

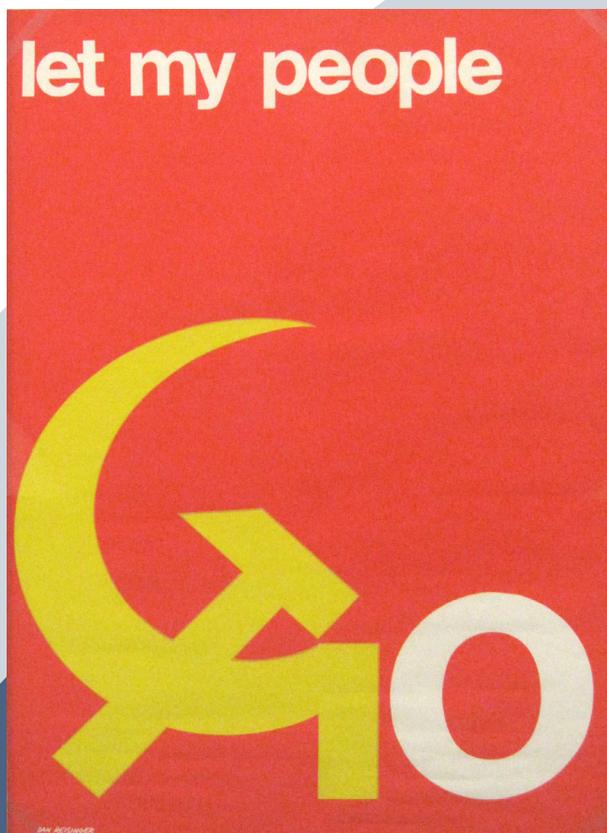
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

PASSOVER MARCH 26, 2013

Let My People Go

By Rabbi Rebecca W. Sirbu



Artifact:

"Let my people go" poster located in the Soviet Jewry case, behind the large film screens, on the 2nd Floor

Let My People Go

Sacred Stories **PASSOVER**

“When Israel was in Egypt’s land: Let my people go... Tell old Pharaoh, Let my people go.”

Many Americans know this song as an African American spiritual, sung by slaves. It is a play on the biblical verses in the Exodus story of the Israelites leaving Egypt. For many American Jews, the song is traditionally sung at the Passover Seder.

“Let my people go” was also a rallying cry for the Soviet Jewry Movement of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. During this period, American Jews organized protests and worked tirelessly to pressure the Soviet Union to allow Jews to leave. The Soviet regime forbade Jews from practicing their religion or customs,

The slogan, “Let my People go!” crosses religious, racial, and socio-economic lines like no other.

and often resorted to persecution and intimidation. What started as a grassroots student movement in 1964 soon took off as a national cause. By the 1970s the National Conference on Soviet Jewry worked to unify the many local and national organizations to better coordinate the Jewish community’s response. Protests and marches were held by Jews in cities across America. The personal stories of *refuseniks* (the name given to Jews who were refused visas to leave) shared at rallies and twinning programs that paired bar and bat mitzvah aged teens with Soviet Jewish teens made the issue personal and real for American Jews.

Many Philadelphians played a prominent role in the movement. Visitors to the core exhibition can see artifacts from individuals like Gwen Goodman, who went on trips to the Soviet Union to

meet with Jews and to learn more about the situation. One such trip inspired Constance and Joseph Smukler to take a leading role in advocating for the release of *refuseniks* by speaking at synagogues and conferences, clandestine travel to the Soviet Union and by meeting with US officials.

The movement peaked on Freedom Sunday in December 1987 when nearly 250,000 people from across the nation gathered on the National Mall to protest on behalf of Soviet Jews. The march coincided with President Reagan’s meeting with the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Within a few years, Gorbachev opened the gates, and hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews immigrated to Israel and America.

Passover, with its theme of freedom is, not surprisingly, the most widely celebrated Jewish holiday in America. Many immigrant groups, including Jews, came to these shores to escape persecution. The slogan, “Let my People go!” crosses religious, racial, and socio-economic lines like no other. What better way to celebrate Passover in America then to continue to advocate on behalf of others, at home and abroad, and continue to speak out in favor of religious freedom.

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.

ARTIFACT

Poster, *Let My People Go*, 1969
Illustrated by Dan Reisinger
National Museum of American Jewish History
Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana

Dan Reisinger (b. 1934) is an Israeli artist and graphic designer. Born in Yugoslavia, he survived the Holocaust hiding with a Serbian family. Reisinger’s *Let My People Go* is one of the first examples of his politically themed work.



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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 expression 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.