

Turning Points in Jewish History

Questions for Discussion

1 Imagining the Beginning: The Call to Abraham (~1500 BCE ?)

- What is meant by “historical truth”? Can a narrative be true even if not grounded in facts?
- How is the term “nation” generally understood? What do you believe qualifies a group of people to call themselves a nation? Does this encompass biological kinship? Shared culture? Political structure? Geography? Consciousness of belonging? Shared history? Something else?
- How might you expect people to behave differently if they believe in a God of history, as opposed to a God of nature?

2 Liberation from Slavery: The Exodus from Egypt (~1200 BCE ?)

- The Puritan settlers in New England explicitly identified with the Israelites, seeing themselves as having fled from oppression to a promised land where they would live according to their own beliefs. How do you see the two stories (Exodus and Pilgrims) as similar and different?
- In this book/chapter, the miracle at the Red Sea is the turning point for the Jewish people. Can a case be made for choosing another turning point in the Exodus account, such as the women’s saving baby Moses in Exodus 2:2-10 or Moses’ epiphany at the burning bush in Exodus 3-4?
- What are the implications of the Jewish narrative of a slave origin for how we live as Jews today?
- What are the implications of a liberation story in which those who are liberated come across not as heroic fighters, but as reluctant and passive, complaining all the way?

3 The Covenant: Revelation at Sinai (~1200 BCE ?)

- What were the costs and benefits of the Jewish people’s entanglement of national and religious identity, such that in order to receive God’s manna, etc., all members were collectively obligated to live according to divinely ordained law?
- For some Jews, historical catastrophes such as the Holocaust have challenged the belief that the nation’s fortunes are conditioned on its obedience to God’s law. How do you understand this covenant in the light of these catastrophes?
- What are the possible implications of the belief that the covenant between God and the Jewish people took place in no-man’s-land (the Sinai desert) instead of in the promised land?

- Discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various positions regarding “what really happened” at Sinai:
 - a. God’s dictation of the whole body of Jewish law to Moses.
 - b. God’s revealing God’s own existence through the first two commandments, giving rise to a human legal system based on a belief in a just God.
 - c. The silent realization that there is a God who demands that the Israelites create a just and humane society.

4 Israel: Entering the Promised Land (~1200 BCE ?)

- How would you rank the turning points studied so far in terms of their “claim” to be “the beginning of Jewish history?”: Abraham’s call, the Exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, the entry into the Land of Israel?
- What are the implications of Joshua dying without the appointment of a successor?
- The biblical concept of covenant is based on the belief that God intervenes in history, bringing natural disasters (especially drought) and enemies upon Israel as a punishment. Is it possible to formulate a secular, rational doctrine that makes possession of the land dependent upon the nation’s behavior?

5 Establishing a State: “Give us a King!” (~1000 BCE)

- Compare the debate over the monarchy with that over uniting the thirteen colonies in America. In each case, what were the arguments and interests for and against unification?
- Why do you believe Samuel chose a first king from the smallest of the tribes?
- Why do you think many people opposed Samuel’s establishment of a monarchy?
- The elders insisted on a king for utilitarian reasons; what changed by the time David received the prophecy that his throne would be established for all time?

6 The Fall of Israel: Exile of the Ten Tribes (722 BCE)

- Imagine and describe the debate within the northern kingdom on the reasons for the disaster.
- The prophets argued that disobedience to God’s law will cause the kingdom to collapse. Could there be an objective basis to such a claim? Is there a link between justice and sustainability?
- If the prophetic view is true—Israel’s enemies are actually God’s tools of punishment—how would this impact upon diplomacy and on commitment to war?

7 The Babylonian Exile: The Destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE)

- What might have led some people to consider Jeremiah's argument valid?
- What does this episode reveal about the relationship of religion and politics?
- Do you believe the transition from animal sacrifice by the Temple priests to personal and communal prayer in the synagogue constituted a distancing from God (as perceived by the tradition)? Could it possibly have been a positive spiritual development?

8 Return to Zion: The Second Temple (539 BCE)

- Why do you think some of the exiles chose to return – and why the majority chose to remain in their new land?
- How might the returnees have viewed their neighbors who stayed in Babylonia—and vice versa?
- How might the peasants who stayed in Judah in 586 have responded to the influx of returnees?

9 Confronting the Challenge of Hellenism: The Hasmonean Revolt (165 BCE)

- Are cultures characterized by sets of moral values? Or are they value-neutral, with the values “supplied” by religion, or personal choice, or something else?
- In the encounter with other peoples, is it possible for Judaism to absorb foreign cultural expressions, such as language, dress, and food, without also absorbing foreign values?
- According to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74a), one may violate any law to save one's life except three prohibitions: murder, incest, and idolatry. Discuss the motivations of martyrdom: its power and its costs.
- The prophets were believed to have received God's word directly and relayed it. The rabbis were understood to extract God's intention by interpreting the revelations given to earlier generations. Discuss the advantages and limitations of each approach. Can they live together? Why or why not?

