

JEWISH STUDIES AT BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

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Jewish studies at Brandeis University cannot be reduced to a single identity or ideology but reflects the dynamic interplay among several academic trends. The program owes its particular structure to its placement within the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies (NEJS), which was founded in 1953, five years after Brandeis was established as a non-sectarian university by members of the American Jewish community. NEJS was viewed as a cornerstone of the university for Jewish and non-Jewish students alike (approximately 50 percent of the current Brandeis student body is Jewish).

NEJS has undergone many changes that reflect the growth of the department, the growth of the institution, and the changing fields of interest of its faculty members. Whereas younger Jewish studies departments have created programs out of whole cloth, traditional commitments—such as offering courses in original languages and presenting Judaism within a textual, diachronic framework—have had a lasting impact at Brandeis. In order to understand the major and its relation to other departments and programs properly, some history is in order. At the time of the department's founding, courses were mainly offered in Jewish thought, history, and literature, including several courses in Hebrew Bible. Hebrew language was an early requirement for the major and has never been abandoned. By

1960, the department offered several Ancient Near Eastern languages and courses in Islamic studies. In 1965, the department set specific distribution requirements for the major including two courses in Bible, one course in Jewish history, one in Jewish philosophy, and one in Modern Hebrew literature. In 1981, the department's growing size and the interests of students led to the establishment of three distinct tracks within the department: Jewish Studies, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, and Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, each with its own set of requirements. Subsequently, the department added separate majors in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies (IMES) in 1983, and Hebrew Language and Literature (HLL) in 2001.

THE JEWISH STUDIES TRACK AIMS TO PROVIDE A DIACHRONIC OVERVIEW AND TO RELATE THE FIELD TO OTHER ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES SUCH AS HISTORY, LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, SOCIOLOGY, AND RELIGION.

Today, NEJS supports two tracks: Jewish Studies, and Bible and Ancient Near East (graduates of either track receive a B.A. in NEJS, not their subspecialties). The Jewish Studies track aims to provide a diachronic overview and to relate the field to other academic disciplines such as history, literature, philosophy, sociology, and religion. Many students major in NEJS out of general interest while others see NEJS as preparatory for specific career paths (common ones include graduate level studies, religious vocations, religious education, work in NGOs, and professions related to language skills). That track requires a foundational course in Jewish studies and a tripartite chronological requirement: 1) Bible

and Ancient Near East, 2) Early Post-Biblical Judaism, Early Christianity, Rabbinics, Medieval Judaism, and Classical Islam, and 3) Modern and Contemporary Judaism. There is also a three-part Hebrew requirement: 1) Fourth Semester Hebrew, 2) Classical Hebrew (biblical, rabbinic, or medieval), and 3) Modern Hebrew Literature. The diversity of NEJS majors (including students with no background in Jewish studies and others with significant knowledge of some aspects) makes offering a curriculum that is simultaneously accessible and advanced a priority.

The foundational course, the chronological requirements, and the Hebrew requirements aim to impart a base level of knowledge while advanced courses allow students to develop in specialty areas (writing an honors thesis is also popular).

Several courses emphasize gaining textual skills in original languages while others offer skills for analyzing the American Jewish community. Some courses assist students contemplating careers in Jewish education to approach issues in pedagogy and the philosophy of Jewish education. One interesting aspect of the placement of Jewish studies within the NEJS structure is that courses in Christianity, Islam, and non-biblical religions of the Ancient Near East fulfill distribution requirements. Apart from minimal required courses, two student transcripts seldom look alike. This curricular heterogeneity reflects the department's depth and interdisciplinary approach to the ever-evolving field of Jewish studies.

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