*Tell us about your research:*

My scholarship explores how German Jews turned to the interpretation of scripture as a way of navigating an era of tremendous change. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the German lands were convulsed by wars, religious strife, economic calamities, and political revolutions; amidst these broader changes, German Jews faced the collapse of the traditional Jewish communal structure (*kehilla*) and were figuring out new structures of communal authority and new models of education—all while also fighting for civil emancipation. Several generations of scholars have suggested that this period of transformation and acculturation was marked by the waning of Jewish religious life, but the story is actually much more interesting: in the midst of these overwhelming shifts, religious texts emerged as a vibrant space where German Jews worked out what it meant to be modern Jews and modern Germans. In Bible commentaries, sermons, prayerbooks (*siddurim*), and catechisms, German Jews used the interpretation of scripture to address a wide range of pressing contemporary concerns, including what forms modern Judaism should take, which professions Jews should practice, and how Jews should think about gender and sexuality.

My book, *Biblical Interpretation and the Shaping of Modern German Judaism*, illustrates how three of the most influential biblical commentators of the nineteenth century, Salomon Herxheimer (1801-1884), Ludwig Philippson (1811-1889), and Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891), reimagined German Judaism through their interpretations of biblical passages about the Jerusalem Temple and the sacrificial service. Although the Temple and sacrifice might seem like odd or antiquated topics to focus on, these institutions were actually at the center of heated debates amongst Jews and other Germans about whether ritual could be a meaningful element of religious life, about the nature of historical progress, and about the contributions of Judaism to European culture. These scholarly debates had real political consequences: theologians and politicians cited German Jews’ orientation toward the Jerusalem Temple as shibboleths for whether German Jews deserved civil rights. *Biblical Interpretation and the Shaping of Modern German Judaism* traces how the different interpretive methods used by Philippson, Herxheimer, and Graetz gave rise to four distinct theologies of the Temple, each of which was calibrated to engage contemporary scholarship and politics in ways that established the vitality of modern Judaism and defended German Jews’ claims to political emancipation.

*What does it mean for biblical interpretation to be “political”?*

The political ramifications of biblical interpretation are particularly obvious in the case of nineteenth-century German Jews: Protestant and Jewish scholars regularly cited interpretations of the Bible in their arguments for or against the civil emancipation of German Jews. As one example, from the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century, theologians and politicians proposed a *quid pro quo* arrangement which required German Jews to alter their professional occupations: Jews could be extended civil rights if they eschewed trade and moneylending and instead retrained as farmers and craftsmen. But Anton Theodor Hartmann, professor of Theology at the University of Rostock, published a series of articles arguing against extending Jews civil rights. Hartmann cited various biblical passages as evidence that Jews held an inherent aversion to physical labor and an innate predilection for trade and moneylending, and thus argued that no amount of professional restructuring would render German Jews fit for citizenship. The debate over Jewish emancipation turned on how one interpreted seemingly insignificant biblical passages; in this case, scholars and politicians often grounded their arguments on their disparate interpretations of Proverbs 28:19, *He that tilleth his ground shall have plenty of bread; but he that followeth after vain things shall have poverty enough*. German Jews entered the fray with their own exegetical interventions. Some German Jews redefined the terms of the debate, and some offered counter-narrative interpretations. Among the latter, Herxheimer interpreted these verses to argue that Jews have always been farmers and craftsmen and, when freed from exclusion from guilds and permitted to purchase land, they would flourish as farmers in German lands as well, thereby evincing the moral rectitude and attachment to the land befitting members of the German *Volk*.

The interpretation of scripture is political in less obvious contexts as well. Anytime scriptural interpretation is used to critique the ways that power is produced and distributed, to redefine whose voices are heard and whose are ignored, to imagine alternate ways of allocating resources, or to contest which forms of knowledge are considered authoritative—these are all political interventions. Sometimes biblical interpretation is used to cultivate more egalitarian politics and sometimes biblical interpretation advances violent, oppressive politics.

*What do nineteenth-century German Jewish commentaries have to do with twenty-first century US politics?*

German Jews understood that civil rights could be extended or revoked based on how theologians and politicians interpreted scripture. German Jewish scholars were also intimately aware of how political appeals to the Bible—even through supposedly “objective” biblical scholarship—regularly consolidated resources in the hands of those who were already in power. And they sought to harness the political power of exegesis to argue for their own emancipation. Scriptural interpretation still holds a similar political dynamism in our current political context.

Even though the US has been lauded for its purported separation of church and state, appeals to the Bible regularly crop up in US political discourse about topics ranging from immigration to reproductive rights to foreign policy. Citing the Bible as opposed to, say, the Talmud or the Qur’an, is already staking a series of assumptions about the normativity of the Bible to US political reasoning, and these assumptions have been rightly challenged. Still, as long as people invoke the Bible in political speech, then being able to critically engage exegetical reasoning constitutes a component of political literacy.

I weave instruction in critical reading into every course I teach, which includes teaching students how to identify a text’s claims, evaluate evidence, and assess warrants. Drawing on my unique position as a scholar of German Jewish exegesis, my courses also sometimes include teaching students how to critically assess appeals to scripture in political speech. This means, in part, introducing students to various modes of exegetical reasoning. Exegetical texts, like academic texts more broadly, are bound by sets of rules and conventions through which meaning is produced. So, for example, the model of *PaRDeS*—*peshat* (plain sense), *derash* (homiletical sense), *remez* (philosophical sense), and *sod* (mystical sense)—iterates four distinct ways of understanding scripture to speak. Each of these modalities employs a different exegetical logic, and is used to engage distinct audiences and to elicit specific sorts of responses. By understanding how exegetical reasoning works, students not only gain access to some of the most compelling sources in Jewish thought, but are also better equipped to critically assess appeals to the Bible in contemporary political discourse.

*What other topics does your research span?*

German Jewish commentaries are such rich sources that they give rise to publications on a wide range of topics. This year I have had three pieces appear in print: “Dismantling Orientalist Fantasies and Protestant Hegemony: German Jewish Exegetes and Their Retrieval of Josephus the Jew” (in *Josephus in Modern Jewish Culture*, 2019); “Re-Forming Professions: Salomon Herxheimer and Ludwig Philippson on the Past and Present of Jewish Farmers” (in *Deutsch-jüdische Bibelwissenschaft Historische, exegetische und theologische Perspektiven*, 2019); and “Heinrich Graetz and the Exegetical Contours of Modern Jewish History” (*The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Summer 2019).

I have several publications forthcoming, including an article about the centrality of biblical and Talmudic exegesis to the emergence of Jewish studies as a field of scholarship; an article analyzing how Heinrich Graetz’s commentary on the Song of Songs subverted late nineteenth-century German tropes around Jewish sexuality and introduced his own ideals of modern Jewish femininity and masculinity; and an article about nineteenth-century biblical exegesis as a unique site of German Jewish and Protestant exchange.

*What learning opportunities for the community will you offer this year?*

I will be giving two public lectures for the Buffalo community this year. The first lecture, “Tortured Readings: Violent Empires and the Interpretation,” explores how in both a nineteenth-century German context and a twenty-first century US context, scriptural hermeneutics have been weaponized to justify imperial violence against religious minorities. The second talk, “Against Maimonides: Two Modern Jewish Theories of Sacrifice,” shows how Ludwig Philippson and Heinrich Graetz countered Maimonides’ accommodationist theory of the sacrificial service and defended the continued theological significance of sacrifice for modern Jews—despite their disinterest in re-building the Temple or re-establishing the sacrificial service.