

GENDER AND JUDAISM

HSC Depth Study: Belief Systems & Ideologies

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Syllabus Content

- traditions and culture in the belief system or ideology:
- how the belief system or ideology defines gender and gender roles

Related Concepts

values, customs, philosophy, symbols, beliefs, worldview, symbols, ritual

Syllabus Outcomes

- H3 analyses relationships and interactions within and between social and cultural groups
- H5 analyses continuity and change and their influence on personal and social futures
- H7 selects, organises, synthesises and analyses information from a variety of sources for usefulness, validity and bias
- H9 applies complex course language and concepts appropriate for a range of audiences and contexts

Rationale

This resource will assist teachers to examine gender within Judaism in a rich manner which looks at the differences and similarities between the strains of Judaism and the cultural groups within Judaism. I am of Assyrian Jewish (also called Nash Didan) descent and am passionate about bringing back the Mizrahi voice. Mizrahi Jews are Jews who have had a continuous presence in the Middle East including Israel. Their voices add a richness to the entire BSI - Judaism unit and can be added to the ideas of gender which are different among not only the different strains but the different cultural groups. While the syllabus content can be covered in dot points, often the evidence used in one dot point has relevance to others.

Mizrahi women traditionally existed within a patriarchal society and today there are examples of Mizrahi women still being very traditional as well as very modern and having careers. Like all women, their roles have shifted along with social norms.

There are *This Does That* note taking templates with a modelled response to guide you and the students

There are some past HSC exam questions which do not explicitly ask about gender, however, I have offered suggestions on how students could use gender to enrich their response

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Belief Systems & Ideologies: Judaism

The expectations on different genders varies among Jewish groups depending on:

- the strain of Judaism they adhere to (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform etc)
- the extent to which they follow traditions
- the rituals and customs followed by the individual or community
- the culture of the Jewish individual or community (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian etc)
- the individual values of the family and/or community
- the beliefs, values and norms of the culture the Jewish individual/community within the diaspora

While this syllabus dot point appears to be a simple exploration of the roles of men and women, it leads to a nuanced and complex examination. Even the definition of “gender” and what defines an individual’s gender is more deeply complicated than a simple boy versus girl narrative. Likewise, expectations of genders shift as individuals grow older and as society changes, so too do the gender expectations placed upon individuals by society.

To unpack the definition of gender and the gender roles, complete the following This Does That Tables in groups. For each Strain and Cultural Group, consider some of the following aspects of society. You may also use your own examples if you think of something not on the list. We will compile the tables to create a comprehensive set of notes.

Marriage – Ceremony	Marriage – Gender Roles and Expectations	Bar Mitzvah	Bat Mitzvah	Circumcision
Synagogue – Roles and Rituals	Synagogue – Community Life	Rabbi	Rebbetzin (Rabbi’s wife)	LGBTQIA+
Family Life	Jewish Feminism	Use of sacred spaces	Separation of men and women in certain situation	Mikvah
Sex	Sexual Ethics	Working outside the home	Niddah	Modesty
Head coverings for women	Head coverings for men	Women’s obligations and responsibilities	Men’s obligations and responsibilities	Dating
Stereotypes about women	Stereotypes about men	Jewish Mother Stereotype	Divorce – “Get”	Ashkenazi male

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Examples may be drawn from:

- Sacred Texts (e.g. Torah, Mishnah)
- Responsa by past Jewish figures (e.g. Maimonides, Rabbi Abraham Geiger)
- Post Holocaust Theologians (e.g. Eliezer Berkovits, Elie Wiesel, Emil Fackenheim)
- Contemporary Rabbis (e.g. Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, Johnathan Sacks)
- Jewish Feminists (e.g. Judy Chicago, Betty Friedan)
- Contemporary articles about issues such as Jewish Feminism and Women of the Wall
- Traditional and Contemporary songs
- Media Representations e.g.
- TV Shows:
 - Friends specifically examines the “weak”, “not very masculine” Ashkenazi male
 - Fauda highlights the Mizrahi masculine male who can fight terrorists
 - Friends and Crazy Ex-Girlfriend examine the “JAP” – Jewish American Princess
 - Jewish Matchmaking on Netflix shows a range of different types of Jews and their attitudes towards dating. It breaks some stereotypes while reinforcing some others! It is a diverse representation of different levels of religious adherence and cultural groups. Worth a binge.
- Films:
 - The Guilt Trip – Barbra Streisand plays the stereotypical over bearing Jewish mother
 - Meet the Fockers – Barbra Streisand and Dustin Hoffman play a stereotypical set of Jewish parents (no boundaries with their child, liberal social values, alternative social views, not very conservative etc)
- Social Media:
 - Challah Mom @ Instagram challah.mom
 - Sophia the Jew @ Instagram sophiathejew
- Participant Observations with various Jewish experts we have (and will continue) to get into the school such as Rabbi Zalman Kastel
- Stories, myths, legends from the previous dot points looking at texts including Yiddish stories, Assyrian (Nash Didan) folk stories, The Wise Men of Chelm jokes
- Contemporary humour e.g Sarah Silverman and Iliza Shlesinger break a lot of stereotypes about women generally and create a sense of a contemporary Jewish woman who is brash and assertive

