

# Sacred Stories

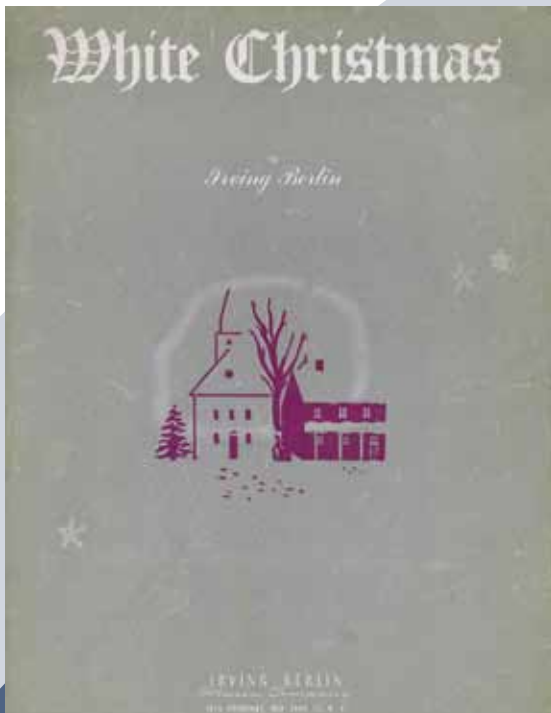
A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

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**SHELACH** JUNE 1, 2013

## *Never See Yourself as a Grasshopper*

By Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard



**Artifact:**

*White Christmas*

Irving Berlin

National Museum of American Jewish History

Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana

Located in the Arts and Culture gallery across from the Rubin Entertainment Theater on the third floor

# Never See Yourself as a Grasshopper

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## Sacred Stories **SHELACH**

As the Israelites were about to invade the Promised Land, Moses sent out spies. He would later say that he did this at the request of the people [Deuteronomy 1:22]. Perhaps this showed a lack of Israelite confidence in God, perhaps it only revealed a lack of self-confidence. In any case, perhaps as a kind of test, God reluctantly agreed to the request. When they returned, the spies told a contradictory story: The land was “flowing with milk and honey” but the well-fortified land also “devours its settlers.”

Panicked, the spies and the people feared failure because, “We saw the Nephilim there – the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.” [Numbers 13:33]

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“Self-confidence is a constructive and realistic attitude that helps us to believe that we will succeed.”

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The spies lacked trust in God but they also lacked self-confidence. Self-confidence is a constructive and realistic attitude that helps us to believe that we will succeed. It is not surprising that ex-slaves would lack self-confidence. Slaves survive dependent on the approval of powerful others who discourage independence. They are taught to feel inadequate and inferior. They avoid taking risks because, doubting themselves, they fear failure. The Israelite enslavement was so powerful that it distorted how the people saw themselves and the world around them.

Over two thousand years later, Jews from Eastern Europe stood at the border of the United States. Imagine the kind of self-confidence it took for a Jewish immigrant, or any immigrant, to build a life in

America. Could such a small, and often disliked, minority really come to play a role in the American economy and culture? Jewish immigrants answered with an optimistic but also realistic “yes.” They refused to see themselves as those who denigrated them saw them. These Jews did not see themselves as grasshoppers.

An immigrant from Russia, Irving Berlin went to work singing in saloons at fourteen. Although his career had the expected ups and downs, Berlin persisted and became perhaps America’s most successful popular song writer. Bing Crosby’s version of Berlin’s song “White Christmas” is, at over 50 million copies, the best-selling single of all time. Imagine that! A Jewish boy from Russia’s song captures the meaning of Christmas for a Christian America! Both parashat Shelach and Irving Berlin’s achievement remind us of a simple message: Emphasize strengths, take risks, and never see yourself as a grasshopper.

*Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard is the Director of Organizational Development at Clal, an ordained Orthodox rabbi, and a practicing clinical and organizational psychologist in New York, holding PhDs in Psychology and Philosophy. Rabbi Blanchard has taught at Washington, Northwestern, and Loyola Universities, as well as the Drisha Institute for Women, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Wexner Heritage Foundation, and Fordham Law School. A guest of both Oprah Winfrey and Pope Benedict XVI, Rabbi Blanchard continues to be an active voice for Clal’s mission of religious pluralism and diversity, as a participant of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding.*

## ARTIFACT

*White Christmas*

Irving Berlin

National Museum of American Jewish History

Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana

Irving Berlin is one of the Museum’s 18 honorees in the *Only In America*® Gallery/Hall of Fame.



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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.