

Jewish Theology and Anthropology: A Conversation

Call for Participants 2026–27

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The interdisciplinary engagement between theology and anthropology is gaining significant scholarly attention, giving rise to the field of theologically engaged anthropology (Furani, 2019; Lemons, 2018; Robbins, 2020). Anthropological theory can deepen our understanding of human experience by incorporating theological insights, while theology benefits from ethnographic approaches that examine how beliefs are enacted in daily life. Scholars such as Sarah Coakley (Coakley, 2013) and Charles Marsh (Marsh et al., 2016) highlight the role of 'lived theology' in shaping religious practice, while Joel Robbins (Robbins, 2020) demonstrates how ethnography can generate theories from within theological frameworks. Arguably, anthropology risks a flat analysis if it focuses solely on individual choices without considering the belief systems that shape them, while theology may overlook how doctrine is influenced by lived experiences and community dynamics.

Despite these developments, most studies in this emerging field focus on Christian communities. Khaled Furani's work (Furani, 2019) has expanded this conversation to Islam, but Jewish theology remains underexplored (Benjamin 2018; Seeman, 2018). This working group, building from an initial cohort in 2025–26, seeks to bridge that gap by bringing Jewish theology into dialogue with the anthropology of Jewish life. Jewish theology functions as a framework for maintaining and reinterpreting Jewish thought, providing believers with tools to articulate and sustain their faith. Applying an ethnographic lens to Jewish theological practice helps illuminate how ritual, community, and relationships shape religious life across different Jewish traditions. Theology's task, then, is to look beyond the descriptive: to help make sense of faith, provide some of the tools to indicate its ongoing relevance, and thereby offer a defence of Jewish teachings. Rather than constructing philosophical arguments to convince the non-believer to uphold any tenets of faith, it offers a framework for the religious believer to find ways of accounting for their faith. By

applying an ethnographic lens, alongside the theological, when thinking about how Jews choose to act as a medium to express their faith and beliefs, it can help unpack some of the ways ritual, community, and the nurturing of relationships—across horizontal and vertical planes—are designed or understood to construct the ways of life that varied interpretations of Judaism seek to impart.

To explore this intersection, we invite scholars to join us for an exploratory conversation during the 2026–2027 academic year. Following last year's working group on mitzvot, this year's theme will be human agency. Agency occupies a central place in both anthropology and theology, yet the two disciplines often approach it in strikingly different ways. Anthropological theories frequently emphasize intentionality, practice, power, and social relations, whereas Jewish theological traditions understand human action in continual relation to divine will, providence, obligation, covenant, and often rabbinic authority. Rather than treating agency as an autonomous human capacity, many Jewish traditions articulate relational forms of agency in which action emerges through dynamic relationships among human beings, God, and other actors.

Throughout the 2026–2027 academic year, we will convene a series of online discussions examining how Jewish theological understandings of agency both challenge and enrich anthropological theories of action. Particular attention will be given to concepts such as *hishtadlut* (human effort), *bitachon* (trust in God), and *hashgacha* (divine providence), asking how these ideas are mobilized, negotiated, and lived in contexts of uncertainty, ethical ambiguity, and everyday decision-making (Raucher 2020; Seeman 2010; Taragin-Zeller 2023; Teman, Ivry and Goren 2016). Rather than assuming that agency belongs exclusively to the human sphere, we will explore how responsibility, intentionality, and efficacy are distributed across relationships between humans and the divine, and how these theological understandings shape religious practice, moral reasoning and communal belonging. By bringing together scholars working across anthropology, theology, Jewish studies, and related disciplines, the working group aims to foster an interdisciplinary conversation that uses the question of human agency as a productive meeting point for rethinking both anthropological theory and Jewish theology.

We welcome participants interested in contributing to this emerging field and engaging in sustained, interdisciplinary dialogue. If you would like to participate, please fill out this [Google form: https://forms.gle/RcytHjgV157Y2G818](https://forms.gle/RcytHjgV157Y2G818) and include a short CV including the names of potential references. If you would like to present, please submit a proposal of a topic you would wish to share with the working group, including a title and an abstract of 500 words.

Deadline for submissions is October 5, 2026.

For any queries, contact: hannah.peterson@mail.huji.ac.il
