

TEACHx

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Course & Discipline: Coursera MOOC: The Talmud, Religious Studies & Jewish Studies

Students: 838

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The Talmud: A Methodological Introduction

Context

In April, we launched an online course that introduces beginning learners to the Talmud, one of the central works of Jewish literature. Since the Talmud has generated a large commitment from adult education students worldwide, the hope was that an online course would be able to find a large audience and provide a better academic introduction to the topic than what is currently available.

Project

The Talmud is one of the richest and most complicated works of literature the world has ever known. Since being composed around 1,500 years ago, it has inspired not only religious reverence but also significant intellectual engagement. In this course, learners from around the world are introduced to the unique characteristics of this text and the challenges that inhere in studying it while studying a chapter of the Talmud. Students of the course can expect to develop an appreciation for how the Talmud works and why it continues to inspire religious and intellectual devotion. They will be challenged to employ critical reading skills and to analyze legal and historical concepts.

The MOOC is eight weeks long, though students are able to complete the course materials in any order they choose. In a given week, learners will watch a series of video lectures related to that week's topic and engage in a number of other activities, from quizzes and discussions to a pair of peer-graded assessments. Recommended readings, historical maps, translations, and comprehensive glossaries are also provided to learners, offering a full set of scholarly resources.

Objectives & Outcomes

This course provides tools for those new to the Talmud, but unlike many other resources available for Talmud study, this MOOC is a little different because it comes from an academic university perspective.

This MOOC focuses on the Talmud's treatment of a single chapter of a single tractate of Mishnah. We chose the opening chapter of tractate Makkot, which literally means "lashes,"

because it focuses on a fairly relatable subject (false testimony) and it is less distracted from its subject matter than some other chapters in the Talmud.

Someone who finishes the MOOC will have an appreciation for how the Talmud works and the confidence to employ a translation or other study guide and study other chapters or tractates. Along the way, learners will ideally develop an understanding of ancient history, particularly Jewish history, and some insight into the unique issues of historiography related to a text. The goal is also for them to develop new skills as a student that are applicable to other subjects and texts as well.

The Talmud specializes in a form of critical examination that forces learners to hone their critical thinking and reading skills. Since much of our study of the Talmud will focus on legal issues, the student may also develop abilities in legal analysis and thinking.

Results

Since this is a humanities course and the first from Weinberg, we weren't sure what to expect. There are currently over 800 students enrolled in the course. The production value of the course was very high and the process helped us produce short and accessible bits of information. We're still waiting to see what the reaction will be from those who complete the course.

Lessons Learned

If I had to do it again, I would pay more attention in the initial scripting of the classes to keeping it brief. I also think I would have benefited from stretching the intense preparation period over a longer time. And I have newfound respect for newscasters and politicians; reading from a teleprompter is not easy to do well.