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**REL 323-01: Religious Movements and Communities: Kabbalah in Popular Culture**  
 Mondays 6-8:45 pm  
 Foust 111

**Course Description**

This course will focus on the development, presentation, and reception of the form of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah as it appears in the modern world. Drawing on a variety of sources, including religious documents, popular literature, internet, music and film, we will explore the ways in which modernity and consumerism have transformed this traditional mode of Jewish spirituality. Important themes for the course will include the role of Kabbalah outside the Jewish community, the Jewish community's internal reclamation of mysticism, and the modern quest for personally fulfilling spirituality. Topics will include the music of Madonna and Matisyahu, the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhism, Kabbalah in Hollywood, Kabbalah in Literature, and more.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

Upon Completing this course, students will be able to 1) demonstrate a working knowledge of Jewish mysticism both in its traditional forms and its contemporary manifestations 2) analyze, discuss, and write about the relationship between traditional and contemporary Jewish mystical spirituality 3) demonstrate the ability to critically read and understand source texts, both ancient and modern 4) demonstrate the ability to extend critical reading and analytical skills to music and film, reading these works as cultural "texts" 5) appreciate religious diversity and the connections between religious practice and popular culture.

**Teaching Methods and Assignments for Achieving Learning Outcomes**

In this course we will be developing background knowledge through lecture and secondary sources, then applying our knowledge to specific primary sources (including texts, music and film) during class discussions. Since this is a writing-intensive course, we will also be focusing on how to use these primary and secondary sources to construct papers with persuasive arguments that incorporate informed opinions on class topics.

**Required Texts**

- Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*
- Cynthia Ozick, *The Puttermesser Papers*
- Myla Goldberg, *The Bee Season*
- Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*
- There are also a large number of electronic class readings available online on Blackboard, which you will be expected to print, read, and bring to class. Don't

neglect these! You will need them! (These readings are designated “electronic” in the syllabus.)

- BRING YOUR ASSIGNED READINGS TO EVERY CLASS WITH YOU.

### Course Requirements and Expectations

- **Class Participation– Spoken (20% of grade):** For this class, you will be expected to participate **very actively** in class discussions, contributing your thoughts and opinions on our weekly topics. You are required to print out all assignments and bring them to class each session. All internet readings (with the exception of website explorations) will be available in printable form as electronic files on blackboard, and you are required to bring these to class as well.
- **Class Participation– Written (10% of grade): Each week you must come to class prepared with a SHORT RESPONSE PAPER, in which you address the class readings, and ONE WRITTEN QUESTION for group discussion. Together, they should be about ONE PAGE LONG.** These assignments must be typed and printed, with your name on them. Be as specific as possible in your response paper, citing authors and page numbers and using quotations when necessary. Also, please be aware that you will be expected to lead the class in a brief discussion of your question. For this reason, you may wish to coordinate your response paper with your weekly question. These materials will be due at the end of each class period. **(Important Note: The response paper assignment excludes the classes on February 16, March 23, March 30, April 20, April 27 and May 4 when you have other work due. On these days, you just need to come to class with a written discussion question.)**
- **Short Paper 1 (10% of grade):** This short (2-3 pages) paper will be due on February 16. The topic will be assigned, and will be based on class readings.
- **Short Paper 2 Draft/Peer Evaluation Workshop:** On March 23, we will be having an in-class workshop focused on peer evaluation of your writing skills. Guidelines for the draft and workshop will be distributed in class. **Although this is not a graded assignment, failure to participate will result in a reduction of the final grade on your second paper by one full letter grade.**
- **Short Paper 2 (20% of grade):** This short (4-5 pages) paper will be due on March 30. The topic will be assigned, and will be based on our readings. This paper should be turned in with its draft and evaluations attached.
- **Final Paper Topic Confirmation:** You are required to confirm your final paper topic with the instructor via e-mail OR conversation in office hours by April 13. **Failure to confirm your topic by this date will result in a reduction of your final paper draft grade by one full letter.**
- **Final Paper Draft (10% of grade):** This draft of your final paper will be due April 20. Draft guidelines will be distributed in class.
- **Final Paper (30% of grade):** You will be required to write a final paper (7-9 pages) for this class, due on May 4. The paper should be a critical, intensive

exploration of a course topic that interests you. Guidelines for the final paper will be distributed in class.

- **Important Paper Requirements**
  - All papers are due in class, at the beginning of class. This means that if you are late to class, your paper is late.
  - All papers must be printed in black ink on white paper.
  - Papers must be printed in 12 point font and double spaced.
  - Page numbers must be included on each page of the paper.
  - Your name must be clearly visible on the first page of your paper.
  - Papers must be stapled together (folding over the corner doesn't count).
  - Your papers must also have titles.
  - Always follow instructions for individual assignments.
  - Failure to meet these formal requirements will result in the reduction of your paper grade by 1/3 for each problem. (So, if you don't staple your paper, an A- paper would become a B+. If you don't staple *and* forget page numbers, the same paper becomes a B.)

