



**Yeshiva University**  
**THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS**  
**CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT**

**Exploring Midrash**

Zoom Lecture Time: Wednesday 1:45-2:30 PM

Optional Beit Midrash/Office hours Monday 1:45-2:30 PM

**Course Description:**

This course will provide an overview of the wide range of midrashic literature to familiarize students with the historical background, literary styles, and functions of various types of midrashim and midrashic collections and their relationship with Mikra. We will cover both Midrash Halakhah (legal) and Midrash Aggadah (homiletic), analyzing their style and form through hands-on assignments. In addition to textual study and analysis of midrashic selections, conceptual issues related to the study of midrash will be addressed, such as: The role of homiletics in the religious experience; the 'problem' of polysemy (a text with multiple interpretations); and the parameters of literal vs. allegorical readings. In conjunction with these overarching questions, we will survey the historical reception of Midrash and the use of Midrash in Torah commentaries from Chazal to modern collections like Hayim Nahman Bialik. Finally, our hope is to explore and rediscover the comforting messages and lessons the Sages imparted to the generations through their homilies.

**Course Objectives:**

- Students will gain an appreciation of the historical background of various midrashic collections and their literary structures.
- Students will understand the structure of the Midrash and its relationship to the text of the Torah. They will be able to dissect and analyze paragraphs of Midrash Aggadah on their own and will have the skills to prepare their own presentations of midrashic texts.
- Students will appreciate the role of *Mashal* (parables) and allegory in Midrash and the nature of the extra-biblical stories.
- Students will gain historical perspective of the reception and controversies surrounding Aggadot in the Midrash and Talmud from medieval to modern times.

**Course Requirements:**

Discussion/Participation: 10%

Assignments: 30%

Midterm (Nov.4<sup>th</sup>): 30%

Final Assignment (Dec. 27<sup>th</sup>): 30%

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**Attendance Policy and Class Structure:**

This course will run remotely for the entire semester with both synchronous and asynchronous components. There will be live mandatory meetings on **Wednesdays 1:45 - 2:30 PM** and optional meetings on Mondays 1:45 - 2:30 PM, which will serve as office hours and Chavruta time. Your participation and discussion grade will be factored based on your attendance on Canvas/Zoom during our live mandatory meetings.

**Guide to Synchronous Learning:** Every student is expected to attend the class meetings through Canvas/Zoom and to participate in readings or class discussions that take place therein. Your cameras should be turned on throughout the meeting time, with no distracting backgrounds please. Additionally, I respectfully request that you leave your cameras on, even if you need to briefly step away from the computer. Contact me if you are having technical difficulties so that your lack of video or sound is not misunderstood as inattentiveness.

Our live meetings will be abbreviated to help you avoid Zoom fatigue but are a *crucial* component of your learning and really should not be missed as I **do not intend to record these live meetings**. While I understand that there may be circumstances that require you to miss class please be sure to let me know in advance, if possible, and absence due to non-pressing issues (medical or familial emergencies) will affect your participation grade.

**Asynchronous Learning** may include assigned readings, text preparation, short lecture videos and comprehension questions.

**Readings:**

All primary and secondary readings will be provided on Canvas.

**Academic Integrity and Honesty:**

All students are expected to follow and abide by the academic integrity and honesty policies of Yeshiva University in this course.

**Disabilities Statement:**

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Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should be in touch with the Office of Disability Services, [rkohn1@yu.edu](mailto:rkohn1@yu.edu) during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter and discuss any specifics with me to ensure the successful implementation of your accommodations.

**Academic Support:**

Academic support is available to you if you are having any difficulties that could include the following but are not limited to these: understanding assignments, navigating research papers, issues with time management of your schedule and your life or general college adjustment, please make an appointment with Dr. Beth Hait. She is available Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9am - 6pm. To make an appointment, go to [yu2.mywconline.com](http://yu2.mywconline.com). Click on the arrow next to "Academic Advisement" and scroll down to "Student Academic Support".

