

Sacred Stories

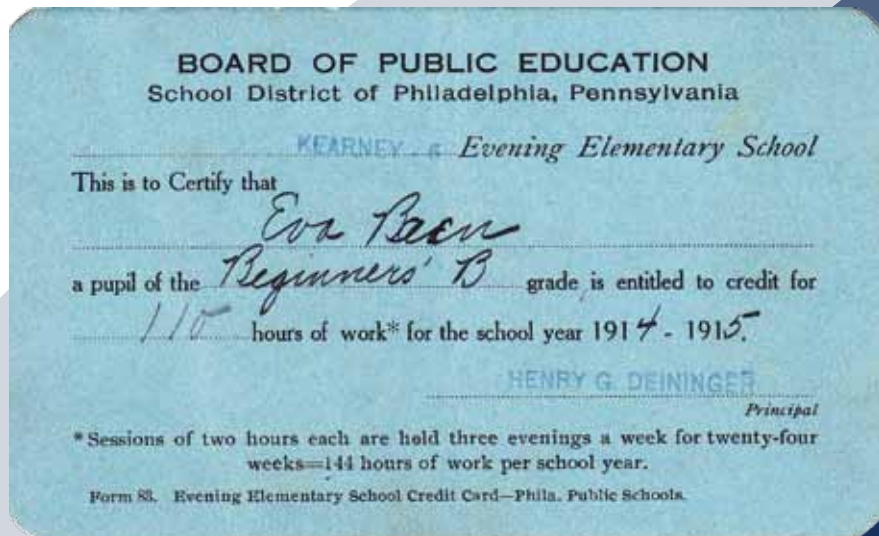
A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI

MAY 4, 2013

Ring in Freedom

By Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard



Artifact:

Attendance card of Eva Baen, Philadelphia, 1914-1915
National Museum of American Jewish History
Gift of Clara K. Braslow in memory of her parents

Ring in Freedom

Sacred Stories **BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI**

The American Liberty Bell bears this inscription: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" [Leviticus 25:10]. The United States stands for human freedom. Liberty means the freedom for each individual to choose how he or she would live life and pursue happiness. The American people have no master besides themselves.

The verse inscribed on the Liberty Bell is found in parshat *Behar*: "...and you shall treat as *kadosh* [hallow/consecrate/set apart] the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim *deror* [release/liberty/freedom] throughout the land for [or 'unto'] all its inhabitants."

Liberation meant a return to personal agency and choice...that would lead to the satisfaction of one's own desires, goals, and purposes.

Every seven years a *shemittah*, or year of rest, for the land was declared; harvested produce was shared and debts forgiven. Every seven cycles came a *Yovel*, a Jubilee, when most land returned to its original owners and all Hebrew slaves, or more accurately, all indentured servants, were released.

A servant/slave has a master. Although Jewish masters were required to treat their indentured servants well, as masters they retained decision-making power. As long as the work itself was not degrading, the servant had to work when, where, and how the master ordered. He was subject to the master's will; he had no significant agency of his own. Liberation meant a return to personal agency and choice, being free to actively make and carry out plans that would lead to the satisfaction of one's own desires, goals, and purposes.

Jewish immigrants to America sought liberation. They sought to be released from the European social and economic constraints created by poverty and prejudice. They looked forward to becoming their own masters. For many, the royal road to liberation was education. It meant

acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to think for oneself, to choose what one really believed was valuable, and to successfully formulate and implement one's own plans.

In 1913 Eva Baen left her parents in Russia and immigrated to America at age seventeen in search of an education. She actively pursued her dream by taking night classes at Kearney and later, Jefferson Evening Elementary Schools in Philadelphia, while working at a shirtwaist factory during the day. Her attendance card from Kearney is one of many she received as she advanced through night school. Eva Baen took the first step towards her own liberation by choosing to leave Russia and, in committing herself to educational pursuits, turned that dream into a reality.

Our verse from parashat *Behar* calls us to create a society in which we regularly reclaim our capacity to be our own masters—to free ourselves from incapacitating fears, illusions and distortions. Eva Baen's card reminds us that education in its widest sense is an important part of that liberation.

Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard is the Director of Organizational Development at Clal, an ordained Orthodox rabbi, and a practicing clinical and organizational psychologist in New York, holding PhDs in Psychology and Philosophy. Rabbi Blanchard has taught at Washington, Northwestern, and Loyola Universities, as well as the Drisha Institute for Women, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Wexner Heritage Foundation, and Fordham Law School. A guest of both Oprah Winfrey and Pope Benedict XVI, Rabbi Blanchard continues to be an active voice for Clal's mission of religious pluralism and diversity, as a participant of the Center for Christian–Jewish Understanding.

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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.