

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

CHUKAT JUNE 15, 2013

Stories and Transitions

By Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu



Artifact:

**Sampler of Rebecca Gratz, Philadelphia
Hebrew Sunday School Society**

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Sacred Stories **CHUKAT**

Every family has stories and traditions that get passed down through the generations. Some families and communities designate days for ritual gatherings, such as an annual Fourth of July picnic at Cousin Sarah's, or a gathering to cheer on Aunt Frances as she runs a marathon. We take great pride in our family traditions, and often adhere to them with enthusiasm and conviction.

But what happens when a disruption occurs? Cousin Sara is in the hospital and can't host the annual picnic. Aunt Frances broke her leg and can't run the marathon. How do we adjust our traditions to meet a new reality?

“[Rebecca Gratz’s] work has ensured the continuity of Jewish identity here in the US.”

When the Israelites left Egypt, they faced a huge disruption in life and traditions, largely due to the simple change in environment and living conditions. They came to depend on Moses and Aaron to lead the way and provide them with new narratives of family and community. In this week's Torah portion, *Chukat*, we learn that ultimately Moses and Aaron will not lead the people into the Promised Land. Again the Israelites are bereft and face a disruption.

In the Bible, continuity of leadership is maintained for the Israelites when God appoints Aaron's son Eleazer as the new High Priest and Joshua as Moses' successor. The Israelites will continue on to the Promised Land of Israel under new leadership, and will live out the history that we still retell today.

Jewish immigrants leaving Europe for America sought ways to continue their traditions despite moving to a new land. Many families educated their children in familial stories and Jewish tradition and language.

Rebecca Gratz (1781-1869) devoted her life to supporting and educating women and children. She helped raise many of her nieces and nephews despite never having children herself. Gratz recognized the need to educate Jewish children in the stories of their ancestors and to teach them basic Hebrew. She founded the first Hebrew Sunday School for which she created curricula and learning materials. Sunday School has become one of the most important vehicles for giving Jewish children a Jewish education in America. Her work has ensured the continuity of Jewish identity here in the US. It is because of Rebecca Gratz that to this day that many Jewish children continue to learn the story of Moses and Aaron.

What stories does your family or community have that you want your children to learn?

Rabbi Rebecca W. Sirbu is the Director of Rabbis Without Borders at Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Vassar College, and holds a masters degree and ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

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Sampler of Rebecca Gratz, Philadelphia
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Rebecca Gratz started this needlepoint sampler and it was completed by her niece.



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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.