



HUC-JIR Alumni Study Retreat in Cincinnati January 7 – 10, 2024 Intensive Session Descriptions

Registration closes on October 31, 2023

To register visit <https://huc.edu/event/huc-jir-alumni-study-retreat-in-cincinnati/>

Contact slinas@huc.edu with questions

Rabbi David Aaron, Ph.D.

SESSION ONE: What if nothing means what it seems to mean? Coming to terms with Avot's transactional form of Judaism.

Half of the aphorisms in Avot's first two chapters concern the acquisition of merit useful only for entry into the World-to-come or for the sake of trading honors among sages. The way of life prescribed by these aphorisms derives from deep convictions about the transactional nature of the universe. Are any of these ideas salvageable in a contemporary progressive Judaism? If yes, how? If not, what does it all mean, given that we continue to include Avot as a standard source of "wisdom" in our Jewish discourse?

SESSION TWO: Should we really be equally focused on "easy commandments" and challenging ones? How Avot undermines core principles of moral action...and what to do about it.

In Avot 2:1 we read—

נהגוי זְהִיר בְּמִצְוֹת קִלְיָה כְּבִתְמוּנָהּ, לְשֵׁאִין אֶתָּה יוֹדֵעַ מִתּוֹ שְׂכָרוֹן שֶׁל מִצְוֹת. נְהוּי מְחֻשָּׁב הַפְּסֹד מִצְוֹת כְּנִגְדַּ שְׂכָרָה, וְשֶׁכֶר עֲבָרָה כְּנִגְדַּ הַפְּסֹדָה

This aphorism suggests that we cannot differentiate mitzvot with severe implications from those that have minimal significance, at least not in terms of our prioritization or the benefits accrued by their performance. But surely this concept presents serious moral problems. It is also impossible to implement, given our limited time, energy and resources. And what about the concept of doing something for its own sake? That's completely absent from Avot. This session will be dedicated to grappling with these moral issues by suggesting that even the earliest amoraic sages had serious problems with the concept that all mitzvot are, in any sense, equal.

[Click here](#) for the bio of Rabbi David Aaron, Ph.D.

Dr. Jason Kalman

SESSION ONE: “If I started selling funeral shrouds, people would stop dying”: Poverty and Wealth in the Writings of Abraham ibn Ezra

In an age when the rich keep getting richer we have an obligation to think about the benefits and obligations of wealth. The 12th c. poet and *parshan* Abraham ibn Ezra (1093-1167), who seems to have had it all and lost it, has much to say about money, those who have it, and those who do not. By studying his descriptions of the biblical patriarchs and samples from his poetry we will explore the value of money and Judaism’s values through the eyes of this thoughtful medieval writer.

SESSION TWO: She Just Can’t Handle Good News: Sarah and the Binding of Isaac

The midrashic sources which discuss Sarah’s death upon hearing the news of the near sacrifice of her beloved son Isaac are often heralded as examples of ancient rabbinic feminism. By reading these sources along with their Christian and Muslim parallels we will explore if this is, in fact, the case. Several rabbinic sources about the Akedah make the matriarch’s death the culminating event of the Test and it is difficult not to identify with Sarah upon hearing what her son had been through at the hands of her husband and God. But, with which of her actions and emotions did the rabbis of antiquity expect we would identify?

[Click here](#) for the bio of Dr. Jason Kalman

Rabbi Rick Sarason, Ph.D.

SESSION ONE: “When Bad Things Happen to Chosen People: The Rabbis on the Problem of Suffering”

Theodicy – divine justice – remains the proverbial thorn in the rose of religious belief. The classical Rabbis basically uphold the theodicy of Deuteronomy, but with some occasional surprising lapses. We will examine some characteristic texts from Lamentations Rabbah and from b. Berakhot 3a, 5a ff. that deal with this issue. And we will consider their pastoral implications (including negative ones).

SESSION TWO: “Liturgical Variety and Creativity in the Cairo Genizah: Implications for Contemporary Reform Liturgies?”

One of the delightful surprises of the systematic classification, study, and publication of materials from the Cairo Genizah over the past 130 years has been the profusion and diversity of liturgical texts discovered, stemming from the rites of both Babylonia and the Land of Israel. We will examine together some of these texts (including poetic versions of standard benedictions, like the Shema and Amidah blessings and Birkat hamazon) and explore their possible implications for contemporary Reform liturgies.

