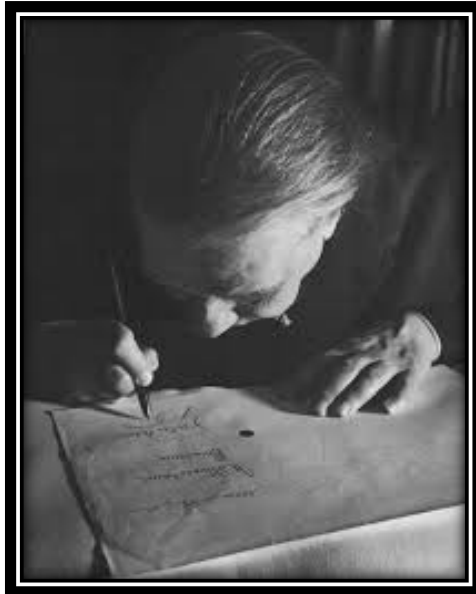




Yeshiva University  
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS  
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

# SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

(INTC/STRAUS CENTER)



*above: Jorge Luis Borges*

Fall, 2020

T/R 3-4:15

Dr. Perelis, Dr. Lavinsky

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this co-taught, interdisciplinary core course, offered in conjunction with the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, students will explore the diverse literary and historical dimensions of spiritual autobiography. Our investigation will begin in late antiquity, with Josephus and Augustine, before focusing on material produced within the medieval and early modern cultural matrix. Authors to be considered include Herman the Jew, Guibert de Nogent, Luis de Carvajal, Rabbi Hayyim Vital Calabrese, Richard Norwood, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Glikl of Hameln, and John Bunyan. Course readings—memoirs, wills, testimonies, confessions, interrogation transcripts, and other materials stylized as first-person narrative accounts—will attest to the lived experience of their authors and the spiritual selves they attempt to fashion using the conventions of autobiographical writing; central here are topics such as religious identity, conversion, Jewish-Christian relations, biblical exegesis, and the circulation of texts and ideas in the age of print. At the same time, however, such self-fashioning draws on literary practices that demand a critical sensitivity to language, form, and rhetoric. No experience with medieval and early modern literature is assumed.



While the course will be taught remotely, we will try to have a series of in person, real world meetings for those students in the New York area. (Students outside the New York area will be invited to participate remotely.) These will be on Friday mornings and they are meant to both enrich the material we are reading this semester and make use of New York's cultural treasures in a socially distanced way. Possible sites to explore together: The Cloisters, The Hispanic Society of America, Congregation Shearith Israel and the Metropolitan Museum.

## REQUIRED READINGS

Several of our course readings, including secondary sources, will be provided through Canvas, as denoted in the reading schedule below by "C." Others will be available online, through a link provided on the syllabus. And still others you will need to borrow from the library (if possible) or purchase online (bookshop.org is a good resource). Please make sure that the editions you borrow or buy are the same as those specified below, which you can check by matching the ISBN number given for each title.

•St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin, 1961) ISBN: 9780140441147

•*Grace Abounding: With Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. J. Stachniewski, A. Pacheco (Oxford World's Classics, 2008) ISBN: 0199554986

•*The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Rabbi: Leon of Modena's 'Life of Judah,'* ed. and trans. M. R. Cohen (Princeton University Press, 1988) ISBN: 0691008248

•*The Life of Glückel of Hameln: A Memoir*, ed. and trans. Beth-Zion Abrahams (Jewish Publication Society, 2012) ISBN: 0827609434

## POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

*Preparing for Class:* Students are expected to come to class with a good understanding of the readings and ready with questions. Each student is expected to engage the material and be a good listener and interlocutor with their classmates. (For the same reasons, you must be visible on Zoom, with your camera turned on, to be counted present.) The professors will create space for discussion via break out rooms in addition to more direct presentations. Students will also make a series of brief oral presentations of the readings.

*Due Dates and Late Work:* Assignments must be turned in on the date and hour they are due unless an extension has been arranged in advance. This applies to presentation details and other work submitted online. Without an extension, the grade will be lowered incrementally each day that an essay or formal writing assignment is late. You will be required to make up any missed work. As always, please talk to one of us if a serious family or personal problem arises or if something otherwise unexpected occurs that might interfere with your work.

*Email:* We will exclusively use the email in Canvas. To receive, send, and manage course email, please see the Inbox on the left-hand navigation bar.



*Points of Courtesy:* Please refrain from engaging in disruptive and distracting behaviors during class. This includes using distracting Zoom backgrounds, texting or messaging unnecessarily, and any other actions that may interfere with class discussion and learning.

*Virtual Office Hours:* We will be available throughout the semester for individual conferences about essay revisions and all other matters related to your interest and progress in the course. We invite you to meet with us often, especially as you formulate ideas for your essays. We also invite you to speak with us about written comments on your work. You can think of this process as a kind of debriefing where we together identify points of interest and confusion.

*Students with Special Needs:* Students with special needs who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, (646) 592-4132, rkohn1@yu.edu, during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

*Academic Integrity:* We expect every student in the class to uphold the following principles: “As a student of Yeshiva University, I pledge to undertake my academic work with honor and integrity. I will submit only original work, giving credit to other where appropriate. I will not give or receive unauthorized aid on exams or on any other work that is to be evaluated by the instructor. I will represent myself honestly. I agree to respect the rights and property of others as required of good citizens and to act in accordance with the rules and regulations of the University”

*Written Work:* Each student will write two 4-5 page essays reflecting on the readings. In addition there will be a 10 page research paper which will include an oral presentation. This project can be completed in groups of up to three students. Instructions for all formal written work will be distributed well in advance of the due date.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

The success of this course depends on your thorough preparation for each class. It is vital to the conversation of the classroom that you read *and reread* the day’s assignment. All readings should be completed for the day they are listed and should be read in the order they appear on the syllabus. With the exception of the required readings listed on the syllabus, all texts are available through our Canvas course website or online. You will be notified in advance in the event that secondary readings are added or changed. Please also note any work due outside of our normal T/TH schedule.

