationalism in Jewish Thought

Dr. Avi Kadish

Course Number: 702.2247

Class Time: TBA

Class Location: TBA

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Course Description:

Objective reason versus subjective experience: are they complementary or contradictory? What is more important: truth or morality? *Can* the Jewish tradition be read in a rational way? *Should* it be read that way? Or should it be read as a key to the secrets of God and the cosmos?

For the past thousand years, Jewish thought has been tied to an internal debate between tradition, rationalism, and mysticism (eventually known as “Kabbalah”). Indeed, Kabbalah first began to flower and flourish as a kind of vehement opposition to Jewish rationalism. On the one hand, Jewish philosophers made a profound effort to apply systematic, universal logic to the Torah of Israel. But on the other hand, there was a fierce and ongoing reaction to that effort all along, an opposition which led to the development of a rich mystical alternative. These two ways of understanding Judaism are at once exceedingly different and yet eerily reminiscent of one another. This course will examine a centuries-long debate about the core meaning of Judaism from several different angles.

Our major focus will be on the deep tension between the philosophy of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) and that of the *Zohar* (the foundational text of Jewish mysticism). The vivid contrast between these two ways of thinking will provide us with paradigms that can help us to better understand Jewish thought and Jewish life from the Middle Ages to our own day and age.

Course Requirements:

- Weekly reading assignments: After reading the material each week, students will give feedback and engage in discussion of that reading in designated forums to be found on the course website (Moodle). The online feedback and discussion by students will be followed by an overall discussion at the beginning of the next class.
- Oral Presentation and Short Term Paper: The student is to choose a primary text or two relating to any issue in Kabbalah or Jewish Thought, which s/he will read, teach and analyze together with the rest of the class. At the end of the semester a short written paper will be submitted based on those text(s) and on the class presentation.
- Final Examination

Final Grade:

Weekly Reading Assignments (online written feedback and discussion): 30%

Oral Presentation and Short Term Paper (both on the same topic): 30%

Final Examination: 40%

Course Outline and Reading List

Week 1. Before Rationalism and Kabbalah (1): God, Creation and Humanity (Midrashic and Talmudic sources)

*Collected Excerpts from Primary Sources

Week 2. Before Rationalism and Kabbalah (2): The Rabbinic Outlook as Expressed in Prayer

Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, 21-64.

*Collected Excerpts from Primary Sources

Week 3. *The Eight Chapters* (Preface, chapter one)

Lawrence Kaplan, "An Introduction to Maimonides' *Eight Chapters*", *The Edah Journal* 2:2 (5762).

*Primary Text for weeks 3-7: "Eight Chapters" in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, pp. 361-386.

Week 4. *The Eight Chapters* (continued): chapters 2-3

Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 7-91 (chapter 1).

*Primary Text for weeks 3-7: "Eight Chapters" in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, pp. 361-386.

Week 5. *The Eight Chapters* (continued): chapters 4-5

Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 92-133 (chapter 2).

*Primary Text for weeks 3-7: "Eight Chapters" in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, pp. 361-386.

Week 6. *The Eight Chapters* (continued): chapters 6-7

Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 134-163 (chapter 3).

*Primary Text for weeks 3-7: "Eight Chapters" in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, pp. 361-386.

Week 7. *The Eight Chapters* (continued): chapter 8 (human free will)

Presentation Topics Due

Louis Jacobs, "Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will". *Conservative Judaism* 34:1 (1980), pp. 4-16 (available online).

*Primary Text for weeks 3-7: "Eight Chapters" in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, pp. 361-386.

Week 8. An Introduction to the Zohar (1): Historical background

Arthur Green, "Introduction" in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, translation and commentary by Daniel Matt (Stanford, 2014), vol. I, pp. xxxi-xliv.

*Primary text for week 8: Heikhalot literature (sample)

Week 9. An Introduction to the Zohar (2): The World of the *Sefirot*

Arthur Green, "Introduction" in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, translation and commentary by Daniel Matt (Stanford, 2014), vol. I, pp. xlv-liii.

*Primary text for week 9: The Rose and the Lily (Zohar)

Week 10. An Introduction to the Zohar (3): The Origin of the *Zohar*

Arthur Green, "Introduction" in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, translation and commentary by Daniel Matt (Stanford, 2014), vol. I, pp. liv-lxxxii.

*Primary text for week 10: The Rose and the Lily, continued (Zohar)

Week 11. The Garden of Eden in the Zohar

Earliest Date for Oral Presentations

Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*, Princeton University Press, 8-33 (and notes pp. 171-75).

*Primary text for week 11: The Garden of Eden (Zohar)

Week 12. Sacrifice and Prayer in Maimonides and the Zohar

Oral Presentations (continued)

Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, pp. 1-32 (chapter 1).

*Collected excerpts from primary sources: Prayer and Sacrifice (Maimonides and Zohar)

Week 13. Hasidic Prayer

Final Date for Oral Presentations

Louis Jacobs, "Hasidic Prayer," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, pp. 330–362.

*Collected excerpts from primary sources: Prayer in Hasidism (Maimonides and Zohar)

Week 14. Final Examination