

Dr. Joel M. Hoffman

Partial List of Lecture/Class Topics

1. **“The Bible Doesn’t Say That.”** The original Hebrew of the Ten Commandments doesn’t say, “don’t kill” or “don’t covet.” The translation “the Lord is my shepherd” is misleading, and the English phrase “with all your heart and all your soul” is just wrong. Like the game of telephone that prompts children to pass messages around a circle, hundreds of generations have handed translations of the Bible one to another, along the way distorting the original meaning. Unlike in the children’s game, we still have the original. Learn what the Bible really says. (Because this is also the topic of *And God Said: How Translation Conceal the Bible’s Original Meaning* [2010, Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin’s Press], this lecture works well in conjunction with a book signing event.)

2. **“Three Thousand Years of Jewish Continuity as Seen Through Three Thousand Years of Hebrew.”** An exploration of the remarkable history that links the Jewish people to its historic language and identity through time: the fascinating story of how Hebrew began, why almost every written alphabet today can trace its roots to Hebrew, how Hebrew developed, where the text of the Bible comes from, the relevance of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient manuscripts, and finally how modern Israeli Hebrew developed. This is ideal for an adult study session, and works well as a 45- to 60-minute lecture with questions afterward. The lecture is uplifting and exciting, with some cutting-edge academic content, but even people with no background in Hebrew will be able to keep up with ease. (Because this is also the topic of *In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language* [2004, NYU Press], this lecture works well in conjunction with a book-signing event.)

3. **“Four Exiles and Four Spiritual Revolutions: From the ancient prophets to modernity.”** Judaism has seen four spiritual revolutions, each in the wake of a major exile. This is an engaging and uplifting look at North American Judaism — the last spiritual revolution — as seen in the context of the last 3,000 years. It is best suited to an extended sermon slot in or after a service, Friday night or Saturday morning. It can range in length from 15 to 60 minutes.

4. **“The Mystery and Majesty of the Dead Sea Scrolls.”** Since their discovery a half-century ago, the Dead Sea Scrolls have captured the popular imagination, and created more controversy and intrigue, than any other ancient find. This engaging presentation offers an introduction to the fascinating story behind the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It can range in length from 15 minutes to several hours, depending on how many of the Dead Sea Scrolls we study in detail.

5. **“How do We Know What the Hebrew Words Mean?”** An overview of translation in general, specific translations (Fox, Orlinsky, etc.), and the linguistic tools used to uncover ancient meanings. This is an important workshop for anyone who studies Jewish texts in translation or who reads ancient Hebrew, because it addresses the fundamental question of how we understand that ancient Hebrew. It is best suited to sitting around a table or tables, and works well as a 60- to 90-minute overview, or as a multi-session topic of study.

6. **“How to Read Jewish Texts.”** Reading and interpreting Jewish texts may be the oldest continuous Jewish activity, older even than rabbinic Judaism. For over 100 generations — from the authors of the later books of the Bible, to the Rabbis, to Rashi, and onward until now — Jews have taken texts, and then commentaries on texts, and made them their own. “How to Read Jewish Texts” is the eye-opening journey through this Jewish textual interpretation. The story of what these people and their approaches have in common — and how they differ — mirrors the history of the Jews, just as studying them and their texts opens the door for serious Jewish study. This workshop works best sitting around a table or tables, and can range from a 60- or 90-minute overview to a three- to ten-week course.

7. **“What the Prayers Really Mean.”** This engaging workshop uses the material in (3) and applies it to the liturgy, offering insight both into what the prayers mean and into how we find the answer to that question. It is an ideal follow-up to (3) during a scholar-in-residence weekend, or it can stand on its own as either a 60- or 90-minute overview or a multi-session course.

8. **“How Liturgy Works. (Or: Everything I need to know I learned from *Birkat HaMazon!*)”** Why is *Birkat HaMazon*, or “Grace after meals,” generally over a dozen pages long? In addition to containing its own liturgical treasures, *Birkat HaMazon* exemplifies the fundamental principles of Jewish liturgy, and answering the question of why it’s so long also offers insight not only into the content of this common prayer, but into the basic workings of all Jewish prayer. This discussion can be a lecture, a stand-alone class, or an introduction to a more extended study of Jewish prayer.

9. **“What If I Don’t Like What the Hebrew Means?”** For as long as there’s been Jewish prayer, Jewish prayer-writers have grappled with the dilemma of what to do with prayers they don’t like, and have generally adopted one of four strategies: omitting the objectionable prayers, changing the Hebrew, changing the translation, or including the material anyway. The discussion of why people have done this is fascinating in its own right, offers insight into Jewish prayer, and is particularly relevant to people grappling with the process of writing a service or prayerbook. This workshop is best suited to a 60- or 90-minute time slot.

10. **“Putting the Hebrew Back in Hebrew School.”** Focusing on the Hebrew aspect of after-school education, we address four goals that the major printed curricula all include. We discuss why in principle they cannot work, and how they lead to frustration and worse among students, teachers, and principals alike. Having learned what cannot succeed, we work toward practical solutions that can vastly improve after-school Hebrew education. This material is best suited to a workshop or full-day seminar with Hebrew teachers and principals.