

Course Description:

This 3000 level course explores Jewish life, law, and practice through the bodily experiences of food, sex and death in historical and contemporary perspectives. From kosher bacon to sex work to zombies, this course will reflect on the body as a material site of the religious to target key questions around what it means to be human, holiness and the sacred, gender and sexuality, identity, otherness, health and wellness, and community, tradition and authority.

In religious studies we understand religion as a human phenomenon that we study from critical, historical, and evidence-based perspectives. Jewish bodily practices include ritual observance, commanded and prohibited behaviours, and cultural practices. These practices reflect the diversity of Judaism itself, lived by humans in specific times and places and experienced in particular cultural, social and political contexts. As such we will consider a range of Jewish bodily practices and experiences that are both historical and contemporary.

Key questions include: How does religion construct (and is constructed by) our understandings of the body? What are the central traditional teachings and practices related to food, sex and death? How have Jewish bodily practices developed in response to particular historical and cultural forces? How do bodily experiences of food, sex and death help us understand Judaism? How does Judaism variously imagine bodies that are hungry, pleased, gendered, transgendered, sexual, desirous, sated, obedient, transgressive, differently abled, well, sick and mortal? How do interpreters of Jewish law respond to scientific and secular cultural developments? How does the body function as both a site of the sacred and the profane as well as the locus of mitzvot (commandment) and sin? What is the relationship between the physical and the spiritual in a body that is understood to be created and commanded by God?

We will explore a wide range of interdisciplinary sources and scholarship including sacred texts, religious law, liturgy, visual art, film, popular culture, recipes, medical texts, as well as scholarly analyses of case studies from Canada and around the world.