

# Sacred Stories

*A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible*

**VAYEITZEI** NOVEMBER 9, 2013

## ***A Tribute To God***

By Rabbi Rebecca W. Sirbu



**Artifact:**

**Temple Emanu-El, New York  
Harper's Weekly, November 14, 1868**

# A Tribute To God

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## Sacred Stories **VAYEITZEI**

In this week's Torah portion, Vayeitzei, Jacob leaves his parents' home and travels to see his uncle, Laban. On the way, he has a dream in which God appears to him and tells him that one day the land he is laying on will be his and that he will be prosperous, with numerous descendants. Shaken, Jacob awakes from the dream and declares, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God." [Gen 28:17] He sets up a pillar, pours oil on it and names the place, "Bethel" which means the house of God. If God remains with him, he promises to return to this place and make a tithe of a tenth of his possessions in gratitude to God. Thus the concept of a synagogue or a specific place to find God's presence is born.

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Settling in America, Jews established synagogues wherever they lived. Given the influx of Jews to New York, particularly to what would become the Lower East Side of New York it is no surprise that many synagogues were established there. One new synagogue, Temple Emanu El began in 1845 as a gathering of 33 German Jews. The community's originally met in a meeting room and then moved into former churches. Growing quickly with many prominent families, the congregation spent \$800,000, a large sum in 1868, to build what was then the largest synagogue structure in America. The Moorish Revival structure by Leopold Eidlitz can be seen in a page taken from *Harper's Weekly* on the fourth floor.

Building such a large and impressive building was a long way from Jacobs's pillar of rocks. However, it served to show that God's message to Jacob had come true. The ornate building was a symbol to Jews that even here in America God was with them. Their population was growing and becoming quite prosperous. Building their own synagogue building

was a symbol that Jews were becoming an accepted and powerful part of American society. Jews could build impressive worship structures to rival any church, and proudly proclaim their religious identities in this new country.

Temple Emanu El stood out not just for its building and impressive membership roster, but also as a leader in Reform worship. The Classical Reform synagogue prayed in German and later English rather than the traditional Hebrew, introduced instrumental music, mixed seating, and did away with the tradition of men wearing kippot (skullcaps) to pray. Continuing to grow, Temple Emanu El moved to its current residence on East 65th street and Fifth Avenue, building another magnificent structure, in 1929. Emanu El continues to be a leading congregation in the Reform Movement. If he could see it today, the biblical Jacob would be amazed at what God had wrought.

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#### ARTIFACT:

Temple Emanu-El, New York  
*Harper's Weekly*, November 14, 1868  
National Museum of American Jewish History  
Dedicated in memory of Sallie M. Gross by Lyn and George Ross



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### **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.