Integrate Course Concepts including:

Stereotypes	Beliefs	Values	Norms	Gender	Technology	Continuity	Change
Identity	Power	Authority	Customs	Ritual	Worldview	Symbols	Philosophy

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Example of a completed This Does That Table

	This (Idea + Example)	Does That (Analytical Verb)	Doing That (Analytical Verb)	And Doing That (Analytical Verb + Synthesising)
Strain / Cultural Group	Orthodox Jews view gender as a very clear construct of men and women. Women are seen as separate but equal. The obligations and responsibilities of women are different, while being no less important. Women are believed to be endowed with a greater degree of “binah” (intuition, understanding, intelligence) than men. The rabbis inferred this from the fact that woman was “built” (Gen. 2:2 rather than “formed” (Gen. 2:7	Highlighting that while women’s roles are different to those of men, they are important.	Demonstrating the equality of women as described through the sacred texts.	Furthermore, it reinforces the idea of gender as a strict construct with clear differences between man and woman as they were created differently, meaning that there is no opportunity to change one’s gender as the gender individuals are born with are clearly given by God. Women are born with an innately greater degree of binah and arguably, men cannot then transition to receive this extra insightfulness.
Past – to begin establishing continuity and/or change	Gen. 2:2 “and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man,” Gen. 2:7 Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature	Explaining that gender differences are innate and	Created by God	Resulting in there being no questioning of these clearly defined and innate differences in creation and roles.
Contemporary – to finalise establishing continuity and/or change	Women of the Wall are a group of Jewish feminists, who are Reform or liberal Jews. They attempt to pray in the male section of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, a very sacred site for Judaism. The wall is segregated into a men’s section and women’s section. There are clashes between Ultra Orthodox men who are against these women praying in the men’s section of the Western Wall.	Indicative of the clearly defined gender roles of women within Orthodox Judaism.	Representing a continuation of the belief that women are separate and equal,	Reinforcing that equality of genders does not mean they can do the same things in the same spaces from an Orthodox point of view. Thereby highlighting that Orthodox views on gender continue to be very traditional and rigid, while Reform Judaism challenges these ideas.

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Separate men's and women's prayer areas at the Western Wall during Passover. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Modelled Response:

An example of how students may combine the notes from the This Does That Table

Orthodox Jews view gender as very clear construct of men and women. Women are seen as separate but equal. The obligations and responsibilities of women are different, while being no less important. Women are believed to be endowed with a greater degree of “binah” (intuition, understanding, intelligence) than men. The rabbis inferred this from the fact that woman was “built” (Gen. 2:2 rather than “formed” (Gen. 2:7) highlighting that while women’s roles are different to those of men, they are important, demonstrating the equality of women as described through the sacred texts. Furthermore, it reinforces the belief of gender as a strict construct with clear differences between man and woman as they were created differently, meaning that there is no opportunity to change one’s gender as the gender individuals are born with are clearly given by God. Women are born with an innately greater degree of binah and arguably, men cannot then transition to receive this extra insightfulness. The quotes from Genesis, Gen. 2:2 “and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man,” referring to women and Gen. 2:7 referring to men, “Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” explain that gender differences are innate and created by God, resulting in there being no questioning of these clearly defined and innate differences in creation and roles. Women of the Wall are a group of Jewish feminists, who are Reform or liberal Jews. They attempt to pray in the mlae section of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, a very sacred site for Judaism. The wall is segregated into a men’s section and women’s section. There are clashes between Ultra Orthodox men who are against these women praying in the men’s section of the Western Wall which is indicative of the clearly defined gender roles of women within Orthodox Judaism. Representing a continuation of the idea that women are separate and equal, reinforcing that equality of genders does not mean they can do the same things in the same spaces from an Orthodox point of view. Thereby highlighting that Orthodox views on gender continue to be very traditional and rigid, while Reform Judaism challenges these ideas.