#### **Other Classroom Policies and Requirements**

- **Course Materials:** You are required to bring your reading materials to every class. Electronic readings **MUST** be printed out and brought with you as well.
- **Academic Integrity:** All students are required to adhere to the UNCG Academic Integrity Policy. You can find this online at <http://academicintegrity.uncg.edu/complete/>
- **Grading Standards:** Standards of grading for course assignments are those described online at <http://www.uncg.edu/reg/Catalog/current/AcaRegs/Grading.html>
- **Attendance:** If you do not attend this class on a regular basis, you will not succeed in this course. This is because you will be receiving lots of information in the classroom that is **NOT** in your readings. You are responsible for this information, and will need it to complete your assignments. **You may have TWO “free” absences from this class, and after that your final grade will begin to fall.** (Here's the math: for each unexcused absence beyond the two allowed, I lower your final numerical grade for the course by .1) Please note that you are still responsible for class materials that you miss on these days. **If you are absent from class more than 4 times, I reserve the right to drop you from this course.** Please note that you are still responsible for class information received on days that you are absent. If you have some truly compelling reason for your absence and can provide documentation proving this reason, I may choose to excuse your absence. (For example, if you're terribly ill, don't come to class and cough all over everyone— just bring a doctor's note when you're feeling better.)
- **Arriving On Time:** At the beginning of each class, I will send around an attendance sheet. It is your responsibility to arrive on time, and to sign the sheet, in order to be counted as present. If timely arrival becomes a problem, I reserve the right alter this policy and penalize lateness.

- **Extension/Late Paper Policy:** No extensions on assignments will be granted in this course. **Late papers drop by one letter grade for each day that they are late.** (As with the attendance policy, if you have a truly compelling reason for an extension, speak to me about it in office hours. A really busy schedule doesn't count.)
- **Talk to the Instructor!:** I enjoy visits from students. Please stop by and see me in office hours (or make an appointment to meet with me) if you want to talk to me about class topics, if you want to talk about an assignment, or if you just want to chat. If you are concerned that a personal situation inside or outside the classroom may affect your class performance, this is also the sort of thing you should let me know. I reserve the right to alter my attendance and extension policies for students with truly exceptional circumstances.
- **Be Courteous:** Basically, use common sense. In this class, you will be expected to be courteous, respectful, and considerate of the instructor, each other, and yourselves. All criticism should be constructive. Don't let your cell phones ring in class, don't check messages, don't send text messages, etc. If you use a laptop to take notes, DO NOT use class time to explore the internet or check your e-mail. The instructor reserves the right to forbid laptop use in the classroom if abuse of computer privileges becomes a problem.

### Course Schedule

#### **January 26: Introduction to the Class**

- Readings to be distributed in class

#### **February 2: Traditional Kabbalah and Its History**

- Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah* (1-19, 22, 24, 26-7, 29-30, 32-5, 39-49, 52-3, 55-62, 67, 71, 79-80, 83-88, 94-5, 97, 103-8, 114-115, 120, 122-3, 131, 134-44, 149, 155-7, 160-1)

#### **February 9: The Kabbalah Center and the Bergs**

- Gershom Scholem, excerpts from "Religious Authority and Mysticism" from *The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (1-15, 19-21, 29-31 electronic)
- Jody Myers, "Main Teachings" in *Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest: The Kabbalah Centre in America* (75-108 electronic)
- Yossi Halevi, *New Republic* (May, 2004), "Like a Prayer: Kabbalah Goes Hollywood" (18-21 electronic)
- Elena Lappin, "The Thin Red Line" from [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/dec/11/religion.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/dec/11/religion.uk) and [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/dec/11/religion.uk1](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/dec/11/religion.uk1) (electronic)
- "But All Is Not What It Seems" from [www.rickross.com/reference/kabbalah/kabbalah15.html](http://www.rickross.com/reference/kabbalah/kabbalah15.html)

#### **February 16: Kabbalah in Music I: The Madonna Phenomenon**

**\*\*\*first short paper due in class at the beginning of class\*\***

- Boaz Huss, “All You Need is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah” *Jewish Quarterly Review* vol. 94, no. 4, Fall 2005 (611-624 electronic)
- Raquel Hecker, “Give Me Back My Old Madonna” from [www.guardian.co.uk/music/2004/oct/31/usa.religion](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2004/oct/31/usa.religion) (electronic)
- “Interview: Margarette Driscoll Meets Madonna” from [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/article498122.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/article498122.ece) (electronic)
- “Papa Don’t Preach Kabbalah” from [www.stylusmagazine.com/feature.php?ID=51](http://www.stylusmagazine.com/feature.php?ID=51) (electronic)
- Alana Newhouse, “Immaterial Girl” from [www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=242](http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=242) (electronic- this is online listening)
- Brad Hirschfield, “Kabbalah, Madonna, and A-Rod” from [blog.beliefnet.com/windowsanddoors/2008/07/kabbalah-madonna-and-arod.html](http://blog.beliefnet.com/windowsanddoors/2008/07/kabbalah-madonna-and-arod.html)
- *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (45-6, 54-8, 126-7 electronic)
- Ayelet Waldman, “Madonna’s Triptych” from [www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=53](http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=53) (electronic)
- Selections of music and video, as well as Madonna’s kabbalistic children’s books, will be presented in class

