Syllabus for Theology  
Questions in Judaism

The text for this course is *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* edited by Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1981. The Hebrew text, a translation and several commentaries are provided for the reader. The class reads the first 25+ chapters, with the goal of understanding how both traditional and modern Jews read the Bible.

The process of the course is to read together the text and translation with the commentaries provided, to which I add both historical information about the transition from the biblical to the rabbinic world and additional rabbinical commentaries (some examples attached), and then discuss the process by which the rabbis reach their conclusions.

The introduction to *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* outlines the kinds of materials contained in the Bible and discusses the relationship between the Bible, God and the Jewish people. I provide the history that led to how that relationship was formulated, how it affected the classical commentaries and how modern commentaries both differ and are similar.

Class discussion is the key to the students’ learning. The rabbinic process of commentary grows out of the belief that the text is divine and therefore every verse is filled with meaning. Our job is to read the text looking for meaning by asking questions. Each commentary is the commentator’s answer to a question in his/her mind. We have the answer in front of us. What was the question in the commentator’s mind? What questions do we in the class have of the text that perhaps the rabbis didn’t ask?

Once we have established the format, each student will be asked to prepare ahead for a class to see how they are doing at understanding our process. The exam for the course will be a text they’ve never seen before, along with commentaries and other materials, and asked to create a lesson out of that material, bringing to bear what they have learned in the course.
Extra Rabbinic Material for Genesis Chapter 1

Why was the world created with a bet? Just as the bet is closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind. You may speculate from the day that days were created but you may not speculate on what was before that.

Why was the world created with a bet? To teach you that there are two worlds (this world and the world to come). Another interpretation: Why with a bet? Because it connotes blessing (brachah). And why not with an aleph? Because it connotes cursing (arur). Another interpretation: why with a bet? Just as a bet has two projecting points, one pointing upward and one pointing backward, so when we ask, “Who created you?” it points upward (to God). And if we ask further, “What is his name?” it points back (to aleph, the first letter in God’s name Adonai).

Rabbi Leazar ben Abinah said in the name of Rav Acha: For 26 generations the aleph complained to God, “Sovereign of the Universe, I am the first of the letters, yet You did not create the world with me.” God answered, “The world and its fulness were created for the sake of Torah alone. Tomorrow when I come to reveal My Torah at Sinai, I will begin with you (aleph, Anochi Adonai Elohecha).

Rabbi Abbahu and Rabbi Chiya Rabbah were engaged in a discussion. Abbahu said, “From the very beginning of the world, God foresaw the deeds of the righteous and the deeds of the wicked. “Now the earth was formless and void” refers to the deeds of the wicked; “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’” are the actions of the righteous. How do we know In which God delights? Because it is written, “And God saw the light that it was good,” it follows that God desires the deeds of the righteous and not the deeds of the wicked.