

**Brandeis University
Fall 2025**

The Jews of Latin America



The CDIJUM site was designed and constructed in Mexico City by architects Ezra Cherem and Alan Cherem, including the restoration of the Rodfe Sedek synagogue and mikvah. (Photo credit: @ LGM Studio-Luis Gallardo. Image reproduced with permission.)

Instructor: Dalia Wassner, Ph.D.
Course: NEJS 132a, Lown 302
Meeting: Tues., Fri. 11:10-12:30 pm
Office Hours: Tuesdays 2pm, Lown 110

Email: daliafw@brandeis.edu

Cross-Listing: LACLS
Subject Designation: DJW

Course Description

What has been the varied and evolving Jewish experience in Latin America and the Caribbean since the early modern period up until contemporary times? What has the presence of Jewish communities, in turn, meant for Latin American, Caribbean and the history of the Americas more broadly? This course will explore the various ways that Jewish inclusion in society has played a role in larger political, social, and cultural conversations of identity from colonial times to the present. At the same time, we will explore what the Jewish experience in the Americas has looked like for Jews in the region for over 500 years.

Drawing on the works of public intellectuals, writers, journalists, artists, playwrights, and filmmakers, we pay particular attention to questions of gender, race, language and religion as defining rubrics of Latin American and Caribbean Jewries' collective identities, and place these within the history of the Americas and diaspora Jewry more broadly. An important perspective also includes Israel-Diaspora relations as concerns Latin America and its Jews.

We will also benefit from guest visits from journalists, material artists and filmmakers.

Learning Goals

- Understand dynamic Jewish identities of the Americas as much as reflective of places of providence and immigrant circumstances; evolving Jewish diaspora ideologies; and specific national and regional realities of the receiving nations
- Develop analytical skills through historical, anthropological, linguistic and social-psychology studies
- Examine the narratives and languages of Jewish diaspora for processing and portraying new Latin American or Caribbean identities (i.e. Sepharad=Authentic; Agriculture=Nationalistic/Productive; Cosmopolitan=Modern)
- Assess the intersection between Jews and indigenous peoples as political minorities in colonial and post-independence contexts
- Examine manifestations of multiethnic and multilingual identities among Jews of the Americas, as much pertaining to those who settled in the region historically, as those who comprise the 1/3 percent of Jewish outmigrants in the present day
- Engage in “de-siloing” Jewish Studies from an in-group discipline of study and expand approaches to “America” that venture beyond the US

Required Texts*

Ruth Behar, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

Moacyr Scliar, *The Centaur in the Garden* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

Ilan Stavans, *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).

*All additional readings will be provided electronically by the professor. All films (unless otherwise noted) will be shown in class.

Class Format

- The course will include lectures and lively discussion based on assigned reading materials.
- The course requires critical engagement with course methodologies and cultural materials.
- Reading and written assignments are due the day they are listed.
- Two written assignments will require students to engage critically with key learning goals.

Grading

- 1) **Participation:** Attendance (10%) + Class contributions (10%)= 20%
- 2) **Writing assignments:** 40% (20% each)
- 3) **Final Exam**= 40%

Expectations

- Students are expected to arrive on time to class, turn off cell phones, and notify the professor ahead of time if there is a need to arrive late, leave early, or miss a class meeting.
- It is expected that students participate in class discussions by adding insightful comments, offering questions, and engaging respectfully with your professor, peers, and guest lecturers.
- Unless previously arranged by the instructor, all assignments must be submitted during class on the designated due date.

Four-Credit Course: Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

Changes to the Syllabus: The instructor will strive to stick to the syllabus throughout the course of the semester. But occasionally, changes may be made to accommodate class interests and guest visitors that enhance the curriculum. The instructor reserves the right to add additional readings and make adjustments to the syllabus for the benefit of the course.

Disabilities

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

Academic Integrity

You are expected to be familiar with, and to follow, the university's policies on academic integrity. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures. All policies related to academic integrity apply to in-class and take-home projects, assignments, exams, and quizzes. Students may only collaborate on assignments with permission from the instructor. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university.

Course Schedule

Unit I. Colonial Period

Week 1. Introduction

Friday August 29: Welcome & Introductions

Week 2. Paradigms of Conquest: Spain and Portugal in the New World

Tuesday September 2: Policies of Expulsion, Contradictions in Conquest: Codifying Law and Language

Reading: Ilan Stavans, "Language and Colonization;" Robert Rowland, "New Christian, Marrano, Jew"

Friday September 5: Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz: Criolla Intellectual & Secret Jew in Colonial New Spain

Reading: Martin Cohen, *The Martyr: Luis de Carvajal, a Secret Jew in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (excerpt); Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, "The Divine Narcissus" (excerpt)

Week 3. The Jew in the Americas: Racial and Religious Diversity

Tuesday September 9: Jewish in the Dutch West Indies: The Case of Port Jews of the Americas

Reading: Hilit Surowitz-Israel "Religious Authority: A Perspective from the Americas," Noah L. Gelfand "To Live and to Trade: The Status of Sephardi Mercantile Communities in the Atlantic World during the 17th & 18th Cs," and Stanley Mirvis "Sexuality and Sentiment: Concubinage and the Sephardi Family in late 18th C Jamaica in Jane Gerber Ed. *The Jews of the Caribbean*

Friday September 12: Diversity in the Caribbean

Film: "Kippah in the Caribbean"

Reading: Laura Arnold Leibman, *The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in 5 Objects*, Introduction and Ch. 3

Unit II. Latin American National Beginnings & Jews Becoming Latin American Nationals

Week 4. Argentina's Gauchos: Narratives of Belonging

Tuesday September 16: Jews on the Pampas: Modern Solutions for Europe & America

Reading: Gerchunoff's *Jewish Gauchos* in Aizenberg's *Parricide on the Pampa?* pp. 39-169; Angélica Gorodischer "Camera Obscura" in *The House of Memory: Stories by Jewish Women Writers of Latin America* Ed. Marjorie Agosín.