On the following pages are blank This Does That Tables

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Applying gender to HSC Exam Questions that both explicitly and implicitly are about gender:

2022 HSC Exam:

To what extent has the significance of rituals, symbols and customs changed over time in ONE belief system or ideology? (15 marks)

Consider:

The inclusion of female Rabbis and Cantors

Different ways women have adapted to cover their hair either with a wig, headband, scarves which further demonstrate their Zionist and Religious perspectives, hat, only covering in synagogue. These have all shifted and changed over time and some aspects for some women and communities have stayed the same

Mizrahi custom of Henna ceremonies as part of the wedding celebrations have been a constant for Mizrahi Jewish women. When it has become a lost custom due to assimilation in Israel or within the diaspora, there is a resurgence of this to reclaim their Middle Eastern identities

Mixed marriages between Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi etc have led to a blending of customs, however, technically when a mixed couple marry, the cultural identity comes from the father and informs the way the family eats, prays and follows certain holidays

Some Reform women have begun wearing a kippah and putting on tefillin

Jewish men who wear kippah have responded to rising antisemitism over history by covering it with a hat. In contemporary times a baseball cap has been the hat of choice, however, for older men this still acts as a sign they may be Jewish as not a lot of elderly men may wear base caps in certain countries e.g. Germany

2021 HSC Exam:

Assess the effectiveness of ONE belief system or ideology in resolving conflict.

Consider:

Conflict between Orthodox and Reform views on women

Conflict between Orthodox Judaism and feminists such as The Women of the Wall. There is continued conflict, this would offer a rich discussion of the inability to clear up this conflict as traditional values and beliefs are clashing with contemporary values and beliefs. Clearly there has not been an effective response to this ongoing conflict.

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2020 HSC Exam:

Analyse the relationship between ethical issues in society and the philosophy of ONE belief system or ideology.

Consider:

Tikkun Olam to examine social justice for LGBTQIA+ individuals within society and Jewish communities

The emerging social discourse on transgender individuals and how they can fit into Jewish life

Ethics around women's rights to contraception and reproductive health care in various forms

American Jewish women have been vocal about anti-abortion laws in the USA as they claim it impinges on their religious right to receive health care and the religious views around preserving the health of the woman over a foetus, especially in the first 40 days of pregnancy

Jewish Feminism seeks to address many ethical issues

2019 HSC Exam:

Assess the impact of dissent on the internal structure of ONE belief system or ideology.

Consider:

Women of the Wall are challenging the unofficial internal structures of Judaism by challenging the Orthodox men's claim to the wall

Jewish feminism challenges the unofficial internal structures by demanding a seat at the table e.g. as female Rabbis, female Cantors, sitting on Synagogue boards

Dissent has led to the emerging strains of Judaism, if Judaism hasn't worked for a group, they have adjusted it to create the rich tapestry of ways of being Jewish



Women of the Wall standing at Prayer, Jerusalem. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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2018 HSC Exam:

To what extent has technology influenced the acceptance and rejection of ONE belief system or ideology?

Consider:

How footage and photographs of The Women of the Wall clashing with Orthodox men influences the acceptance or rejection of Judaism by non Jews, secular Jews etc.

Technology has made it easier for Jewish women to observe Shabbat with warmers for food, timers placed on appliances and lights, leading to wider acceptance and adherence

Israel's inclusion of women in the armed forces reflects the Jewish equality of women. Attractive female soldiers are often used by social media campaigns to assist in supporting Israel

Media representations of women in TV and film can both lead to acceptance and rejection

Media representation of the different types of Jewish men and masculinity can lead to greater acceptance or rejection. It can also reinforce or challenge commonly held stereotypes.

Zionist women in the mainstream and social media may lead to a rejection of Judaism

Social Media accounts e.g. Challah Mom open up observant Jewish women's lives to explore the richness, complexities and highlight how they are similar to secular and non Jewish women. This micro level interaction with someone's life opens up dialogue between different types of people which can lead to greater understanding and acceptance

Footage of Jewish women of colour on Social Media opens up new Jewish worlds, broadening the assumptions about Jewish women, breaking down stereotypes

Technology has allowed Jewish women to explore their Jewishness in the privacy of their homes, to gain confidence in expressing their own unique Jewish views

Footage of Pride Marches globally, but especially in Israel, highlight that Judaism is accepting of diversity