

About this partnership:

Both the Jewish People and the United States of America are rooted in a quest for greater freedom and human dignity. Inspired by this parallelism, the National Museum of American Jewish History is collaborating with Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and its Rabbis Without Borders program to launch a new initiative, **Sacred Stories: A Living Commentary on the Hebrew Bible and American Jewish History**.

Sacred Stories weaves together Judaism's foundational sacred text, the Torah, with one of the most successful expressions of freedom in human history, the story of Jewish life in America. **Sacred Stories** explores our shared values by linking these two vital and compelling stories through contemporary commentary and 21st century media.

The **Torah** is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Used to refer generally to Jewish wisdom, it also refers specifically to the 5 Books of Moses which makes up the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the Torah text, a **Parsha**, is read on **Shabbat** (Sabbath). The whole Torah is read sequentially over the course of the year. Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and begins on Friday evenings and ends Saturday night. Many Jews observe Shabbat to emulate God's resting on the seventh day of Creation. The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbat holy which Jews do with festive meals, resting, and learning.



The National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.



Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center. Bringing Jewish insights to a wide American audience, Clal makes Jewish wisdom an accessible public resource. A leader in religious pluralism, Clal builds bridges across communities to encourage diversity and openness. Linking Jewish texts and tradition with innovative scholarship, Clal promotes Jewish participation in American civic and spiritual life, reinvigorating communities and enhancing leadership development.

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

BAMIDBAR MAY 11, 2013

A Community of Individuals

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD



Artifact:

Ticket for High Holiday services at Temple Israel, Lawrence, New York, 1951
Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana
Located in the Synagogue gallery on the second floor, in the wall case opposite the films.

A Community of Individuals

Sacred Stories **BAMIDBAR**

On the large wall on the 2nd floor as you cross the atrium there is an astonishing array of photos. Older people and young people, the famous and the unknown, men and women, converts and Jews from birth, people of all races, people of a variety of professions. Already on our journey through the history of American Jews, we are compelled to stop here and take notice. We are reminded that there are real people involved in the narratives of history.

This was not an undefined mass. The community was ordered and in that order it was defined.

It is a visual accounting of a community. The abstract concept of 'a people' is made concrete, and in doing so it is vibrant, challenging, familiar, and engaging. We look at these faces and we know who makes up this community.

There is a similar accounting of tribes in this week's Torah portion, *Bamidbar*. *Bamidbar* means in the desert and this week's portion comes as the people of Israel are wandering through the desert. Wandering can seem aimless and hopeless if one does not stop and notice the community that surrounds us. One might wonder if any individual is of particular import in a large community. The bible lists the names of the tribal leaders and then goes on to detail the members, name by name and by the numbers too. Place also mattered, every person had a name and a tribe, and every tribe was located in relation to the holy center. This was not an undefined mass. The community was ordered and in that order it was defined. This accounting was a reminder of the importance of each individual, that each male (the women were not included) member

mattered. Not only were they seen by God, but they needed to be seen by each other as well.

Heading to High Holiday services in 1951, Mrs. Amelia Loeb of Temple Israel in Lawrence, New York, knew she mattered as well. For the most attended services of the year, the synagogue adhered to the common practice of handing out tickets to assure seating. Unlike their foremothers, Mrs. Amelia Loeb and the other women of the congregation were counted. She was identified by name. Loeb had her own ticket, with her own name, not that of her husband. She was a seat holder, guaranteed a place in the mass gathering. Likely as not, she and other members took the same seat year after year, so that like the tribes of Israel they could identify individuals by location as well as name. Like the other members of the community, she was important as an individual as well as part of the larger group.

Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD. is the Rabbi-in-Residence at Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue), an organization advocating for ethnic and cultural diversity in the global Jewish community. A graduate of Barnard College holding a doctorate from Yale University, Rabbi Ruth is the editor of Tzeh U'llimad: A Blog of Jewish Learning.

ARTIFACT

Ticket for High Holiday services at Temple Israel, Lawrence, New York, 1951
National Museum of American Jewish History
Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana



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