

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

SHAVUOT MAY 14, 2013

The Blessing of Assimilation

By Rabbi Irwin Kula



Artifact:

Shoshanah II, tallit for a woman cantor, by Renee Goldin Fischman, 1992

National Museum of American Jewish History

Contemporary Artifacts Purchase Fund

The Blessing of Assimilation

Sacred Stories **SHAVUOT**

The Jewish festival of Shavuot – the Feast of Weeks – celebrates the encounter between God and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai.

As described in the Biblical book of Exodus the newly freed children of Israel receive the Ten Commandments, establish a covenant with God, and become a holy nation – a distinctive, set apart people, committed to live as a model of justice and righteousness. From that moment at Sinai some three thousand years ago the history of the Jews has been a dialectical journey at times engaging and integrating and at other times distancing and separating from the dominant culture in which they lived. How much to take in of the wisdom and truths of the larger culture and how much to protect one's own inheritance and traditions from outside influences and ideas? This balancing act of being members of the larger society while maintaining one's particular identity is no less than the challenge of survival and continuity for any minority in a culture as powerful and compelling as America.

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The beautiful prayer shawl for a female cantor created by Renee Goldin Fischman and the magnificently painted tambourine by Betsy Platkin Teutsch depicting women receiving and celebrating the Torah are quintessential products of this tension. Behind the creation of these two innovative religious works of art, which are used in contemporary worship, are countless arguments, divisive debates, and genuine soul searching within and across myriad Jewish communities.

Historically, males exclusively served as cantors and wore the prayer shawl, and the Torah scroll was the province of men – women were prohibited from even touching the scroll. But in the 20th century as women's rights expanded and feminism was increasingly accepted in the American political and cultural landscape, Jews, like all inheritors of traditional religions, wrestled with whether to embrace these new ideas. Would embracing the "foreign idea" of women's equality betray or advance Judaism? Would permitting women to partake in previously prohibited

rituals dilute or enhance the practice of Judaism? Some Jews worried that assimilating new ideas and practice would undermine Jewish life. But for the majority of American Jews, assimilation offered a means by which traditional Judaism would and could be investing with new strength and meaning.



The unique American experiment of unprecedented religious freedom and pluralism combined with the drive for the new and creative that is so much a part of the American ethos is the ground for a never-ending dance between adapting and resisting that all immigrants and ethnic and religious minorities engage in. Inevitably in this exquisite process there is loss but as these two ritual objects witness there is also the blessing of assimilation.

Rabbi Irwin Kula, the President of Clal, a sought after speaker, and blogger for The Huffington Post and the Washington Post's "On Faith," has been a guest on FoxNews.com, NBC's Today Show, The Oprah Winfrey Show, The O'Reilly Factor (Fox), Frontline (PBS), and PoliticsDaily.com, among others. He is a graduate of Columbia University and received his ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. An eighth-generation rabbi, he has headed congregations in St. Louis, MO; Queens, NY; and Jerusalem, Israel and co-founded the Aitz Hayim Center for Jewish Living in Chicago.

ARTIFACTS

Shoshanah II, tallit for a woman cantor (cover image)

Renee Goldin Fischman, 1992

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Tambourine (interior image)

Betsy Platkin Teutsch

National Museum of American Jewish History

Gift of Betsy Teutsch Studio



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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.