



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS CENTER
FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

Rashi and Rembrandt: Art as Commentary in Early Modern Amsterdam
Fall 2022 / Mon 1:40-3:55pm & Wed 1:25-3:40pm
Rabbi Meir Soloveichik and Professor Jacob Wisse

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Course Description

Acclaimed for his Protestant-influenced interpretation of Scripture, Rembrandt van Rijn's art – paintings, prints and drawings – demonstrate a rich sensitivity to specifically Jewish ideas and concerns. The artist's association with Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and other members of Amsterdam's Jewish community influenced his approach to Hebrew Biblical subjects, as well as his understanding of Christian theology. At the same time, the artist's work broke new stylistic ground and established an original approach to interpreting subjects and engaging with artistic traditions in general. This inter-disciplinary course explores the character of Rembrandt's depictions of Hebrew Biblical and Christian subjects by examining their relationship to Jewish exegesis, including Talmudic, Midrashic and Kabbalistic literature, to contemporary Jewish life in Amsterdam, and to the art historical tradition. We will examine Rembrandt's connections to the Jewish community of Amsterdam, his knowledge of and perspective on Jewish sources and customs, and the master's place within the larger context of art history and theological discourse.

Course Structure

In each section of the course, we will explore subjects and themes addressed by Rembrandt in his art, analyzing them both through an art historical/technical and philosophical/theological lens. Professors Soloveichik and Wisse, who will both be together with the students during all class meetings, will – in each session – address the same images and topics from different vantage points, invoking historical and contemporary sources to place Rembrandt's images and ideas in context. Students will be required to read primary sources (in translation) and will be called upon for at least one in-class or on-site presentation. In addition to classroom meetings and discussions, we will visit world-class collections in the New York area to see the work of Rembrandt and his contemporaries in person, including possibly the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, and/or a private collection.

Course Readings

Readings will be assigned throughout the semester and will be distributed or posted through our Canvas course site. We recommend obtaining a copy of: Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Regular readings will be assigned from: Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002); Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009); and Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (Knopf, 1999).



Course Evaluation

Attendance, engagement, weekly readings, and discussion	15%
Two critical responsa on readings*	20%
Midterm exam	25%
Class presentation & research paper	40%

*Critical Responsa

Over the course of the semester, students are responsible for writing two critical responses to specific texts that will be distributed and/or discussed in class. Questions will be posed to guide your discussion. The critique is an analysis and critical evaluation of the point of view adopted by the author in relation to the broad themes of our course. Consider how the text or image reflects on the themes of the *Rashi & Rembrandt* class. A full set of guidelines for the critical responsa will be circulated.

Attendance & Participation

Students are strongly encouraged to attend **all** meetings during the term and to participate steadily and enthusiastically in class discussion. This is especially important in a topical class that moves briskly between themes and subjects. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class meeting. Promptness, attentiveness, participation, and collegiality will be considered in the course evaluation at the instructors' discretion. Students are expected to keep up with weekly readings and to come to class prepared to discuss them.

Honor Code

Yeshiva College maintains an honor code that these instructors take very seriously. The work you submit must be your own. All outside sources and references consulted must be properly cited. Cheating will not be tolerated and will result in university disciplinary action. If you are unclear in any way about what constitutes plagiarism, please do not hesitate to discuss it with either or both professors.

Writing Center

The Beren Campus Writing Center (located in 714 in Lex 215) offers free, confidential tutoring that can support your writing for this course. Find out more and make an appointment at <https://www.yu.edu/writing-centers/beren>.

In-Class Behavior and Cell Phones

We place a high premium on the behavior of students within the classroom. Several aspects of behavior to consider are promptness, civility, decorum, and respect for fellow students. All cell phones should be turned off before the class begins, and kept off for the duration of class meetings, including museum visits. We do not distinguish between making calls, having a cell phone ring during class, texting or checking for text messages.

Students with Disabilities and Special Needs



Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, rkohn1@yu.edu, during the first week of class. The office is located in 215 Lexington Ave, Suite 505. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter and discuss any specifics with me to ensure the successful implementation of your accommodations.

