

American Judaism, Religion, and Democracy
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Course Structure:

The underlying assumption of this course is that the intersection of American religion (in this case Judaism), Spirituality and Democracy contains the potential to accelerate civic virtue or toxicity. Our goal is to understand this process and think creatively about how that intersection zone can strengthen our civic culture.

While this is not a course in Introduction to Judaism or Civics, major concepts of both will be necessary for our exploration. In addition, we will have to respect the role that spirituality plays in creating personal and communal meaning, can how it can be a powerful driver of individual and public choices. Participants will be asked to reflect on concepts in personal writing and class participation. The topics covered may trigger powerful emotions, especially as students observe and experience prominent events (as yet unanticipated) around us. Take heart, this class focuses on the deep roots and long term forces that undergird our democracy. While contemporary policy fights and partisan lines reflect and influence those forces, our thesis is that we can operate from a place outside the confines of current politics.

The course also has an activist agenda. In addition to informing students and inspiring personal reflection, we seek to incubate healthy norms of citizenship in our community, with partner institutions, and in our local civic culture. Therefore, as you consider these topics and your reflections, also think about how you might share these lessons with peers. Ask yourself: how might these topics become part of my leadership toolkit in public life?

Course Outline

- I. **Session 1:**
 - a. The three layers of American democracy:
 - i. Civic Actions
 - ii. Institutional sites of civic action
 - iii. Foundational ideas grounding our institutions and civic systems
 1. Respectful dissent
 2. Interrogation and creation of narrative
 3. Civil religion
 4. The use of power
 5. Covenantal rights
 6. Institutionalism and constitutionalism
 - b. The intersection zone—Religion, Spirituality and Democracy—and feedback loops.
 - i. Three formulations:
 1. American religions, including American Judaism, provide practices and ideas that include the importance and maintenance of liberal democracy as the only moral political system.
 2. We find spiritual meaning through the formation and experience of citizenship that sustains liberal democracy.

3. Since secular notions of liberalism are necessary but not sufficient to the sustenance of liberal democracy, especially in the specific geographic and historical context of America, religious and spiritual experiences fill the gap.
 - ii. Feedback loops:
 1. Negative: Decayed religion undermines political norms creating fear and anxiety which religion either feeds or is impotent to address.
 2. Positive: Integrous religious structures build resilience and transcendent morality limiting the excesses of political passion which supports the institutional thinking of religion.
- c. The project: to create religious structures that provide potent spirituality applied to American constitutional democracy (i.e. use religion to incubate healthy citizenship).
- d. The overview of what's to come:
 - i. November 29, 2022: Understanding the mechanics of religion—theologies, practices, structures
 - ii. December 13, 2022, January 17, 2023: Liturgy and Ritual as essential American container creators
 - iii. January 31, February 28, 2023: Text Study, Revelation, Narrative and the American quest for Meaning.
 - iv. March 7, 28, 2023 : Institutionalism, Constitutionalism, Covenant, Membership and Belonging as the structure of American republican democracy.
 - v. April 18, 2023 Healing, Hope and Chaplaincy and the confrontation with American reality.
 - vi. May 2, 2023: The unique American interfaith landscape—the interaction of faith, power and race—and our opportunity.
 - vii. Potential Additional Session: peer mentoring, facilitating
- e. Reflection: How have the following forces shaped your understanding of civic duty: (1) your family story, (2) your Jewish practices and values, (3) your aspirations for our country, (4) your experiences with American politics?