

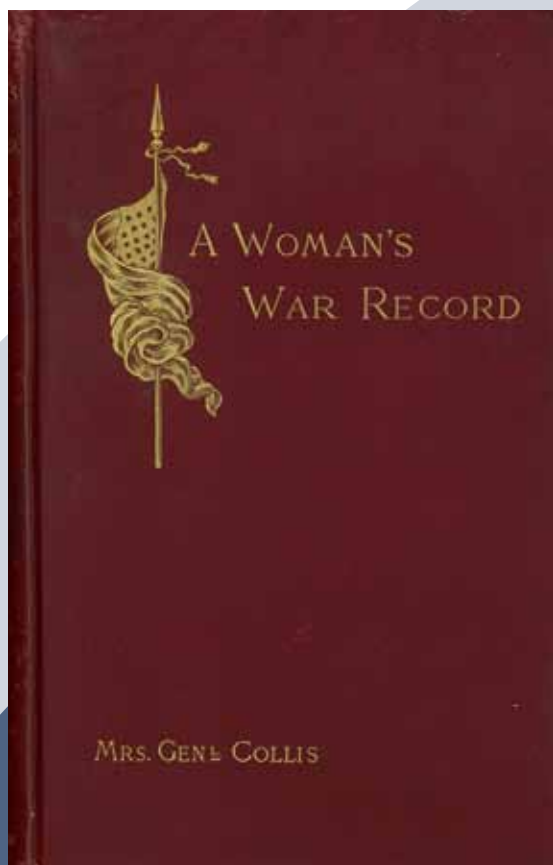
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

TAZRIA-METZORA APRIL 13, 2013

Who's the Patient Here?

By Rabbi Helaine Ettinger



Artifact:

A Woman's War Record, 1861-1865, by Septima Maria Levy Collis, 1897
Located on the fourth floor in the large case in the Civil War gallery

Who's the Patient Here?

Sacred Stories **TAZRIA-METZORA**

Houses, just like people, fall ill according to the Book of Leviticus. This particular chapter includes a story of houses in which “plague breaks out” (Lev 14:43). What kind of strange phenomenon is this? Scientifically, it could be a mold or rot that spreads over the stones and mortar. Jewish commentators through the centuries have seen this “plague” as a sickness of the soul, a metaphor for the spiritual health of those living in it. The 16th century biblical commentator, Rabbi Moshe Alshich interpreted the infection of the house as a warning to society. The infection of stones and mortar were the physical symptoms of the need to redress moral misconduct in society.

“I never fully realized the fratricidal character of the conflict until I lost my idolized brother Dave of the Southern army one day, and was nursing my Northern husband back to life the next.”

—Septima Levy Collis

In the mid-eighteenth century, the United States faced a mortal challenge, a war that threatened to rupture the nation. Throughout the conflict, Abraham Lincoln often referenced the bible in his speeches and writings, using the analogy of an “ailing house” as the basis for one of his most famous speeches:

“‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free.”

– Abraham Lincoln, June 16, 1858

Moral disease, as surely as bodily disease, worsens and spreads throughout a society if left unchecked. Lincoln saw slavery as a sickness in the soul of our nation. He expressed his uneasiness by comparing his beloved country to a house too weak to stand.

In a poignant and personal account, *A Woman's War Record*, Septima M. Levy Collis described the pain of living through the Civil War in

a household that was literally divided. Her book is on display in the Museum's Civil War gallery. Charleston-born Septima Levy, the young bride of Union General Charles H. T. Collis had friends and family fighting on both sides of the conflict. "I never fully realized the fratricidal character of the conflict until I lost my idolized brother Dave of the Southern army one day, and was nursing my Northern husband back

to life the next." She noted both the destruction brought by the war and the first signs of healing. Recalling a time when she and her husband were stationed in Virginia, she noted:



"City Point became one vast hospital for suffering humanity. As far as the eye could reach... the plain was dotted with tents which were rapidly filled with wounded men, Northern and Southern, white and black without distinction."

The scars of the Civil War remained part of American society for generations, and continue to figure prominently in our politics and culture. An ailing society slowly

heals, as Levy Collis wrote, war "cost the lives of many dear ones, but this was the only loss. We are to-day one people – we might have been a dozen." Our biblical ancestors would be pleased to know that we heeded their warning.

Rabbi Helaine Ettinger is a Reform Rabbi serving the Jewish Congregation of Kinnelon in New Jersey. Co-President of the Women's Rabbinic Network she is also a fellow with Rabbis Without Borders and a founding member of the collaborative adult educational program, Rimom.

ARTIFACT

A Woman's War Record, 1861-1865

Septima Maria Levy Collis, New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1897

National Museum of American Jewish History

Dedicated in honor of Lyn and George Ross by Gwen and Alan Goodman



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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.