

# Sacred Stories

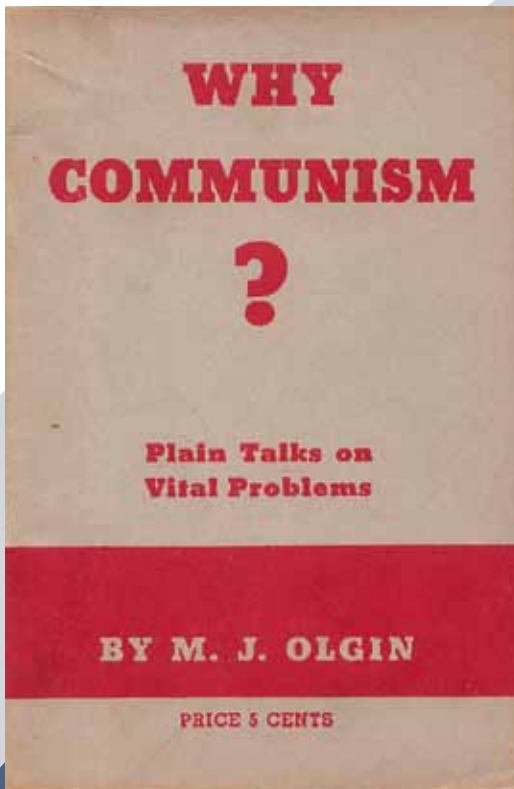
*A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible*

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**KORACH** JUNE 8, 2013

## *Playing With Fire*

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder



**Artifact:**

*Why Communism?*

M. J. Olgin, New York: Workers Library Publishers, ca. 1935

National Museum of American Jewish History

Dedicated in honor of Dr. Bernie Segal's birthday by Lyn and George Ross

# Playing With Fire

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## Sacred Stories **KORACH**

Facing intolerable conditions in Czarist Russia, a large number of Jews involved themselves with the socialist and communist movements that challenged the regime in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fearing persecution, many made their way to the United States where they saw, in the political openness of American society, the possibility of living their convictions without fear.

Political thinkers like Moissaye Joseph Olgin, who in his native Russia was limited to illegal underground activism, were able to act openly, in the U.S. He wrote for local and international papers, founded his own paper *The Morning Freiheit*, and published *Why Communism?* in 1935. He was among a group of Jews who joined, with many others, to found the communist Workers Party of America, a national political party.

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“For American Jews, socialism and communism were also social movements permeating the most mundane aspects of life. ”

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For American Jews, socialism and communism were also social movements permeating the most mundane aspects of life. There were socialist and communist summer camps, mother's groups, and even sports clubs. For many Jews, socialism and communism were part of the fullest expression of American freedom.

But as we see in this week's Torah portion, engaging with a political approach that challenges established power can have disastrous results. A prominent man in his own right, Korach decides to challenge the existing leadership. Some of his reasoning for doing so was quite sound, and yet his effort had the potential to upset the structure of the community. Moses demands that the people distance themselves from this heresy. Korach and his loyal followers pay a high price for their defiance. They are swallowed up by the earth and consumed in fire; their presence and their concerns a mere memory.

The communism and socialism espoused by some in the United States eventually came to be seen as threatening to the fundamental nature of American society. In the 1950s, a generation of Jews, who had assumed political freedom in their new homeland could accommodate their ideological visions, found out otherwise. With the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism, Jews realized the need to distance themselves from ideas and communities that they held dear. Even those who were only peripherally connected to communism – having donated money once or gone to a meeting or two – were in danger of being seen as dangerous to the national structure. To be perceived as communist and labeled as such could mean having your name on a ‘Blacklist.’ Ostracized by the community, it was the equivalent of having a career go up in flames or be swallowed by the earth.



Watching lives torn apart by public denunciations of communism, American Jews learned the limits of political expression. Almost immediately, Jewish engagement with socialism, like Korach’s rebellion, became a mere memory.

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#### ARTIFACTS:

*Why Communism? (Cover)*

M.J. Olgin, New York: Workers Library Publishers, ca. 1935

National Museum of American Jewish History

Dedicated in honor of Dr. Bernie Segal’s birthday by Lyn and George Ross

*Red Channels*

New York: Counterattack: the Newsletter of Facts to Combat Communism, 1950

National Museum of American Jewish History

Dedicated in honor of George Ross by Jane Barr Pino



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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.