Post Pesach Program 2020

**AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY:**

**PERSONAL NARRATIVES IN THE U.S.**

Prof. Joanne Jacobson

“Autobiography is a necessity … to say who we are and where we’ve been”

(Robert F. Sayre, “Autobiography and America”

What drives writers toward the first person: to create narratives in which they write *themselves?* Are there particularly *American* conditions that feed this hunger to write—and to read—personal narrative? Can a writer’s creation of her/his own life in writing be *true?*

In this course we will be critically examining autobiography as we read together personal narratives written in the United States since the end of the seventeenth century. We’ll be thinking together about why human beings are drawn to remember their lives and to give them shape in narrative. We’ll be exploring the cultural conditions especially favorable to the emergence of autobiography as a form. We’ll be examining autobiography as an arena in which diverse versions of “American” lives, experience, and values have been—and continue to be—written, tested, challenged, and re-written. And in the final week of the course we will be focusing on the particular needs that trauma and illness, including the COVID-19 pandemic, bring to language and personal narrative: the need for understanding and community; the hunger for healing and closure; the need to let go, and the need to begin again.

**COURSE TEXTS** will include Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography; an escaped slave narrative; essays on the experiences of wildness and nature; on growing up African-American, Hispanic, Chinese-American; on surviving an organ transplant; and a series of essays on enduring the coronavirus worldwide.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

* Five two-paragaph/1-2 page essays, including one revision and the option of creating your own video autobiographical essay
* regular attendance
* well-prepared, thoughtful participation in class discussion
* an essay-format final exam