### **February 23: Kabbalah in Music II: Matisyahu**

- Explore Matisyahu’s website [www.matisyahuworld.com/](http://www.matisyahuworld.com/) (electronic)
- *The New York Times*, “Hanukkah Receives Kosher Pop Welcome” from [www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/arts/music/23mati.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/arts/music/23mati.html)
- *Rolling Stone*, “Matisyahu: Hasidic Hot Stepper” from [www.rollingstone.com/news/story/9363668/matisyahu\\_hasidic\\_hot\\_stepper.html](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/9363668/matisyahu_hasidic_hot_stepper.html) (electronic)
- The Jewish Journal, “Chasidic Beatboxing Keeps Matisyahu moving” from [www.jewishjournal.com/music/article/chasidic\\_beatboxing\\_keeps\\_matisyahu\\_moving\\_20081112/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/music/article/chasidic_beatboxing_keeps_matisyahu_moving_20081112/) (electronic)
- “Matisyahu’s Passover” from [www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/376771/jewish/Matisyahus-Passover.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/376771/jewish/Matisyahus-Passover.htm) (electronic)
- *The Washington Post*, “Funny, He Doesn't Look Jamaican: Chart-Topping Matisyahu Wants to Be More Than Just a Hasidic Reggae Superstar” from [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021700451.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021700451.html) (electronic)
- Shlomo Carlebach, “Reb Nahman on Joy,” “Jewish Music,” “My Soul, My Soul” from [www.rebshlomo.org](http://www.rebshlomo.org) (electronic)
- Rabbi Nahman’s Wisdom (399-401 electronic)
- Nahman of Bratslav, *The Tales*, “The Loss of the Princess” (51-61 electronic)
- Selections of music and video will be presented in class

### **March 2: Contemporary Kabbalistic Spirituality**

- Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (109-113 electronic)

- Excerpts from Arthur Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (9-18, 91-105, 120-37 electronic)
- Read “The Principles of Kabbalah” from Chabad website chabad.org at [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/363609/jewish/The-Principles-of-Kabbalah.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/363609/jewish/The-Principles-of-Kabbalah.htm) (yes, you must read through all of these items, from “God” to “Reincarnation”) (electronic)
- Read “Practical Kabbalah” from Chabad website chabad.org at [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/363610/jewish/Practical-Kabbalah.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/363610/jewish/Practical-Kabbalah.htm) (yes, you must read the whole thing, from “Jewish Meditation” to “Teshuvah”) (electronic)

## **SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS MARCH 9**

### **March 16: Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Buddhism**

Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*

### **March 23: Writing and Peer Evaluation Workshop**

**\*\*second short paper draft due in class at the beginning of class\*\***

### **March 30: Judaism, The New Age, Jewish Renewal**

**\*\*\*2<sup>nd</sup> short paper due in class, at the beginning of class\*\*\***

- *New Age Judaism*, eds. Celia Rothenberg and Anne Vallely (1-33, electronic)
- Roger Kamenetz, *Stalking Elijah* (6-33, 182-95 electronic)
- Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy* (ix-xxiv)
- Explore the website <https://www.aleph.org/start.taf>

### **April 6: Kabbalah in Literature I**

- Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, “The Idea of the Golem” (165-204, electronic)
- Excerpts from Cynthia Ozick, *The Puttermessa Papers* (31-101)
- Film selections to be viewed in class

### **April 13: Kabbalah in Literature II**

**\*\*\*deadline for final paper topic confirmation\*\*\***

- Byron Sherwin, *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (144-160 electronic)
- Arthur Green and Barry Holtz eds., “Meet Him in the Word” from *Your Word is Fire* (39-51 electronic)
- Excerpts from Myla Goldberg, *The Bee Season* (7-15, 57-63, 69-71, 80-82, 86-7, 102-7, 109-12, 130-33, 170-73, 179-81, 186-91, 194-5, 215-20, 232-8, 239-42, 252-57, 265-74)

### **April 20: Kabbalah in Film: Pi**

**\*\*\*final paper draft due in class, at the beginning of class\*\*\***

- Gershom Scholem, “The ‘Book of Creation’” from *Origins of the Kabbalah* (24-35 electronic)

- Excerpts from *Sefer Yetzirah* (22, 261-67 electronic)
- Gershom Scholem “Gematria” from *Kabbalah* (337-343 electronic)
- Numbers Rabbah 18:21 (electronic)

**April 27: Dybbuks and Spirit Possession**

- J. H. Chajes, *Between the Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (11-31, 65-70, 154-164 electronic)
- Ellen Galford, *The Dyke and the Dybbuk* (1-14, 52-82 electronic)
- Film excerpts to be viewed in class

**May 4: Wrapping Things Up: Kabbalah in (even more) Unexpected Places**

\*\*final papers due in class at the beginning of class\*\*

Materials for discussion (film, text, etc.) will be distributed and viewed in class.