

## **Eighteenth Century Kabbalistic Thought and Literature – Syllabus**

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### **Course Description:**

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In this course, we will closely examine and critically analyze eighteenth century kabbalistic literature within the broader context of the rise of the Hasidic movement. The eighteenth century was a watershed period for Jewish thought and culture, including the form of Jewish mysticism known as the Kabbalah (literally, “that which is received” or “tradition”). One of the most important social and intellectual developments during this pivotal century was the rise of the pietistic Eastern European Jewish movement known as Hasidism. In his monumental study, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem identified Hasidism as “the popularization of Kabbalistic thought. . . an attempt to make the world of Kabbalism, through a certain transformation or re-interpretation, accessible to the masses of the people.” We will take Scholem’s provocative observation as a starting off point as we explore kabbalistic literature produced by members of the Hasidic movement. Rather than surveying a wide range of sources, we will focus on carefully reading a representative selection of texts in English translation. Over the course of the quarter, we will explore a number of critical areas of kabbalistic thought, including tzimtzum, the sefirot, theodicy, and hermeneutics.

### **Required Reading**

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Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hassidism*, Yeshiva University Press, New York 1999 (A Translation of Primary Sources) (*Selected Readings*)

J. Immanuel Schochet, *Mystical Concepts in Chassidism: An Introduction of Kabbalistic Concepts and Doctrines*, Kehot Publication Society, New York, 1998. (*Selected Readings*)

Gershom Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken, New York, 1995. (*Selected Readings*)

Recommended Reading

Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School*, The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Arthur Green, *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl*, Paulist Press, 1982.

## Course Requirements

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You will be required to read all assigned texts carefully and to prepare a short response—no more than one page—every week to be discussed in class. In addition, you will be required to write a 5 page paper on a topic selected in consultation with me. Rather than preparing texts on your own, the class will be divided into study partnerships consisting of two individuals (i.e., a havruta) who will read and discuss the texts prior to class.

## Course Outline

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**Class 1:** *Introduction - Understanding the historical and intellectual context, as well as the social controversies, surrounding eighteenth century Kabala.*

In this first class we will examine the context and controversies surrounding 18<sup>th</sup> century Kabala, focusing in particular on the emergence of the Hasidic movement and its relationship to earlier trends in the Kabala, including the Zohar (the most important kabalistic text), and the Lurianic corpus.

**Class 2:** *18<sup>th</sup> Century Kabala – A Unique Phenomenon?*

In this class we will continue the discussion from the previous class and try to determine whether the 18<sup>th</sup> century kabalistic school of thought made any unique contribution to Jewish thought and literature. We will also explore the different approaches among 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystics.

**Class 3:** *Tzimzum (Contraction of the Divine): Bridging the Infinite and Finite*

In this class we will try to tackle one of mysticism's greatest questions: can infinity be the source of finitude? We will begin by examining the classical Lurianic approach to this issue and then explore the eighteenth century debates as found in Hasidic literature.

**Class 4:** *Sefirot: Aspects of the Divine, Part I*

In this class we will critically analyze the theosophical structure known as the “Sefirot” and explore eighteenth century kabalistic contributions to this topic.

**Class 5:** *Sefirot : Aspects of the Divine, Part II*

Building on the previous class, we will explore kabalistic interpretations of Genesis 1:27, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them,” paying special attention to the links between the Sefirot and the human psyche.

**Class 6:** *Theodicy Part I*

We will watch and discuss the award winning Israeli film *Ushpizin*, which dramatically represents kabalistic ideas concerning pain and suffering.

**Class 7:** *Theodicy, Part II*

In this class we will address the question of whether an omnipotent divinity can be reconciled with a world filled with pain and suffering. We will analyze Jewish mystics’ approach to the subject of theodicy, as articulated in eighteenth century kabalistic literature.

**Class 8:** *Mystical Hermeneutics, Part I*

We will dissect a verse from the biblical book of Leviticus that was classically understood as a tragic curse but transformed into a blessing by eighteenth century Kabbalists.

**Class 9:** *Mystical Hermeneutics, Part 2*

In this class we will explore the biblical story of Jacob’s love for Rachel and his first marriage to her sister Leah from a kabalistic perspective.

**Class 10:** *The Power of Transgression*

In this class we will comparatively examine kabalistic conceptions of sin and guilt against the backdrop of earlier biblical and rabbinic sources.