



“WHAT JEWS THINK” SERIES 2023-2024

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No fee for HPCT-CAE members; nonmember - \$18 donation requested



Thursday, November 2 @8:30 PM

Dr. Yaniv Feller, University of Florida

“Philosophy and Leadership in Dark Times”

This talk introduces the thought of Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck (1873–1956), one of the most prominent Jewish public intellectuals of his era and the official leader of German Jewry under Nazism. After briefly discussing Baeck’s biography, we will examine how his understanding of the essence of Judaism developed in conversation with Christianity, before moving to the impact of the rise of Nazism on Baeck’s thought, and the moral dilemmas he had to face.

Yaniv Feller is an assistant professor of Religion and Jewish Studies at the University of Florida. He is the author of *The Jewish Imperial Imagination: Leo Baeck and German-Jewish Thought* (Cambridge University Press, September 2023) and a co-editor of *Covenantal Thinking: Essays on the Philosophy and Theology of David Novak*, to be published by the University of Toronto Press in March 2024. Yaniv published articles on various topics in Jewish thought and culture, including Jewish-Christian relations, post-Holocaust theology, and Christmas trees.

Thursday, December 14 @ 8:30 PM

Dr. Brian Gordon Hillman, Towson University

“The Beginnings of Kabbalah”

“The Beginnings of Kabbalah” examines the fundamental theological questions that gave rise to the tradition of Jewish texts and ideas known as Kabbalah. The program historically locates Kabbalah’s origins in Medieval Europe and considers how Kabbalah arose, in part, as a response to philosophical conceptions of the divine. The program will then explore some early Kabbalistic texts to understand how Kabbalists understood both the nature of divinity and the relationship between G-d and the world with a focus on humanity’s place therein.

Brian Hillman is an assistant professor in the department of philosophy and religious studies at Towson University in Towson, Maryland. He earned a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Indiana University, Bloomington in 2021. His research focuses on modern Jewish thought and Kabbalah. In addition to being the managing editor of the *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, his writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, *Religious Studies Review*, and *The Jewish Book Council*.

Thursday, January 4 @8:30 PM

Dr. Eitan Fishbane, Jewish Theological Seminary

“Ideas of God in Jewish Mysticism”

We will explore the varied, fascinating, and inspiring ways in which Jewish mystical thinkers and practitioners have understood and described the nature and character of Divinity. Drawing on lyrical and symbolism-infused texts from the Kabbalah of 13th century Spain (especially that of the Zohar), the Kabbalah of 16th century Tzfat, to that of the spiritual masters of modern eastern European Hasidism, we will study such ideas as: the Ein-Sof (No End or Infinity); the *sefirot* as the inner luminous dimensions of God’s self, the emanations of a river of heavenly divine light and breath; God as the ultimate fountain of pure compassion/Rahamim; the monistic and pantheistic — the radically immanent — vision of God as the interconnected life force of all Being.

Dr. Eitan Fishbane is Professor of Jewish Thought at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), where he has taught for 17 years. Among Professor Fishbane’s published books are: *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (Oxford University Press, 2018); *As Light Before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Stanford University Press, 2009); and, most recently, *Embers of Pilgrimage* (Panui Poetry Series, 2021). Fishbane received his Ph.D. and B.A., *summa cum laude*, from Brandeis University.

Thursday, February 8 @8:30 PM

Dr. Eugene Sheppard, Brandeis University

“Ideas of God in Jewish Mysticism”

More info to come

Thursday, February 29 @8:30 PM

Rabbi Dr. Haim Rechnittzer, Hebrew Union College

“What is Judaism? – The Dispute between Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig”

In 1923 Rosenzweig wrote an open letter to Martin Buber titled “Die Bauleute” (The Builders), a letter that later became a central part of Rosenzweig’s Jewish theological legacy. In “The Builders – Concerning the Jewish Law” Rosenzweig accuses Buber that despite liberating “us” from the shackles of 19th century academic objective engagement with “Judaism” and opening our minds and hearts to seek the “inner power” of the Jewish tradition, he failed to answer the crucial existential question “what are we to do?” That is, Buber’s answer left the question of Jewish praxis, of Halakhah, outside of the realm of possible answers. He provided a non-halakhic answer, arguing that the “truth” of Judaism lies in its religiosity, not its manifestation as a religion, or as Law. Our session will be dedicated to the exploration of these two opposing concepts of “Judaism” and the ever-present existential question of “what are we (Jews) to do?”

Rabbi Dr. Haim O. Rechnitzer is a Professor of Jewish Thought at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, Ohio, and a poet. He earned his doctorate from the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and his rabbinical ordination from HUC-JIR (Jerusalem) in 2003. Rechnitzer’s research is dedicated to themes of political theology, theological trends in Hebrew poetry, Israeli theology, and Jewish education. His most recent book is *Pictures / Reproductions* (Jerusalem: Carme & Yediot Aharonot, 2022). His forthcoming book is *Ars-Prophetica: Theology in the Poetry of Twentieth-Century Israeli Poets Avraham Ĥalfi, Shin Shalom, Amir Gilboa, and T. Carmi* (Cincinnati, HUC Press, 2023). He has published articles on the subject of political theology, philosophy of education, theology of Piyyut (religious hymns), and Hebrew poetry.

Thursday, March 14 @8:30 PM

Dr. Michah Gottlieb, New York University

“A Rabbinic Debate about Slavery on the Eve of the Civil War”

As civil war loomed, President James Buchanan designated January 4, 1861 as a national day for fasting and prayer. That day Rabbi Morris Raphall of Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in Manhattan gave a sermon arguing that a civil war should not be waged over slavery since slavery was a biblically sanctioned institution. The Baltimore Rabbi David Einhorn responded with an essay excoriating Raphall for his terrible misunderstanding of the Bible. Does the Bible consider slavery legitimate? In this session, we’ll explore a rabbinic debate over this question.

Michah Gottlieb is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at NYU. An expert on modern Jewish thought and philosophy, his current research centers on musar and the practice of ethical self-development. He is author of several books and numerous articles including most recently, *The Jewish Reformation: Bible Translation and Middle-Class German Judaism as Spiritual Enterprise* (Oxford, 2021).

Thursday, April 11 @8:30 PM

Dr. Andrea Dara Cooper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

“Jewish Philosophy and Feminism”

In this talk, we’ll consider how scholars and theologians have attempted to find a feminist space within the Jewish interpretive tradition. How can contemporary approaches to gender analysis allow us to understand the use of gendered terms in Judaism, and in what ways can Judaism be both challenged and revitalized by these approaches?

Andrea Dara Cooper is Associate Professor and Leonard and Tobee Kaplan Scholar in Modern Jewish Thought and Culture in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she teaches a range of courses on religion and culture, the history of Judaism, gender, and philosophy. She is the author of *Gendering Modern Jewish Thought* (Indiana University Press, 2021).

Thursday, May 9 @8:30 PM

Dr. Shira Billet, Jewish Theological Seminary

“How Jewish Philosophers Think about Troubling Traditions”

We will introduce Jewish philosophy as a means of grappling with “troubling traditions.” Traditions refer to sacred texts that are authoritative for us in some significant way. They are “troubling” when they conflict with other strong beliefs we hold, be they epistemic beliefs about what is true or false, moral beliefs about right or wrong, or political beliefs about how we ought or ought not to live. We will look at methods that Jewish philosophers have articulated in attempting to resolve these contradictions, and gain insight into the history and practice of Jewish philosophy.

Shira Billet is Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought and Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Her research focuses on the work of nineteenth-century German Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen, his ethical and Jewish thought, and the history of Jewish philosophy broadly.