10 Roman Rule: The Great Revolt and Destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE)

- Was the desecration of the Temple (including placing an image of the emperor there) a *casus belli* because of the insult to national pride – or because it violated the prohibition against idolatry?

- Flesh out the encounter between Rabbi Yochanan and his nephew. What does the nephew really believe? Whose side is he on?
- What arguments would have been made to support the revolt, given the apparent imbalance in forces? What might the moderates have claimed in opposition? What would their long-term vision have been?
- Was Rabbi Yochanan a traitor or a hero?

11 Finding a Messianic Equilibrium: The Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE)

- Gershom Scholem comments: “There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it... [T]he Messianic idea has compelled *a life lived in deferment*, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished...” Do you agree? Explain.
- How would you respond to these questions underlying Bar Kochba’s endeavor and all messianic movements: Can we know our coordinates on the map of history? Can our actions affect it on a grand scale?
- Were the leaders of the revolts against powerful foreign empires (Babylonia in 586 BCE, the Seleucids in 165 BCE, and Rome in 66 and 132) heroes or fools (or worse)?

12 The Oral Law Becomes Literature: The Mishnah (~200 CE)

- Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in order to make it accessible to non-clergy, and simultaneously to undercut the clergy’s authority to be the sole interpreters of it. How does his act compare with Rabbi Judah’s making the Oral Law portable and accessible?
- What are the costs and benefits of separating the Jewish community’s leadership into two authority-bases: Torah (rabbis) and political power (patriarchs, lay leaders)? Might another model work better? If yes, what would you propose?
- Rav Sherira Gaon takes pains to defend himself against the potential charge that he is suggesting that the Mishnah is a creative response to particular historical circumstances. What would be problematic in such an interpretation?

13 The Golden Age of Iberian Jewry: Maimonides (700-1100 CE)

- How would you compare the Golden Age of Iberian Jewry with the Jewish experience in 20th- century and 21st century? North America? **[Add another sentence to help direct the conversation.]**
- What are the benefits—and costs— of the codification of Jewish law?

- If Maimonides were writing a “guide” for today’s young Jews perplexed by conflicts between Jewish tradition and current cultural trends, what issues would he likely discuss?

14 The Rise of Eastern European Jewry: The Crusades (1100-1300 CE)

- Might Jews and Christians understand forced baptism differently? If so, how?
- What factors would have affected the decision to stay put and weather persecution or to emigrate?
- How would you compare the experiences of Jews in Medieval Christian Europe and Muslims in 21st century Europe? What accounts for the similarities and differences?

15 Kabbalah Enters the Mainstream: Nahmanides (~1300 CE)

- Was the flowering of Jewish mysticism a natural response to the rationalists’ questioning of faith?
- In our time, which of the two challenges to religion is dominant: the rationalist critique/rejection, or the spiritual critique of petrified established religion?
- Which of the two challenges to religion is dominant in your or your community’s life?

16 The End of Iberian Jewry: Conversion, Expulsion, Diaspora (1300-1600 CE)

- It has been argued (and denied) that the prevalence of rationalist philosophy among Iberian Jews supported the choice of conversion over the martyrdom preferred by the more mystically inclined Ashkenazic Jews. What do you think?
- What obstacles would have to be overcome in order to maintain a forbidden religious tradition in secret, over generations?
- Is it possible for a conversion under duress to be a “true” conversion?

17 The Rise and Collapse of Polish Jewry: the Cossack Revolt (1648 CE)

- Is there a parallel between the “interstitial” position of the Jews in Poland and that of Jews in American society today? Are the Jews seen as filling particular economic and social niches? Is the perception accurate?
- What were the costs and benefits of Medieval Jewish communal autonomy?
- In 1492-97 and in 1648 Iberian Jewish life and Polish Jewish life, respectively, experienced a historic catastrophe. Compare the circumstances and the consequences. How might the differences between the two Golden Ages have led to different reactions to collapse?

18 The Rise of Hasidism: The Baal Shem Tov and his Disciples (~1750 CE)

- Leading rabbis of the time argued that Hasidism was heretical, and fought to root it out. And yet it not only survived, but has become a powerful force in the Jewish world today. What factors do you think led to this turnabout?
- What are the risks and benefits of the shift from a religious leadership based on halachic knowledge to one based on personal charisma and spirituality?
- Can you find a parallel between the Hasidic concept of religious leadership and that of the modern liberal movements?

19 The Challenge of Emancipation: The Napoleonic Sanhedrin (~1780-1880 CE)

- How is the Jewish community of today similar to – and different from - the pre-emancipation community?
- Is there merit to the argument that Emancipation was a bad bargain because Judaism is not sustainable in the long term in an open, individualistic environment? Is an at least partially closed, segregated environment (such as ultra-Orthodox communities or a Jewish state) essential to Jewish survival?
- Compare and contrast the Jewish attempts at harmonization with the surrounding culture in 18th-century Europe and the Golden Age in Iberia. **[Add another sentence here to help direct the conversation.]**

20 Reform and Reaction: The Hamburg Temple (1818 CE)

- What factors might have caused Reform to spread so rapidly in Germany but to completely fail to take root in Eastern Europe?
- Do you believe both non-halachic Judaism and halachic Judaism are viable in the long run?
- In your view, does the Reform option prevent assimilation or exacerbate it?

