

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

KI TETSE AUGUST 17, 2013

The Power of Small

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD



Artifact:

Tallit katan of Samuel Stein, Poland, ca. 1888

National Museum of American Jewish History

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Sacred Stories **KI TETSE**

This week's Torah portion, Ki Tetse, contains a litany of laws covering a myriad of topics: war, divorce, agriculture, public safety, slavery, sexuality, animal husbandry, memory, and vengeance. Standing on its own in the middle of the portion, sandwiched between these weighty issues is a brief comment, "You shall make tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself." [Deuteronomy 22:12]

“...sometimes all we need are a short verse, a small garment, and tiny knots to remind us of what is important to us and to our communities..”

This terse note on fashion is a cornerstone of Jewish life for many men and women. When praying, adults—historically it was only men, but in recent generations, many women have undertaken this commandment—wrap themselves in a *tallit*, a prayer shawl with fringes tied neatly on the four corners. A smaller version, a *tallit katan*, literally a “small *tallit*” exists too, with similar four corners and knotted fringes. And it is this smaller version, often worn throughout the day, not just during prayers, and the compact verse that inspired it, that stands out among the many laws as the constant reminder of communal connections and personal responsibility. Young boys as well as adult men, wear it between their bodies and their clothing, like a spiritual coat of arms, each knot, symbolic of one of the 613 Jewish laws, laws that help mediate between personal experience and the community.

This particular *tallit katan* belonged to Samuel Stein who was born in Poland in 1886. The ritual fringes are typical of all such garments but the exquisite embroidery sets it apart. Whether it was made for the young Samuel by a relative or purchased for him, the care put into this handiwork added depth and meaning to an already sacred object. A young married man when he came to America, where he worked as a baker in Philadelphia, Samuel chose to bring this child-sized *tallit katan* with him as a reminder not only of his past, but the enduring power of tradition.

Often we look to the big and bold to carry the weight of that which is important. We assume that we must broadcast it as loudly as possible in order to express value. But sometimes all we need are a short verse, a small garment, and tiny knots to remind us of what is important to us and to our communities.

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.

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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.