

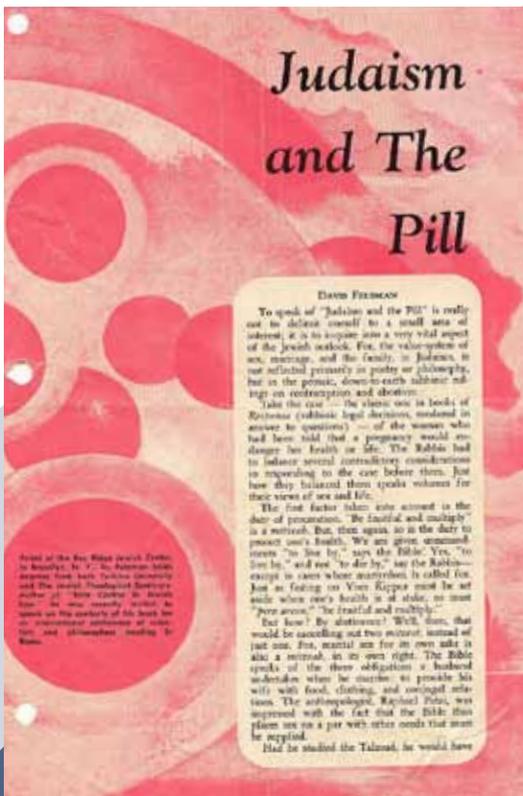
# Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

**TAZRIA** MARCH 28, 2014

## A Jewish Sexual Ethic

By Rabbi Leana Moritt and Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder



Artifact:

Handbill, "Judaism and the Pill"

David Feldman, 1969

Gift of Ethel C. Levenson

Located in the Women's Movement case behind the large film screens in the Freedom Now gallery on the second floor.

# A Jewish Sexual Ethic

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## Sacred Stories **TAZRIA**

It's no accident that strong Jewish voices were at the vanguard of the women's movement. These women (and men) drew on Jewish tradition as they sought modern sexual liberation. Biblical and Jewish ethics embrace sexuality as healthy when appropriately channeled. Unlike some traditions that see celibacy as ideal, coupledness is the natural Jewish state. Roles and responsibilities for both men and women are specifically defined, while honoring both genders in an open and equal manner.

One example is this week's Torah portion *Tazria*. Therein is a discussion of two spiritual states: *tahor*—pure and *tamei*—impure. These states are part of a natural cycle and are achieved through biblically appropriate physical contact, often associated with blood, other bodily fluids, and ritual cleansings in a *mikveh* (ritual bath). They are frequently connected with sexuality and childbirth—this week's portion discusses impurity after childbirth. And while according to the Bible, women are more

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prone towards impurity; these states apply biblically to both men and women alike. Women and men are sexual beings. Women and men have possibilities and limitations.

In 1969, advances in contraception were changing American mores about sexuality, particularly for women. For Jews, innovations such as the pill, were not necessarily bad. Modern rabbis, such as David Feldman, author of "Judaism and the Pill" were able to re-contextualize this new science within the biblical text. Feldman and others followed generations of open rabbinic conversations about sexuality, which saw women in a positive light as sexual beings. The pill, Feldman concluded, was permissible from a Jewish point of view.

Being able to control fertility opened new possibilities for involvement in the workforce. Jewish women had always worked. Religious tradition

saw it as a value; culturally women's work was acceptable. Throughout Europe, Jewish women were taught to read and write. Jewish women ran or co-ran family businesses.

By the 1970s, the majority of American Jews had moved beyond the immigrant experience and integrated American values with their own Jewish values. The legacy of women's work, education, and positive sexuality within the Jewish community meant that Jewish women were poised to be at the forefront of American conversations about women's roles and possibilities. Jewish women like Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone were at the forefront of a movement to embrace equality for women with men and demand change. Behind them, in synagogues, on college campuses, in consciousness-raising mother's groups, were countless Jewish women who were not ashamed to name the oppression of women and expect public discussion of the limitations and possibilities for women.

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#### ARTIFACTS:

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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.