POL 485 Topics in Political Thought II - Language and Politics: The Case of Hebrew  
*Tuesdays 12:00 – 14:00, TC 22*

**Professor Dan Avnon**

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The creation of (or, perhaps, “revival of”? “emergence of”? “development of”?) Hebrew as the national language of the State of Israel has fascinated linguistics, sociologists and historians, who have researched this phenomena quite extensively. In this course we’ll draw on background materials developed in those fields of research in order to contemplate a less-developed field of study: the Hebraic conceptual system underpinning the structure of Israel’s “Jewish and Democratic” political system.

The seminar will examine diverse perspectives on the nature of language and of speech and their role in founding and shaping political communities. While open to a variety of issues stemming from the transition from Biblical to Israeli Hebrew, the course meetings will devote special attention to tensions immanent in the combination of Biblical and contemporary Hebrew in the context of Israel's political system.

Since we are dealing with the way cultural consciousness shapes and is in turn shaped by tradition and by experienced realities, our discussions of materials relating to Jewish and Israeli development will be interspersed with introductions to philosophical and methodological issues. Hence we’ll meet along the way a variety of approaches to analysis of political reality that assume perception (rather than fixed systems of thought) to be the primary source of language, thought and systemic structures (such as political systems).

The initial structure of the course assumes three mini-segments: meeting one to five are background materials; meetings seven to nine prepare the background for focus on the formation of Hebrew political concepts; meetings ten to twelve will examine the way that Israel’s political system reflects the tensions and developments immanent in the formation of Israeli Hebrew.

A most important, final, note: being a research seminar, the plan of meetings is just a plan. Topics and readings may change according to the dynamics of the discussion and the interests of the participants. I’ll add or detract reading accordingly. Also, I have a separate list of sources in Hebrew for those among you who prefer drawing on research done in Israel, in Hebrew.
CLASS FORMAT

Each session will open with a discussion prepared by me (Dan). Each week I will assign a certain number of students the task of preparing questions on the readings. These questions will be raised after my introductory comments. At the end of each class the students who had prepared questions will post one- or two-paragraph long responses to his or her question on our Blackboard site. Every student will be responsible for at least 3 such posts. These postings will not be graded but will contribute to a student’s participation grade. Doing the reading is essential as is participation in class discussion. This too will contribute to the participation grade. A bonus will be granted to students who will undertake to send me good summaries of class lectures and discussion no later than the Sunday following the class meeting.

REQUIREMENTS

Undergraduates

Participation 20%
1,500 word essay due on October 15th, 2013. 20%
4,000 words term paper due December 10th, 2013. 60%

MA students

October essay (same as listed above).
Final research paper up to 6,000 words (also 60%). You can either write about the general topic assigned to the class or choose a research item in consultation with Dan. (The latter option is open also to undergraduate students).
Due Date: December 10th, 2013.

PhD students

Final research paper of up to 8,000 words. Topic to be determined in consultation with Dan. Mid-term paper an option.
If submitting only a final paper, then it will constitute 80% of grade. The other 20% are for participation.
Due Date: No later than January 10th, 2014.

Strict word limit will be enforced
BACKGROUND READINGS:


SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS AND READINGS

1. **September 10 Thematic and methodological overview**

   Read at least one of the following sources (or any other good introduction to Gadamer that you get hold of).


2. **September 17 Hebrew – Language as Chronology**


3. **September 24 Hebrew of the Bible as vehicle of faith**

   Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Selections will be announced in class. You can use any edition you fancy. For those reading this book for the first time, I recommend the following edition:


3
4. **October 1** Bible as transmitter of esoteric knowledge


5. **October 8** Biblical Hebrew as historical artifact

Spinoza, Baruch. *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Selections will be announced. While you can use a translation of your choice, there is a copy of the Standard English translation by Elwes in Robarts course reserves. B3985 .Es E44

6. **October 15** 1st essay due today.

Class convenes in the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library to learn about the Judaic collection, with particular emphasis on Bibles and additional Hebrew texts considered sacred.

7. **October 22** Hebrew between “Nation”-building and State-building: The Language/culture wars.


8. **October 29** Is Israeli Hebrew indeed ... Hebrew? What can other countries learn from the Hebrew experience?


9. **November 5** Hebrew Political Concepts I: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations.


**November 12**  
November pause, no class.

**10. November 19 Hebrew Political Concepts II: Examples and Theoretical Lessons**


**11. November 26 Hebrew Political Concepts III: Between Biblical and Israeli Hebrew**.


**12. December 3 Politics and Language: A Shared or Divisive Civic/Civil Language?**

Readings TBA