

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

AUGUST 31, 2013

Ties That Bind

By Rabbi Yonah Berman



Artifact:
Tallit-tefillin bag of Lazar Kushnier, Russia
National Museum of American Jewish History

Stepping Towards Freedom

Sacred Stories **NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH**

Whether it's planning to spend a night away from home, or moving to a new country, what we pack speaks volumes to how we plan to spend our time. Especially for someone moving to a new country, the possessions they decide to take with them—and those they choose not to take with them—reflect their sense of who they are, and the lives they hope to lead in their new homes.

Throughout the era of mass immigration to the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, people brought many items of practical value with them to America. My own grandmother still has a suitcase full of down feathers that she brought with her on a steam ship from Poland in 1938, thinking that they could be used to make a blanket or a coat.

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Immigrants also brought items of sentimental and even spiritual value as well. The bag in the case before you is one example of such an object. Used to hold and transport *Tefillin* (phylacteries)—prayer amulets containing inspiring passages from the Hebrew Bible and worn on the forehead and arm during morning prayers—it represents the portability of traditions observed in Europe and the possibility of celebrating that tradition in America as well. This embroidered velvet bag was made in Russia and given to Lazar Kushnier for his bar mitzvah. Kushnier brought it with him to America and eventually passed it on to his son to use.

In fact, the same grandmother who brought the suitcase full of feathers for practical reasons, also brought along a copy of the biblical Scroll of Esther with her when she emigrated from Poland in 1938. I read from that Scroll each year on the holiday Purim, remembering her and all those who made similar journeys.

In this week's Torah portion, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, Moses is speaking to the Children of Israel as they enter the Land of Israel after 40 years of travel: "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day." [Deuteronomy 19:13-14]

How can one sustain religious observances and customs across multiple generations? In part, by answering the question implicit in Moses' speech: As you leave your previous dwellings behind, what will you bring with you as you establish a new home in a new land? How will you connect that which has come before you, and share it with those who come after you, so that relationships with our heritage and with God remain intact? Like my grandmother, and like Lazar Kushnier, we must continue to preserve our traditions by bringing them with us and sharing them with the next generation.

Rabbi Yonah Berman is the Rabbi of Congregation Kadimah-Toras Moshe, an Orthodox synagogue in Brighton, Massachusetts. A native of Teaneck NJ, Rabbi Berman studied at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel and received his BA in Psychology from Yeshiva University. After graduation, he returned to Israel and served in the IDF in a front-line tank unit, where he was awarded for his performance during training. During his studies at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, Rabbi Berman held internships at CLAL, the Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, and Beth David Congregation in West Hartford, Connecticut.

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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.