### **Thurs., 8/27: Introduction**

Jorge Luis Borges, “Borges and I”; “I, a Jew?” (available at <http://www.amherstlecture.org/perry2007/Borges%20and%20I.pdf>)



Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable," selections (available at <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.125753/page/n299/mode/2up>)

**Tues., 9/1: Classical Origins**

Josephus, *Vita* (<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/autobiog.html>)

**Thurs., 9/3: Classical Origins**

Josephus, *Vita*, cont'd

M. Stanislavski, *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning*, "Introduction" and "Josephus' Life" (C)

**Tues., 9/8: Memory, Text, Conversion**

Augustine, *Confessions*, bks. 1-3

**Thurs., 9/10: Memory, Text, Conversion**

*Confessions*, cont'd, bks. 4-7

**Tues., 9/15: Memory, Text, Conversion**

*Confessions*, cont'd, bks. 8-10

Brown, "Dialogue with God" (C)

**Thurs., 9/17: From Premodern to Modern?**

Mintz, "Writing about Ourselves" (C)

Chajes, "Accounting for the Self" (C)

**Tues., 9/22: Two Twelfth-Century Case Studies**

*A Monk's Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert de Nogent*, selections (C)

**Thurs., 9/24: Two Twelfth-Century Case Studies**

*A Monk's Confession*, cont'd

Kruger, "Medieval Christian (Dis)identifications: Muslims and Jews in Guibert of Nogent" (C)



Rubinstein, *Guibert of Nogent: Portrait of a Medieval Mind*, selections (C)

*Succot Break*

**Tues., 10/13: Two Twelfth-Century Case Studies**

*The Conversion of Herman the Jew* (C)

Schmitt, “Medieval Autobiography” (C)

**Thurs., 10/15: Two Twelfth-Century Case Studies**

*The Conversion of Herman the Jew*, cont’d

critical writing forum (details forthcoming)

**Tues., 10/20: Letters, Wills, and other Egodocuments**

L. B. Schwarz, *Memoirs of My People Through a Thousand Years* (Introduction and 3-42; see, too, selections from the Hebrew originals available on Canvas)

Bar-Levav, “When I was Alive,” 45-60 (C)

**Thurs., 10/22: Letters, Wills, and other Egodocuments**

S.J. Pearce, *The Andalusí Literary and Intellectual Tradition: The Role of Arabic in Judah Ibn Tibbon's Ethical Will*, Chapter 3 and the Appendix (available as an ebook through YUfind:

[https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1481814&site=eds-live&scope=site&authtype=sso&custid=s6086892&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_203](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1481814&site=eds-live&scope=site&authtype=sso&custid=s6086892&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_203))

**Friday, 10/23, 10-12: Visit to the Cloisters**

**Tues., 10/27: Conversion of the Fractured Self**

Shlomo Halevi/Paul of Burgos, Purim Letter (C)

**Thurs., 10/29: Autobiography, Gender, and Mysticism**

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, selections (C)

See images and discussion of manuscript at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-book-of-margery-kempe>



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**Friday, 10/30, Visit to the Hispanic Society of America (time tba)**

**Tues., 11/3: Hispanic Society of America Debrief**  
Critical writing forum

**Thurs., 11/5: Expulsion and Reinvention: The Case of Don Isaac Abrabannel**

Cedric Cohen Skalli, “Abravanel’s Commentary on the Former Prophets: Portraits, Self-Portraits, and Models of Leadership” (C)

**Tues., 11/10: Interiority and the Shaping of the Self**

St. Teresa of Avila (text available at  
<https://www.catholicspiritualdirection.org/lifeofteresa.pdf>; read chapters 1-10)

**Thurs., 11/12: Spiritual Audacity and Religious Creativity**

Luis de Carvajal, aka Joseph Lumbroso

**Tues., 11/17: Spiritual Audacity and Religious Creativity**

Carvajal, cont’d

**Thurs., 11/19: The Life of the Mind**

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/14516>)

**Tues., 11/24: Warts and All: Leon de Modena’s *Hayye Yehuda* and the Crafting of a Renaissance Jewish life**

*The Life of Judah*, Mark R. Cohen, ed. and trans., 75-117

\*Excerpts from the Hebrew original on Canvas

Introductory essays by Marc R. Cohen, Theodore K. Rabb and Howard Edelman, 3- 50

**Tues., 12/1: Modena, Cont’d**

*The Life of Judah*, 117-180

**Thurs., 12/3: Richard Norwood’s *Confessions***

Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fame and Secrecy*, 50-74

The Case of Richard Norwood, from *Grace Abounding*

**Friday, 12/4, Visit to Shearith Israel (time tba)**



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**Tues., 12/8: Protestant Autobiography and the Allegorical Self**

Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, selections

**Thurs., 12/10: Glückel of Hameln**

*The Life of Glückel of Hameln, 1646-1724*, available as an ebook through YUfind  
(<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=343696&site=eds-live&scope=site&authtype=sso&custid=s6086892>)

**Tues., 12/15: Glückel of Hameln, cont'd**

**12/22: Oral Presentations**

**12/28: Research project due, 12:00 noon.**