

## **MODERN YIDDISH LITERATURE AND CULTURE**

Jewish Studies: 563:386:01  
(Comp. Lit.: 195:395:02)  
(German: 470:384:01)

### **PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS**

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### **Course Description**

This course offers an introduction to the literary and cultural activity of Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century. Materials include prose fiction, autobiography, poetry, and drama by major writers (including Sholem Aleichem, Y. L. Peretz, S. Ansky, and Isaac Bashevis Singer), as well as a selection of Yiddish films. Knowledge of Yiddish is not required; all readings are in English.

The course focuses on the distinctive role that Yiddish played in modern Jewish culture during a period when the language was the vernacular of the majority of world Jewry. The course examines how “Yiddish modernism” took shape in different venues and genres, and it considers larger, overarching issues, especially the role that this traditional vernacular language played as a vehicle for modernist ideas during a period of extraordinary upheaval.

### **Course Learning Goals**

- Students will become familiar with key authors, works, and movements of modern Yiddish literature and culture, from the turn of the twentieth century to the present.
- Students will understand these works of literature and culture in the historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts of their creation, focusing on the encounter of Yiddish speaking Jews with modernity.
- Students will develop their ability to analyze a work of literature or culture in writing.

## Course books

Required:

- Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* (Random House) ISBN: 9780805210699
- I.L. Peretz, *The I. L. Peretz Reader* (Yale University Press) ISBN: 9780300092455
- S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk and Other Writings* (Yale University Press) ISBN: 9780300092509

Recommended (also on reserve in Alexander Library):

- Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) ISBN: 9780253214188.
- Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: NYU Press, 2005) ISBN: 9780814736852

## Course Requirements

**Class attendance, preparedness, and participation:** Regular attendance of class and active participation in class discussion is required. Students are expected to come to class on time, having prepared the reading or other assignment due that day, with comments, questions, etc., regarding the assigned material; to respect the protocols of classroom conduct (e.g., arriving promptly, turning off cell phones and laptops, not eating during class, avoiding distracting chatter); to check their email regularly for class announcements (e.g., changes in schedule or assignments); and to turn in written work on the dates due. Students who expect to miss one or two classes should use the University absence reporting website <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/> to indicate the date and reason for their absence. An email is automatically sent to the instructor. Students with three unexcused absences (excused absences being illness, family emergency, etc.) will have their course grade reduced by one full grade (e.g., from A to B). Students with six or more unexcused absences will receive an F for the course. *Students who find that they are unable to attend class regularly for some pressing reason should notify their dean as well as the professor as soon as possible.*

**Two guided analyses:** A guided analysis is an essay of 4-5 double-spaced pages (ca. 1000-1500 words), in which students write an analysis of an assigned text or other exercise, addressing questions provided by the instructor. Guidelines for guided analyses will be distributed at least two weeks before they are due. Students are required to write two guided analyses during the semester; see Class Schedule for due dates.

**Four response papers:** A response paper is a reflective essay of 2-3 double-spaced pages (ca. 500-700 words), in which students write a response to a text or film assigned for class; reaction papers are due the day that the text or film is to be discussed and may not be turned in afterwards. Guidelines for reaction papers will be distributed at least one week before they are due. Students are required to turn in four out of eight reaction papers over the course of the semester; it is the student's choice which response papers to write; see Class Schedule for due dates.

**Final examination:** A take-home examination that will consist of a series of identifications and an essay question. Examination will be distributed on the last day of class; due date (during exam period) to be announced.

*All written work that a student submits must be his/her own independent effort. Students must cite properly all outside sources consulted in preparing written assignments. Failure to comply with this policy can result in failure of the course.*

Course grades will be decided as follows: guided analyses (25%), reaction papers (25%), final exam (25%), class preparedness and participation (25%).

## **CLASS SCHEDULE**

Key to readings:

[R] = on reserve in Alexander Library

[\$] = to be purchased.

# = online reading *available online at Sakai.rutgers.edu*

NOTE: Class Schedule is subject to change. Announcements of any changes will be made in class as well as by email; students should check their email regularly for these announcements. If students miss a class, they should be sure to check with the instructor about possible changes in assignments.

### Introduction

**1/17]** Origins and development of the Yiddish language

**1/19]** The East European background of modern Yiddish culture

Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, pp. 3-51 #; Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, chapter 1 [\$/R]

### Founding figures

**1/23-31]** Sholem Aleichem

*Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* [\$]

- Selected *Railroad Stories*: “To the Reader,” “Competitors,” “Baranovich Station,” “The Man from Buenos Aires,” “High School,” “Third Class”
- *Tevye the Dairyman*

→ response paper on *Tevye the Dairyman* due 1/31

2/2-9] Peretz

*The I. L. Peretz Reader* [\$]

- "Monish"
- "Impressions of a Journey"
- "The Pious Cat"; "If Not Higher"; "Three Gifts"; "Bontshe Shvayg"

→ response paper on *The Pious Cat* due 2/9

2/14-21] Ansky

S. Ansky, "Questionnaire" #; Abraham Rechtman, "The Jewish Ethnographical Expedition" #

*The Dybbuk and Other Writings* [\$]

- “The Dybbuk”
- “The Destruction of Galicia: Excerpts”

Interwar Poland and the Soviet Union

2/23] Introduction

→ First guided analysis due 2/23

2/28] Yiddish prose in interwar Poland

Sholem Asch, “Kola Street” #; I.J. Singer, “The Old City” #

→ response paper on “The Old City” due 3/2

3/1] Screening: The Dybbuk (120 min.)

3/6] Yiddish cinema in interwar Poland

Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, Introduction, chapter 20 [#R]

→ response paper on *The Dybbuk* due 3/7

3/8] YIVO's Autobiographies project

"G.W." and "Esther," from *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* #

→ response paper on "Esther" due 3/9

## SPRING BREAK

3/20] Yiddish in the Soviet Union

Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, chapters 2 & 3 [\$/R]

3/22] Soviet Yiddish prose

Moshe Kulbak, *Zelmenyaner* #

→ response paper on "Zelmenyaner" due 3/23

## American Yiddish Literature and Culture

3/27] Introduction

Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, pp. 67-118, 417-459. [\$/R]

3/29] American Yiddish Social and Political Culture

Poems by Dovid Edelshtadt, Morris Rosenfeld, Yehoash #; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, pp. 287-325 [\$/R]

4/3] Early Modern American Yiddish prose

Malka Lee, "Through the Eyes of Childhood," Avraham Reisen "New Bosses," L. Shapiro, "New Yorkish" #

→ response paper on "New Bosses" due 4/4

4/5] Early Modern American Yiddish poetry

Poems by Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Mani-Leyb, Anna Margolin. #

4/10] The Introspectivists

Inzikhist manifesto; Poems by Celia Dropkin, Yankev Glatshiteyn, A. Leyeles. #

→ **Second guided analysis due 4/11**

**4/12] NO CLASS (PASSOVER)**

**4/17]** Screening: *Tevye der milkhiker* (90 min.)

**4/19]** American Yiddish theater and film

Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, chapters 8, 12. [#R]

Osip Dymov, "Bronx Express" #

→ **response paper on *Tevye der milkhiker* due: 4/17**

**4/24]** Isaac Bashevis Singer

"A Day in Coney Island" #; "The Cabalist of East Broadway" #; Nobel Prize Lecture #

**4/26]** Contemporary Yiddish writing:

Poems by Sholem Berger, Gitl Schaechter, Aharon Taub #

→ **Final exam (take-home) distributed on 4/26. Due date to be announced.**