

Yael Shahar

Lectures & Workshops



The following lectures, seminars, and workshops can be tailored to suit any audience, regardless of background or previous knowledge. Each class can be given either in a stand-alone 1-3 hour format, or as part of an all-day workshop or seminar. The classes are interactive and aim to build a deeper understanding through dialogue, in the manner of classic Jewish study.

Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish: Thesis and Anti-Thesis in the Talmud

No other Talmudic sages have so fired the imagination as the iconic pair: Rabbi Yochanan, cloistered in the Four Cubits of Halakhah, who chose a life of poverty and asceticism over a life of worldly success; and Reish Lakish, his pupil, a former bandit who could always “find twenty-four reasons why Rabbi Yochanan was wrong”.

The Talmud is full of stories and debates between these two scholars. We’ll take a look at some of these sources to see how their opposing worldviews lie beneath the synthesis and antithesis of much of the Talmud, and why neither view is sufficient on its own.

Memory and Immortality in Jewish Tradition

The most severe penalty in the Torah is Karet: “That person will be cut off from his people.” This dire punishment is considered worse even than the death penalty. But what does it mean to be “cut off” from one’s people?

This presentation explores Jewish texts down through the ages, to show how the notion of *Karet*, of cutting off, is bound up with the Jewish idea of cultural and genetic immortality. In fact, we’ll see that the Jewish tradition includes ideas that seem to presage the modern science of Epigenetics—the study of how certain kinds of memory are handed down in families through molecular and cellular mechanisms.

Memoir as the Preservation of Jewish Memory: A Writing Workshop

Everyone has a story to tell—in fact most have dozens of stories, any one of which is worthy of being preserved for future generations. Some of these stories are not only crucial to family and community history, but have lessons for humanity far beyond the individual and family level.

This workshop will give participants some valuable tips on putting memory into writing, launching them on their way from first sentence to published memoir.

Topics covered will include: interviewing; writing, story-telling and story structure; the ins and outs of publishing; distribution and marketing.

T’shuvah: Unrightable Wrongs and Unanswerable Dilemmas

Can one do T’shuvah for acts committed under compulsion? What if you don’t know whether you did anything wrong? This presentation will examine the halakhic answers to some painful dilemmas in Jewish history, from the suicide at Massada to the choice of the sonderkommando during the Shoah. We’ll look at T’shuvah through a variety of lenses: including the written Torah, the Talmud, the Rambam, and modern thinkers like Victor Frankl and Heschel.

The seminar is meant to be interactive, and potentially cathartic for those who have faced hard choices in the past.

The Evolution of Jewish Cultural Memory

This lecture explores the mysterious mechanisms by which Jewish cultural memory is encoded as “cultural DNA”. Why are some memories handed down and not others? How do values create self-propagating cultures? And how do these questions help to explain Jewish cultural continuity.

We’ll discuss some radical ideas proposed 2,000 years ago which have increasing relevance in today’s globalized world. We’ll look at Jewish history through the prism of modern evolutionary theory, genealogy, genetic diversity, and cultural memetics in order to understand how Jewish practice forms the “memory” of the Jewish People.

More About Yael Shahar

After an adventurous and unattributable career in security and intelligence, Yael Shahar divides her time between researching organizational dynamics and learning Talmud with anyone who will sit still long enough. She specializes in Jewish organizational dynamics, textual interpretation, and social trends. A dynamic and sought-after public speaker, she lectures in Israel and abroad.

She is the author of *Returning*, and writes on Jewish education and philosophy at www.yaeshahar.com, the *Times of Israel*, and *Haaretz Jewish World*.