

Syllabus: Misnagdic Jewish Thought

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The term “Misnagid,” or “one who opposes,” is one that defined the leaders of the Lithuanian Yeshiva world by highlighting its differentiation from the Hasidic way of life. The problem with the term is that it summarizes a worldview solely in way it opposed another. In fact, those whose intellectual lives was linked to the Yeshiva of Vilozhin and its worldview have given us a classics of Jewish thought, all making the case for the study of Torah, and the rigorous observance of halakha, as lying at the center of the spiritual life. This course will examine three different complex works, each of which can be considered a classic of Misnagdic Jewish thought: the mystical *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim* of Rabbi Hayyim of Vilozhin, with a focus on the fourth part; the *Ha'amek Davar* of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, known as “the Netziv,” with its focus on Humash, Midrash, and Talmudic texts; and Rabbi Joseph. B. Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man*, which describes the worldview of his ancestors utilizing a philosophical idiom. We will discuss what these works have in common, how they differ, and what each of them has to teach us today.

Critical Engagement of Primary Sources

Each one of these works is complex, and will require intense engagement. We will study these classics carefully in class, consider the arguments presented, and discuss the difference between them. Questions to be considered will include: What is Rabbi Hayyim’s theology of “Torah study for its own sake?” What are the other understandings of this phrase, and what is Rabbi Hayyim’s critique of these understandings? What is Netziv’s understanding of the nature of Torah study? How does he see this embodied in the story of Moses, and in talmudic descriptions of Moses’ stature? How does he understand the unfolding and evolution of Torah study throughout the centuries, and especially in the second Temple period? How are we to understand the famous closing of the Vilozhin yeshiva? What, for Rabbi Soloveitchik, is the nature of creativity in Torah study? Is his description of the “Halakhic Man” a depiction of an actual figure, or is it an archetype? Does the text actually reflect his own worldview? Do the three works actually embody a common approach to life, or are they too different from one another for this to be the case?

Course Structure, Obligations, and Grading

The semester will be divided into thirds; in each part we will focus on one of these three works. As each work is studied, scholarship regarding the work will be assigned to read outside the class, and written weekly reflections on this scholarship will be assigned every week. The written reflections will be in response to essay prompts and questions about the reading, and the reflection will be assessed by the instructor based on whether it reflects that the student has carefully read the assigned readings. A final term paper will be required at the conclusion of the semester; here, original and creative insights will be expected, rather than merely a summary of what was studied in class. This paper must focus on an issue one of the central texts studied in the class, or on a comparison between them, or on contrast between one of these works and another significant work of Jewish thought. The paper must be 20 pages and feature both textual analysis and a study of relevant scholarship.

Grades will be assigned based on the following structure: 1/3 attendance; 1/3 reading responses; and 1/3 final paper.

Part I: Rabbi Hayyim of Vilozhin

Primary Text: *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*, Part IV

Scholarly works:

Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Study of Torah for Torah's Sake in the Work of Rabbi Hayyim Vilozhin and his Contemporaries*

Immanuel Etkes, "Rabbi Hayyim Vilozhin's Response to Hasidism," in *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image* (University of California Press, 2002)

Part II: Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin,

Primary Text: *Haamek Davar*, selections.

Scholarly and additional works:

Hayyim Nachman Bialik, "*Ha-Matmid*"

Gil S. Perl, *The Pillar of Volozhin: Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin and the World of Nineteenth Century Lithuanian Torah Scholarship*

Jacob J. Schacter, "Haskalah, Secular Studies and the Close of the Yeshiva in Volozhin in 1892" *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, Vol. 2 (1990), pp. 76-133

Part III: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

Primary text: *Halakhic Man*

Scholarly works:

Aviezer Ravitzky, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Human Knowledge: Between Maimonides and Neo-Kantian Philosophy," *Modern Judaism* (May 1986)

Chaim Saiman, "Halakhah's Empire: The Yeshiva and the House of Brisk," in *Halakhah: The Jewish Idea of Law* (Princeton University Press, 2018)

Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Urim, 2012)

Additional text for course and for final paper preparation: Stuart Halpern (ed.), *Books of the People: Revisiting Classic Works of Jewish Thought*.