**Library Support:**

Get all the support you need with research for your courses. The Yeshiva University Libraries ([library.yu.edu](http://library.yu.edu)) offer individualized consultations that will help you locate and cite journal articles, books, and other credible sources for solid papers, presentations, and reports. Skilled information-seekers succeed academically and in the workplace. Prepare for the future by contacting the library at [https://library.yu.edu/ask\\_the\\_library](https://library.yu.edu/ask_the_library).

**Topics:**

**Week 1**

**Introduction to the Course:**

Goals & Expectations  
Course structure  
Navigating Canvas  
Navigating Online Databases

**Week 2**

**I. Introduction to Midrash**

**Defining terms**

מקרא משנה תלמוד מדרש הלכה מדרש אגדה –

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**The transmission of תורה שבעל פה:**

תקופת התנאים

תקופת האמוראים

**What is Midrash?**

מדרש & דרשן/ דרשות

Types of midrashim and drashot

**Midrash Halakhah**

Overview of Major Works, Tools & Schools of Thought

Malbim on Midrash Halakhah

**Week 3-5**

**Midrash Aggadah**

Historical Background

Midrash in the Synagogue vs. the Beit Midrash

Overview of Major Works of Midrash, Collections, & Critical Editions.

מדרש הבאורים/מדרש הדרשות

The importance of Midrash

**II. How to Read and Study Midrash**

**Midrashic Forms**

(Selections from **בראשית רבה** will be assigned and studied)

Breaking down the midrashic structure:

**דרכי האגדה והדרשה**

פתיחה-

גופה-

משל-

סיפור דרשני-

פתגם-

מעשי חכמים-

**Week 6-8**

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**\*\* Parshah Corner \*\*** פרשת השבוע **Midrash on**

Understanding midrashic disputes and varying perspectives (the לשיטתו approach)

Studies in:

ויקרא רבה

פסיקתא

**Midterm**

**Week 9**

**Use of Midrash in the Commentaries of Rishonim**

Rashi

R. Avraham Ibn Ezra

**Achronim:**

כלי יקר

הכתב והקבלה

**Week 10**

**Talmudic Aggadita**

The relationship between Halakhah and Aggadah

**Understanding Extra-Biblical Stories**

**Week 11-13**

**I. The Historical Reception of Midrash:**

Literal vs. Non-Literal Reading and the Role of Allegory

**Geonim:**

R. Sherira

R. Hai

R. Shmuel bar Hofni

**Rishonim:**

Maimonides

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R. Ezra of Gerona

Hasidei Ashkenaz

Kuzari

Ramban

**Achronim:**

מהר"ל

רמח"ל

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch

The value of narrative: Hayim Nachman Bialik

**Select Bibliography:**

Readings will be drawn from the following works and scholarly articles among others.

**\*All readings will be provided on Canvas\***

יעקב אלבוים, להבין דברי חכמים: מבחר דברי מבוא לאגדה ולמדרש משל חכמי ימי הביניים, ירושלים תשס"א.

יונה פרנקל, דרכי האגדה והמדרש, תל אביב, 1996.

חננאל מאק, מדרש האגדה, משרד הביטחון, תל-אביב תשמ"ט.

א"א אורבך, פרקי אמונות ודעות, ירושלים תשל"א

יוסף היינמן, דרכי האגדה, ירושלים תשי"ד

יעקב אליהו אפרתי, פרשת העקידה: המקראות ומדרשי האגדה של חז"ל כפשוטם, פתח תקוה, תשמ"ג

ח"נ ביאליק, הלכה ואגדה, כל כתבי ח"נ ביאליק, תל אביב תשל"א

הרב יהושע ענבל, תורה שבעל פה: סמכותה ודרכיה, ירושלים תשע"ה

ענת רייזל, מבוא למדרשים, גוש עציון, תשע"א

חנוך אלבק, מבוא לתלמודים, תל אביב, תשכ"ט

Rabbi Nachman Cohen, The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Disputes and Perspectives: R.

Yehuda and R. Nechemia, Torah Lishmah Institute, New York, 2007

Simi Peters, Learning to Read Midrash, Urim Publications, New York, 2004

David Stern, Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary

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Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston IL, 1996

The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History, Edited by Michael  
Fishbane

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