Friday September 19: Latin American Jewish Literature: Trials of New Beginnings

Reading: Moacyr Scliar, *The Centaur in the Garden* (begin)

Film: "Camera Obscura"

Week 5. After the Countryside Utopia

Tuesday September 23: no class-Rosh Hashanah

Friday September 26: Magical Realism and Jewish Modernity: A Brazilian solution to the Jewish Question

Reading: Moacyr Scliar, *The Centaur in the Garden* (finish)

Week 6. Mexican Socialism: A Beacon for Jews and Anthropologists

Tuesday September 30: Socialism, Art and Jewish Mexican Women: Frida Kahlo, Anita Brenner and Mariana Yampolsky

Reading: Anita Brenner, excerpts; Dalia Wassner, "Transnational Mexican Renaissance"

Film for homework: "Frida" (2002, Salma Hayek)

Friday October 3: Redefining a Country: Anthropology & Nationalism

Reading: Rick López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* Ch. 4, pp.127-150; Charles King *Gods of the Upper Air: How A Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century* Ch. 6, pp.105-126.

Unit III. Latin America's Wars of Modernity

Week 7. Post-War Jews in Cold War Mexico

Tuesday October 7: Sukkot-no class

Friday October 10: 2nd Generation Jewish Mexicans: post-War but also Cold War

Film: "Novia que te vea/Bride to Be"

Reading: Margo Glantz, *Genealogias* (excerpt); Rosa Nissan, "Bride to be"

Week 8. Jews in the Southern Cone: Socialism or Cosmopolitanism as Modernity's Cure?

Tuesday Oct 14: Shmini Atzeret-no class

Thursday Oct 16 (Brandeis Tuesday): Chilean Jews: the Search for Belonging in a Divided Americas

Reading: Ariel Dorfman *Heading South, Looking North* (excerpt); Claudio Lomnitz, *Nuestra America* (excerpt)

Friday Oct 17: Borges, Cosmopolitanism, and the Jews

Reading: Borges "The Secret Miracle," Aizenberg and Borges, Borges in Jerusalem, Stavans on Borges

Week 9. Journalism, Art and Storytelling

Tuesday October 21: Multi-generational reporting: Special Guest Javier Sinay

Reading: Javier Sinay, *The Murders of Moisesville: The Rise and Fall of the Jerusalem of South America* (Preface)

Writing Assignment 1 due

Friday October 24: Artist Books: Special Guest: Mirta Kupferminc

Reading: None

Week 10. Artist Books

Tuesday October 28: Borges and the Kabbalah

*Special event by Mirta Kupferminc evening program instead of daytime class

Rapaport Treasure Hall, Brandeis Library 6:30-8:30pm

Friday October 31: In-class Film: "The Official Story"

Reading: None

Week 11. Jewish Collective Memory: Fighting Authoritarianism in the Americas

Tuesday November 4: The Sword, the Pen and the Uterus: Argentine Women Protesting Military Dictatorship

Reading: Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror* (Intro and Ch1)

Friday November 7: Satire and Journalism

Reading: Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (excerpt); Marshall Meyer, *You are My Witness* (excerpt)

Unit IV: Traversing Nations: Latin American and Caribbean Jews

Week 12. Cuban Jews and the Multiplying Definitions of American Jewish Diaspora

Tuesday November 11: Cuban Diaspora/Jewish Diaspora

Reading: Ruth Behar, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (all)

Friday November 14 (*Class meets on zoom, link to follow): WWII and Cuba

Reading: Robert Levine *Tropical Diaspora*, Ch 4. "The SS St. Louis Incident"

Film for HW (link provided on moodle): "Cuba's Forgotten Jewels"

Week 13. Rethinking Jewish Diasporas

Tuesday November 18: New homes for Latin American Jews: What we can learn from sociodemographic studies

Reading: Daniel Fainstein et al, "Jewish Peoplehood LatAm Study;" Ariela Ronay-Jinich, "Latin Jewish Families and Their Educational Choices: Navigating Multiple Identities"

Friday November 21: Zionism, Diaspora, and Center: Latin American Jews and Israel

Reading: Sebastian Klor, *Between Exile and Exodus: Argentine Jewish Immigration to Israel, 1948-1967* (article); Adrián Krupnik, *Between Two Homelands: Argentine Migration to and From Israel* (excerpt); Raanan Rein, *The New Jewish Argentina* (excerpt)

Week 14. Multiple Migrations, Compounded Identities?

Tuesday November 25: **Writing Assignment #2 Due**

Film: "Next Year in Argentina"

Reading: Ilan Stavans *On Borrowed Words* (begin)

Friday November 28: No classes-Thanksgiving Recess

Week 15. Latin American Jews in the Americas and in Israel

Tuesday December 2*: Post-Oct 7: Latin American Jews in Israel

Reading: Fuente Latina Hispanic Study Post Oct 7th (Private Access)

***Note: Additional Activity Special Evening Film Screening Tuesday Dec 2:** Fuente Latina Docuseries, Panel and Screening 7pm (Brandeis Cinematheque at the Business School)

Friday December 5: Center-Diaspora and Latin America

Reading: Ilan Stavans, *On Borrowed Words* (finish)

Week 16. Conclusions: Latin Jews in the Americas and the Global Diaspora

Tuesday December 9: New Centers and Diasporas for Latin American & Caribbean Jews

Reading: None

Final Exam: Take-Home Written Exam Handed Out