[Click here](#) for the bio of Rabbi Rick Sarason, Ph.D.

Rabbi Haim O. Rechnitzer, Ph.D.

SESSION ONE: Poetry as Theology – Modern Hebrew “secular” poets as prophets of a new religiosity.

Delve into the poetry of leading 20th century Israeli poets such as Avraham Shlonsky, Avraham Halpi, T. Carmi and contemporary poets such as Rivkah Miriam to uncover and recover their theological elements. Reading these poets with an eye toward the theological element illuminates the poems’ multiplicity of meaning as we contextualize the works not only with biblical sources but also within an intricate net of Jewish canonic text such

as Midrash, Talmud, Heikhalot, Kabbalah and Hasidism. All the poems will be read in both Hebrew and translation to English.

SESSION TWO: Singing *Piyyut* – Between Ecstatic Mysticism and New Pedagogy for Jewish Education

In recent years there is an outburst of professional and amateur musical groups that preform *Piyyut* (religious hymns) all over Israel. Many of these groups cannot be clearly defined as “religious” or “secular,” “Sephardic” or “Ashkenazi. In many cases, audiences too cannot be classified by traditional Israeli categorizations. Furthermore, the settings for these performances have moved from their traditional locations and occasions (i.e. synagogues and life-cycle events) to concert halls or outdoor public spaces, often fulfilling the function of previously popular secular, mostly Ashkenazi, Zionist Shirah Be-tsiibur (communal, quasi-ideological sing-alongs). It seems safe to say that the revival of *Piyyut* as a form of new Israeli sing-alongs breaks and defies the demarcation lines of “secular” and “religious” identities and socio-political affiliations. In this session we will watch several *piyyut* performances and “close-read” both the videos and the *piyyut* texts, and discuss the *piyyut* and singing as a spiritual and pedagogical potential.

[Click here](#) for the bio of Rabbi Haim Rechnitzer, Ph.D.

Dr. Christine Neal Thomas

SESSION ONE: “To the Queen, My Mother; Message from the King, Your Son”: Royal Mothers and Sons in Late Bronze Age Syria and the Biblical David Cycle

Late Bronze Age Syria was a dynamic world in which royal women crossed boundaries of all kinds, mediating relationships among polities and brokering dynastic succession within polities. Letters in the ancient language of the site of the Syrian city state Ugarit shed light on the roles of royal women as kingmakers. Legal documents from the Hittite overlords of Syria also shed light on the agency of these royal mothers. The address of Ugaritic letters “to the queen, my mother” from “the king, your son,” encodes modalities of political power that can be elucidated by examining relationships between two sets of royal mothers and sons in Hittite legal verdicts from the reign of the Ugaritic king Ammistamru III. In the first legal case, a royal son’s position as king is defended by his mother, the queen. In the second, a royal son’s right to rule is put into jeopardy if he should support his mother’s position as queen. These positive and negative examples of reciprocity between royal mothers and their sons offer a vantage point from which to reconsider aspects of patrimonialism as a political system.

Furthermore, these two case studies from Ugarit shed light on the biblical depictions of Bathsheba, wife of David and mother of Solomon in 1 Kings 1-2 and raise questions about the nature of biblical patrimonialism. This session will facilitate text studies of translations of ancient texts in Ugaritic and Akkadian and move from this analysis to robust discussion of close readings of Bathsheba’s role as a kingmaker from the Hebrew Bible.

SESSION TWO: Undoing Daughters: Michal, Wife of David, Daughter of Saul, in Light of the Demise of The Daughter of a Hittite Princess

This second session offers a new perspective on the royal women of Late Bronze Age Syria in conversation with the royal women of the biblical David cycle. Royal women were not only kingmaking mothers, they were also simultaneously wives and daughters who mediated relationships among royal men. Yet what happened when these relationships became undone? What happened to the political patrimonial system when royal women lost their status as wives, daughters, and mothers? In this session we will see how a royal woman’s agency to undo networks among men becomes expressed ironically in her own demise. This session will facilitate text studies of translations of ancient legal texts in Akkadian from Hittite controlled Syria and move from this analysis to robust discussion of Michal’s position as daughter of Saul, wife of David, and mother of none in 1 and 2 Samuel.

[Click here](#) for the bio of Dr. Christine Thomas

