

NVHC lifelong learning class, 2020-21

“Examining Jewish History via Biography”

Synopsis: In the Eleh Ezkerah on Yom Kippur, the prayer for martyrs, the machzor says, “we remember them as human beings defined by their moral choices, their sacrifices, their sense of responsibility.” And elsewhere in the liturgy, we have gratefully remembered “the Psalmists and Sages of Israel.” In this course, we will approach Jewish history from a different angle—via biographical profiles of about 25-30 key figures in the times of the Bible, antiquity, the middle ages, and then over the past roughly 250 years. We will look at the lives and legacies of religious leaders, statesmen and jurists, philosophers, poets, writers and linguists, journalists, scientists, military leaders, and philanthropists to tease out some broad themes in the study of Jewish history in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora, especially in Europe and the United States.

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There are no required books but you might like to consult some of the following, many of which are either in the NVHC library or available in inexpensive copies on-line or at your local library. Two of the best sources for the general reader are [Yale University Press’s Jewish Lives](#) series (that has over 72 titles) and the ones in the [Schocken Books/Nextbook](#) series, also known as Jewish Encounters. There is also much information in reference books; the multi-volume *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972; 2008), or works like [The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion](#) (Oxford University Press, 1997; 2d edition, 2011) are good places to start. See also the [Jewish Virtual Library](#). Many of the contemporary and historical figures we will discuss in the class are also profiled on DVDs about Jewish history, among them: *The Jewish Americans* (PBS, 2008); Simon Schama’s *The Story of the Jews* (PBS, 2013); Abba Eban’s *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews* (2001); his *Israel: A Nation is Born* (2001); and the documentary, *The 50 Years War: Israel and the Arabs* (PBS, 1999).

I. BIBLICAL PERIOD AND ANTIQUITY (ORIGINS TO 1000 CE)

*Moses-

Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (Yale University Press, 2016).

*King David (circa 1040-970 BCE)-

Robert Pinsky, *The Life of David* (Schocken, 2005); David Wolpe, *David: The Divided Heart* (Yale University Press, 2014).

*Hillel (1st century BCE)-

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Hillel: If Not Now, When?* (Schocken, 2010).

*Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef (c. 40-135 CE) -

Barry W. Holtz, *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud* (Yale University Press, 2017); Reuven Hammer, *Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy* (JPS, 2015).

II. MIDDLE AGES TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT (1000-1700 CE)

*Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon or Maimonides (1135-1204)-

Sherwin B. Nuland, *Maimonides* (Schocken, 2005); Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2013); Micah Goodman, *Maimonides and the Book that Changed Judaism: Secrets of The Guide for the Perplexed* (JPS, 2010); Ralph Rosen, “Moses Maimonides,” in Strauss and Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); Julius Gutmann, “Aristotelianism and Its Opponents,” in *Philosophies of Judaism* (Schocken, 1973).

*Rashi or Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak (1040-1105)-

Chaim Pearl, *Rashi* (Grove Press, 1988); Elie Wiesel, *Rashi: A Portrait* (Schocken, 2009).

*Gracia Mendes (1510-1569)-

Cecil Roth, *Dona Gracia of the House of Nasi* (JPS, 1977).

*Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632-1677)-

Rebecca Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (Schocken, 2006); Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (2d edition, Cambridge University Press, 2018); Stanley Rosen, "Benedict Spinoza," in Strauss and Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

*Gluckel of Hamlen (1646-1724)-

The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hamlen (Schocken, 1977).

*The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797)-

Eliyahu Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (Yale University Press, 2013).

*Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786)-

Shmuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity* (Yale University Press, 2010); Alexander Altmann, "Introduction," to Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism* (University Press of New England, 1983).

III. MODERN PERIOD (1789-2020)

A) ISRAEL/YISHUV (BRITISH MANDATE)/OTTOMAN PALESTINE

*Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922)-

Ilan Stavans, *Resurrecting Hebrew* (Schocken, 2008); Robert St. John, *Tongue of the Prophets* (Dolphin Books, 1952).

*David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973)-

Shimon Peres, *Ben-Gurion: A Political Life* (Schocken, 2011); Anita Shapira, *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel* (Yale University Press, 2014); Shlomo Aronson, *David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

*Menachem Begin (1913-1992) and Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880-1940)-

Daniel Gordis, *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's Soul* (Schocken, 2014); Hillel Halkin, *Jabotinsky: A Life* (Yale University Press, 2019); Colin Shindler, *The Rise of the Israeli Right: From Odessa to Hebron* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

*Golda Meir (1898-1978)-

Francine Klagsbrun, *Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel* (Schocken, 2017).

*Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995) and Shimon Peres (1923-2016)-

Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (expanded edition, University of California Press, 1996); Itamar Rabinovich, *Yitzhak Rabin: Soldier, Leader, Statesman* (Yale University Press, 2017). Shimon Peres, *No Room for Small Dreams: Courage, Imagination, and the Making of Modern Israel* (Custom House, 2017); Shimon Peres with Robert Littell, *For the Future of Israel* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

B) EUROPE***Albert Einstein (1879-1955)-**

Albert Einstein, *Essays on Humanism* (Philosophical Library, 1983); Steven Gimbel, *Einstein: His Space and Times* (Yale University Press, 2015); Walter Isaacson, *Einstein* (Simon and Shuster, 2008); David E. Rowe and Robert Schulmann, eds., *Einstein on Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

***Leo Baeck (1873-1956) and Martin Buber (1878-1965)-**

LBI Yearbook, "In Memoriam: Leo Baeck," pp.3-44 (Leo Baeck Institute, 1957). Leonard Baker, *Days of Sorrow and Pain: Leo Baeck and the Berlin Jews* (Oxford University Press, 1978). Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber* (Yale University Press, 2019); Paula Vermes, *Buber* (Grove Press, 1988); Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work* (volume 1, Wayne State University Press reprint, 1988; volumes 2-3, EP Dutton, 1983).

***Primo Levi (1919-1987) and Elie Wiesel (1928-2016)-**

Berl Lang, *Primo Levi: The Matter of A Life* (Yale University Press, 2013); Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of An Optimist* (Overlook Press, 1996). Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (Schocken, 1996); *Memoirs: And the Sea Is Never Full, 1969-* (Schocken, 1999).

C) USA***Emma Lazarus (1849-1887)-**

Esther Schor, *Emma Lazarus* (Schocken, 2006).

***Salo Baron (1895-1989)-**

Robert Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron: Architect of Jewish History* (NYU Press, 1995); Arthur Hertzberg, "Salo W. Baron and the Writing of Modern Jewish History: Speculations in Honor of His Centennial," in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, ed., *Writing A Modern Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Salo W. Baron* (Yale University Press/Jewish Museum, 2006).

***Justice Louis Brandeis (1856-1941) and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1933-2020)-**

Jeffrey Rosen, *Louis D. Brandeis: American Prophet* (Yale University Press, 2016); Melvin I. Urofsky, *Louis D. Brandeis: A Life* (Pantheon Books, 2009). Scott Dodson, ed. *The Legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsburg* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Linda Hirshman, *Sisters-In-Law: How Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg Went to the Supreme Court and Changed the World* (Harper, 2015); RBG, *In My Own Words* (Simon and Shuster, 2016).