

What Is the Good Society?

Tikvah, William & Mary Chapter - Spring 2026

Developed by Gabriel Stein

Description

What is the Good Society? How should human beings live together under God, lawfully and morally? Beginning with the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature, this course of study traces how foundational Jewish ideas of creation, law, holiness, and community developed in conversation and tension with Greek philosophy, Christianity, Islam, and modern political thought.

These sessions follow a chronological and thematic arc from ancient revelation to modernity, encountering doctrinal debates, political revolutions, and social transformations along the way. Readings include biblical texts, Talmudic passages, medieval and modern philosophy, and political documents. We will encounter numerous thinkers, including rabbis, church leaders, and philosophers. We will pay particular attention to questions of authority, pluralism, faith, reason, and the moral limits of politics. The goal is to emerge intellectually equipped to evaluate competing visions of the Good Society and articulate how Jewish thought, both classical and modern, contributes to contemporary moral and civic life beyond the four walls of the beit midrash.

Expectations/Guidelines

- Come to each seminar prepared, having read the listed readings and prepared to discuss each topic. The readings will be manageable (15-25 pages maximum).
- Come to each seminar with questions and thoughts derived from each reading to promote active discussion.
- Respect each other's opinions and give people full attention while they are speaking.
- Assume good intentions from all. Personal attacks, ad hoc arguments, etc. will not be tolerated.
- While this seminar is rooted primarily in Jewish thought, the seminar is open to all without exception so long as the above guidelines are followed.
- Get out of this seminar what you want to. Have fun and grow!
- For all biblical/rabbinic texts, please reference Sefaria.

Syllabus

Session 1 - *When God Began to Create...*

- Genesis/Bereshit 1:1-2:23
- Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (Part II, Chapters 30-31)
- Augustine, *Confessions* (Book Thirteen)
 - o §§ 1-2, 9-10, 38-39

Session 2 - *The Good, the Bad, and the Holy*

- Exodus 19:1-20:19
- Leviticus 19-20 (Parashat Kedoshim)

Session 3 - *Not in Heaven*

- Deuteronomy 30
- Babylonian Talmud (Bava Metzia 59a:12--59b:5 [Oven of Akhnai])
- R. Eliezer Berkovits, *Not in Heaven* (Chapter 1)

Session 4 - *The Greek Alternative*

- Plato, *Republic*
 - o Book II (368c–376e)
 - o Book IV (427d–445e)
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
 - o I.1-2
 - o X.6-9

Session 5 - *Why Us? Why Them?*

- Genesis 9:1-17
- Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 56a:24)
- Tosefta (*Avodah Zarah* 9:4)

Session 6 - *He Was Here?!*

- New Testament
 - o Matthew 5-7, 22:34-40
 - o Romans 3:19-31, 7:7-12
 - o Acts 15
 - o Galatians 3:23-29

Session 7 - *The Case Against the Good*

- Thucydides, Melian Dialogue
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* (First Essay, Sections 2-16)

Session 8 - *Modernity, Revolution, Reinvention*

- Martin Luther, *95 Theses*
- John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*
 - o *Chapter II, Sec. 4-15*
 - o *Chapter V, Sec. 25-51*
 - o *Chapter VIII, Sec. 95-99*
 - o *Chapter IX, Sec. 123-131*
- Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*
 - o *Book I, Chapters 1-4, 6*
 - o *Book II, Chapters 1-4*
 - o *Book IV, Chapter 8*

Session 9 - *The Knight of Faith*

- Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*
 - o *Exordium*
 - o *Eulogy on Abraham*
 - o *Problema I*
 - o *Problema III*
- R. Joseph Soloveichik, *Lonely Man of Faith* (pp. 10-30, 48-65)

Session 10 - *My Brother's Keeper?*

- Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*
- Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, "We Remember - A Reflection on the Shoah"
- Breger & Bemporad, "Why Haven't Jews Responded to Vatican II after 50 Years?" (*The Forward*)

Session 11 - *Tradition after Progress*

- R. Jonathan Sacks, "On Creative Minorities"
- Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Chapter 1, Chapter 15)

Session 12 - *The Modern Good*

- R. Eliezer Berkovits, "From Temple to Synagogue and Back"
- Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return"