21 The Rise of North American Jewry: The Great Migration (1881-1924 CE)

- What measures are necessary – and possible – to enable Judaism to survive in the individualistic American environment?
- It is common to speak of America as comprising parallel religious groups: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim. What aspects of Jewish identity undermine this characterization?

- During the 20th century, forces of nationalism and racism were able to overturn Enlightenment and emancipation in Europe. What factors might allow – or prevent – such a process in North America?

22 Jewish Nationalism: Theodore Herzl (1896 CE)

- Compare and contrast Herzl’s Zionism with other nationalisms, such as Italy and/or Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. **[Add another sentence to help direct the conversation.]**
- Is Zionism’s claim that the Jews are a nation just like other European nations an accurate description of Jewishness through the lens of Jewish history?
- Do you believe anti-Semitism in Europe will be a permanent phenomenon? What, if anything, can eliminate it? What do you see as the best options for European Jews today?

23 The Secular Zionist Revolution: Achad Ha’am (~1900 CE)

- Can cultures be characterized by sets of moral values?
- What are the defining markers of a culture? If Jews around the world speak different languages, and their lives and ritual observances reflect a variety of local foods, melodies, and artistic motifs –does “Jewish culture” exist?
- Is Judaism as a culture, without the covenant, still Judaism?

24 Zionist Settlement of the Land of Israel: First and Second Aliyot (1881-1914 CE)

- Compare and contrast the encounter between European settlers in North America and the native population with that between the settlers of the First and Second Aliyot and the Palestinian population. **[Add another sentence to help direct the conversation.]**
- Many European intellectuals saw the “old Europe” of the end of the 19th century as decadent and in spiritual, cultural, and political decline. How might this view have motivated the Jewish pioneers and influenced their self-perception and developing culture?
- Imagine a conversation among Russian Jewish college students at the turn of the 20th century, considering whether to emigrate to the United States, emigrate to Palestine, or struggle for democracy in Russia. Which option do you think you would have chosen and why?

25 The Destruction of European Jewry: The Holocaust (1933-45 CE)

- Aside from scale, how was the Holocaust different from previous disasters in Jewish history, such as the Babylonian exile, the expulsion from Iberia, the Chmielnicki massacre?

- Do you believe the Holocaust proves the bankruptcy of the modern enlightened vision of society?
- Was the Holocaust the culmination of a millennium of Christian anti-Semitism and Jewish powerlessness in Europe – or was it something unique, outside that framework?

26 The Jewish State: Proclaiming and Defending Independence (1948 CE)

- Is there anything the Zionists could have done differently that might have led the Arabs to accept a Jewish state in Palestine?
- Is it possible for the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel to have their experience of defeat in 1948 appropriately recognized and commemorated? How have other countries dealt with such experiences?
- From your experience how has the existence of a modern Jewish state affected Jewish identity outside of it? How would you evaluate the costs and benefits of Israel's existence for Diaspora Jews?

27 East Meets West: Mass Aliyah from North Africa and the Mideast (1949-1957 CE)

- Compare and contrast the experience of Russian Jews immigrating to North America at the turn of the 20th century and the Mizrahi Jews immigrating to Israel. **[Add another sentence to help direct the conversation.]**
- Which is preferable as a model: melting pot or tossed salad?
- How might the Mizrahi influence in Israeli culture contribute to exacerbate – or ameliorate – the Israeli-Arab conflict?

28 Benefits and Costs of Military Power: The Six Day War (1967 CE)

- Consider the costs and benefits of partition into two parallel states, vs. the possibility of a single, binational state.
- Who should have the authority to determine if a people's claim to be a "nation" should be accepted?
- What does it mean for a location or territory to be "holy"? Is the definition subjective or objective? What are the implications of holiness for possession? Access?

29 The Feminist Revolution: The Ordination of Women (1972 CE)

- In your view, what obstacles remain to full gender equality in the Jewish community?
- Putting aside resistance to feminist influences in Judaism driven by men's insecurity, what other factors might cause Jews to reject the move toward egalitarianism?
- Is it possible for a commitment to gender equality to coexist with a belief in differential gender roles in Judaism?

30 The Fall of the Iron Curtain: The Liberation of Soviet Jewry (1989 CE)

- Compare/contrast the circumstances, options, and experiences of the Jewish emigrants from Russia in 1900 and in 2000. [**Add another sentence to help direct the conversation.**]
- Compare and contrast the experience of Russian Jews and Mizrahi Jews in their immigration to Israel. [**Add another sentence to help direct the conversation.**]
- What can we learn about the nature of Jewish identity from the experience of Russian Jewry in the course of the 20th century?