

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

VAYISHLACH NOVEMBER 16, 2013

Blessings for America

By Rabbi Daniel Bar-Nahum



Artifact:

Prayer for the country, Richmond, 1789
National Museum of American Jewish History

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Sacred Stories **VAYISHLACH**

When challenges arise, it is easy to pray for a solution. Journeying towards a meeting with his estranged brother, the biblical Jacob had a nighttime encounter with an angel. Upon besting the angel during a nighttime scuffle, proclaims: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me!" Jacob asks for blessing from the Angel of the Eternal, but he did not get into specific requests or needs. A general blessing was all that was needed.

In 1789, George Washington proclaimed a Day of Thanksgiving. In celebration of this day, faith communities around the new nation held services of Thanksgiving. Jacob Cohen, of the Jewish Community of Richmond, Virginia, composed a "Prayer for the Nation" in Hebrew. In this prayer, Cohen thanks God for the new nation and asks God to bless the nation, the president, and the vice president, as well as the senators and representatives elected to government.

"The song's request for blessing is simple and direct, like the biblical Jacob: 'God, bless America.'"

Almost 130 years later, in the shadow of The Great War, Irving Berlin wrote the words to "God Bless America" as a prayer asking for blessing for America in the form of a song. It was not until 1938, however, and the rise of Hitler in Europe, that Berlin introduced the song to America. The song's request for blessing is simple and direct, like the biblical Jacob: "God, bless America."

The sentiment behind these prayers for the United States is clear: Jews viewed America as their nation and their home. One line of Cohen's prayer reads, "Grant success and blessing upon our country." Berlin describes America as "my home sweet home." Both these prayers evoke a sense of belonging. America is ours. There is no fear of dual loyalty. A nation which was founded in order to give to bigotry no sanction



can truly be a home for all people, particularly Jews who had struggled to find freedom and prosperity in most nations of the world.

The biblical Jacob demanded a blessing for survival, facing a potentially powerful foe. In the midst of struggle, whether it be the founding of the nation or a fight against evil, the Jewish-American response has been to ask for blessings for America, a nation that has itself been a blessing for so many people with so many differences.

Rabbi Daniel Bar-Nahum is head rabbi and director of education at Temple Emanu-El of East Meadow, in East Meadow, N.Y. Born in Israel, he moved to the Chicago area in 1981. He went on to attend Vanderbilt University and was a DeLeT Fellow at Brandeis University. Rabbi Bar-Nahum completed his master's degree via distance learning at Siegal College in Cleveland, OH focusing on Jewish identity formation in middle school students. He was a Judaic studies teacher at the Davis Academy in Atlanta, GA, before earning his ordination and a masters of arts in Hebrew literature at HUC-JIR.

ARTIFACTS:

Cover: Prayer for the country, Richmond, 1789
National Museum of American Jewish History
A gift from ARA Services, Inc., Conservation funds provided by the Robert Saligman Charitable Fund

Interior: *God Bless America* by Irving Berlin, 1939
National Museum of American Jewish History
Gift of George Blumenthal



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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.