

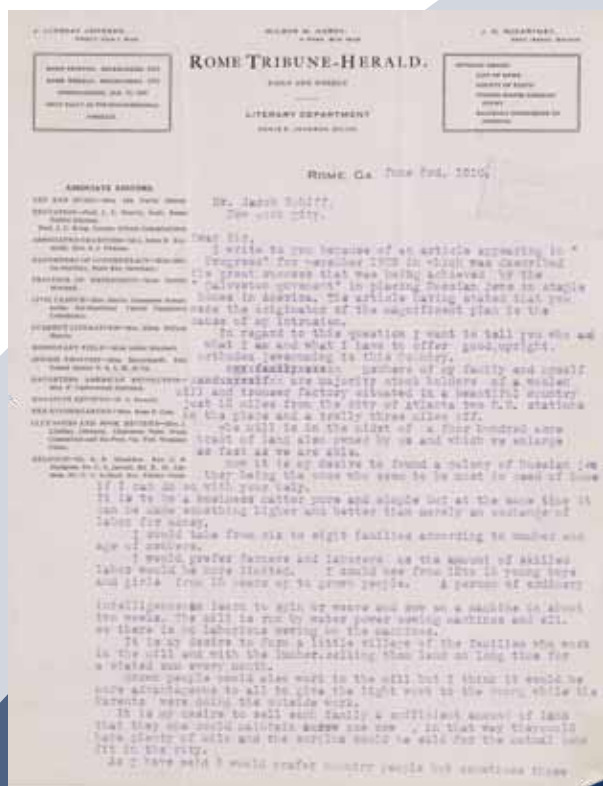
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

BALAK JUNE 22, 2013

Appreciating Others

By Rabbi Brad Hirschfield



Artifact:

Letter from Annie Johnson to Jacob Schiff, Rome, Georgia, 1910
Lent by the American Jewish Historical Society

Appreciating Others

Sacred Stories **BALAK**

What does it mean to appreciate those who are genuinely different from us? This is not about being able to see that some other group, community, or individual is “really like us,” or that “deep down, we are all the same.” I appreciate that, and sometimes it’s even true, but what about when we don’t think it is?

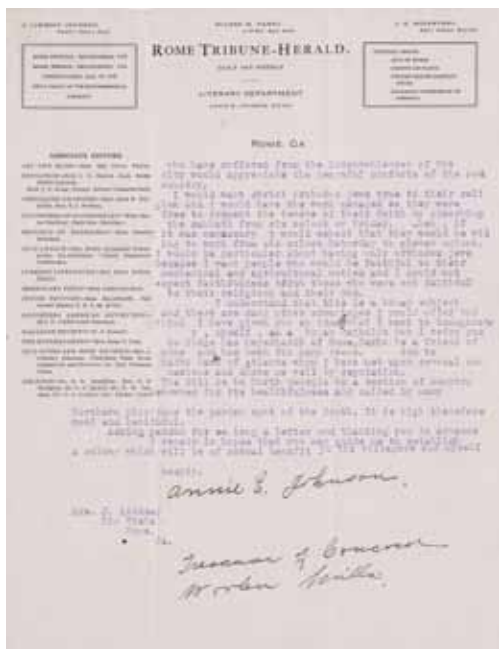
Can we see others as genuinely other while not only appreciating them for who they are, but understanding how their “otherness” can be a resource – even something to be celebrated? In many ways, the ability to get to that understanding represents the best of America, and the promise it has held out for centuries. That is the promise we see being fulfilled in Annie Johnson’s letter to Jacob Schiff.

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Jacob Schiff was the primary financial supporter of the Galveston Immigration Plan, an early twentieth century immigration campaign that aimed to settle incoming Jewish immigrants in areas of the United States other than East Coast cities. The Galveston Plan was named as such because many of the immigrants entered America through Galveston, Texas en route to new western settlements. Ms. Johnson’s request that Schiff expand his “Galveston plan” to include her mills in north Georgia is based on her deep admiration for religiously observant Jews even though she is a practicing Catholic. While in no way suggesting that the religious chasm between her and the workers she sought to resettle on her land would ever be bridged, she valued the faithfulness and integrity of people who would remain so different from her.

Jews were, and would remain, “the other” for Annie Johnson, and yet, they could be appreciated for who they were. That’s a story that the ancient Canaanite prophet, Balaam, would have understood well. Reminiscent of Balaam’s story, Annie Johnson’s actions show us the timelessness of this biblical moral, illuminating it 3,000 years after its first telling.

Called by King Balak to curse the Israelites in chapter 22 of the Book of Numbers, Balaam ends up singing their praises – extolling them as a community whose virtues were visible to all who cared to take note. He exclaims, “How fair are your tents, O Jacob...their kingdom shall be exalted.” (Numbers 24:5-7)



Like Ms. Johnson, Balaam remains an outside admirer – one who has no intention of being Jewish, but can still appreciate the gifts of a community not his own, even as others find such an attitude odd or even threatening.

Both Balaam and Annie Johnson challenge us to see the beauty and value in people who may be different from us, but in their differences remind us of the values to which we aspire and help us build the world in which we hope to live.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld, President of CLAL, has been ranked several years in a row in *Newsweek* as one of America’s “50 Most Influential Rabbis,” and recognized as one of our nation’s top “Preachers & Teachers,” by *Beliefnet.com*.

ARTIFACT

Letter from Annie Johnson to Jacob Schiff, Rome, Georgia, 1910
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(First page shown on cover; second page shown on interior)



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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.