The Tabernacle in Word & Image: An Italian Jewish Manuscript Revealed

Introduction

This course introduces a case study in the ways manuscripts can be used by intellectual historians – historians of ideas. Alessandro Guetta (Paris) uses a single Italian Hebrew manuscript as a case study, Malkiel Ashkenazi's *Tavnit ha-mishkan*, an extended commentary on the ancient Israelite Tabernacle (*mishkan*). In the process, students will get a sense of the intellectual life of early modern Jews in Mantua/Italy, literary culture, the impact of the Inquisition, and kabbalah, as well as how palaeography and differences between versions can illuminate the historical context of texts beyond anything we might expect by reading a printed version.

Among the questions the course will address are:

- What was Jewish intellectual life like in late Renaissance and early modern Mantua?
- If we attend to differences between manuscript editions, what do we learn about changes in the underlying ideas?
- How did Jewish book culture intersect with and react to the Inquisition and Christian censorship?
- How does Jewish biblical commentary reflect the age in which it was produced?

Instructor

Alessandro Guetta is Professor of Jewish thought at INALCO (*Institut National des Langues et Civilisation Orientales*), Paris. He is an expert in the intellectual history of the Jews in Italy in the early modern and modern periods. Among his many books and articles are *Philosophy and Kabbalah: Elijah Benamozegh and the Reconciliation of Western Thought and Jewish Esotericism* (New York, 2009) and *Italian Jewry in Early Modern Era. Essays in Intellectual History* (Boston 2014) available on line here. His current research explores the phenomenon of Jews producing elegant Italian translations of Hebrew texts (Bible, poetry, philosophy) in the late Renaissance period.

The TA for this course, Matt Chalmers, will be available through the discussion forum or via email at mchal@sas.upenn.edu.

Objectives

- Acquire knowledge of Jewish intellectual culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as the interpretation of the biblical past.

- Become familiar with a significant early modern Jewish intellectual, Malkiel Ashkenazi, and the important, understudied *Tavnit ha-mishkan*.
- Understand the value of exploring manuscript editions as material objects, especially for the history of ideas.

Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites for taking this course. However, we encourage learners to explore edX DemoX if they are unfamiliar with the exX platform.

Though this course can stand alone, it is part 2 of a new series exploring what can be learned from studying Jewish manuscripts. Part one is by Professor Y. Tzvi Langermann (*PennX – Katz1.2x*): **The History of Medieval Medicine through Jewish Manuscripts.**

Course Format

The course comprises five short modules, released in June 2018. The course is self-paced and has no end date.

A total time commitment of 2–3 hours is expected.

Each module contains the following components:

- **Lecture videos**
  - The basic content for the module is a lecture video, between 10-15 minutes long, in which Alessandro Guetta explains a key concept with reference to the *Tavnit ha-mishkan*.
- **Review Questions**
  - Optional multiple-choice questions attached to each lecture to aid retention of material.
  - Unlimited attempts are permitted.
  - Worth 60% of final course grade.
- **Final Quiz**
  - Thirteen questions graded assessment.
  - One or two attempts per question permitted, depending on question type.
  - Worth 40% of final course grade.

In addition, the course includes:

- **Glossary of Key Terms**
  - Alphabetized.
  - Covers Hebrew-language terminology in particular, as well as key individuals.
- **Further Reading bibliography**
- **Discussion Forum**
  - Participation is optional but encouraged.
  - Moderated for several weeks after launch (June 2018) by Matt Chalmers, Teaching Assistant for the course.
  - Please exercise good judgement and appropriate forum etiquette including respect for fellow learners.

Certificates and Grading

Certificate based on:

- Successful completion of review questions (60%).
- Final exam (40%).

A cumulative grade of 75% is considered a passing grade. Learners on the audit track will see their achievement reflected in their course profile. Learners who complete the course requirements on the verified certificate track will receive a certificate.

Course Outline

Module 1: This module introduces Malkiel Ashkenazi, early modern Mantua, and the relatively unknown manuscript on which the course focuses: *Tavnit ha-mishkan*. Some of the characteristic features of the manuscript held at the University of Pennsylvania are also discussed, including its Italian Hebrew script.

Module 2: This module discusses, with comparison to Jedidiah Recanati's translation of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, how reading different versions of the same work can tell us about the availability of new ideas to the author. It also discusses in much more depth the topic of the *Tavnit ha-mishkan*, and the goals of the author in writing the books that he did, as well as scholarly techniques for understanding quotations and allusions.

Module 3: This module explores how the digitization and online cataloguing of manuscripts can facilitate their use in writing intellectual history. It also compares the version of *Tavnit ha-mishkan* held by the University of Pennsylvania to versions of the same text in copies in Moscow and Budapest. Using the first lines, it explores how those versions can be placed in order of composition by attention to material hints left in the manuscripts.

Module 4: This module scrutinizes the sources used by Malkiel Ashkenazi, and the possibility of using those sources to reconstruct the library available to an average early modern Jewish intellectual. It also discusses how the availability of sources like the Talmud was affected by the Roman Catholic Inquisition, and the changing role of kabbalah in supplying insights and interpretations of the Tabernacle.

Module 5: This module examines the *Tavnit ha-mishkan* in a larger intellectual context in which Jewish authors aimed to represent as realistic a reconstruction of the Temple complex as possible. In this it participates more in a Renaissance world than a more moralizing or allegorical traditions of "reading the Tabernacle" that preceded it. Guetta thus explores the intellectual significance of such Jewish attempts at accurate historical reconstruction in the specific context of late Renaissance and early modern Italy.