Class Schedule and Topics

Aug. 24 (W): No class meeting – to be re-scheduled

Aug. 29 (M): Why Rembrandt? The “Jewish question”. Inspiration, goals, and methodology for the course.

Wed. Aug. 31 (W), Sept. 7 (W): Topic 1 – Setting the Stage: Amsterdam in the 17th Century, the New Israel; the Spanish & Portuguese community and the Jewish context.

- Daniel, chapter 5
- Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, pp. 1-41 (chapter one: “On the Breestraat”)
- Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, pp. 7-32 (chapter one: “Amsterdam Sephardi Jews as Patrons and Collectors of Art”)

Sept. 5 (M): Labor Day – no classes

Sept. 12 (M), 14 (W): Topic 2 – Heritage of Classical Antiquity; the understanding of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament in Rembrandt’s time. On Menasseh ben Israel – “Rembrandt’s Rabbi”.

- Daniel, chapters 7-8
- Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, pp. 42-103 (chapter two: “Graven Images”)
- Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, pp. 6-16 (Introduction: “Rembrandt and the Jerusalem Temple”)
- Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, pp. 104-143 (chapter three: “The Unhappy Rabbi”)
- Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, pp. 58-98 (chapter three: “Rembrandt’s Encounter with Menasseh ben Israel: Defining the Rabbi’s Status in the Christian World”)

Sept. 19 (M), 21 (W): Topic 3 – Artistic Influence, Inspiration, Dialogue, and Competition. Looking at Titian, Caravaggio, and Rubens. On the image of Moses in Rembrandt’s work.

- Exodus, chapters 32-34
- Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (Knopf, 1999).

Sept. 25-28: Rosh Hashana & Fast of Gedaliah – no classes

Sept. 29 (Th), Oct. 3 (M) – both class meetings via ZOOM: Topic 4 – The intellectual power of light. Rembrandt’s physical & spiritual healers. On Rembrandt’s Abraham and depictions of the *Akedah*.



- Genesis 22:1-19
- Judah ibn Abbas, *Et Sha'arei Ratzon*

Oct. 4-19: Yom Kippur & Sukkot – no classes

Oct. 24 (M), 25 (W): Topic 5 – Spreading the word. Rembrandt and innovations in printmaking.

Oct. 31 (M), Nov. 2 (W): Topic 6 – Self-Portraiture and representations of the self. The status and ideal of the artist. On feasts – Belshazzar and others

- R. Littman, "An Error in the Menetekel Inscription in Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast*," in *Oud Holland* 107 (1993): pp. 296–7.

Nov. 7 (M): Midterm Exam

Nov. 9 (W), 14 (M), 16 (W): Topic 7 – Depictions and theme of blindness in Rembrandt.

Monochrome vs. color palettes. On *Jeremiah's Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* and the question of subject matter in Rembrandt; On the figures of Samson and Balaam.

- Judges, chapters 13-16
- Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, pp. 99-123 (chapter four: "Encountering Difference: Rembrandt's *Presentation in the Dark Manner*")

Nov. 21 (M), 23 (W): Topic 8 – Rembrandt's late style and the painting blessings. Rembrandt's and the Bible's ideal of family and agedness. On Rembrandt's *David and Saul* and the image of kingship

- 1 Samuel, chapters 16-20
- Emilie E.S. Gordenker and Petria Noble, "Rembrandt's 'Saul and David' at the Mauritshuis: A Progress Report," in *The Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*
- Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, pp. 78-201 (chapter six: "Rembrandt's Late Works; Without Temple of Church")
- Genesis, chapter 48
- Jamie Buettner, "Family Benediction: The Role of Asenath in Rembrandt's *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*"

Nov. 28 (M), 30 (W): Topic 9 – Rembrandt's legacy. Categorizing Rembrandt – The Rembrandt Research Project. Rembrandt's students and long-term offspring. On other artists, Biblical themes and subjects. Conclusions and questions

- Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, pp. 124-159 (chapter five: "Christian History in Print: Renewing the Covenant")

Dec. 5 (M), 7 (W), 12 (M), 14 (W), 19 (M), 21 (W): Student Presentations

Dec. 23-26: Study Days – no classes (unless rescheduled from earlier in semester)



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Dec. 30 (Friday): Research paper due (in lieu of final exam)