

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

MATOT-MASE'EI JULY 6, 2013

Called to Serve

By Rabbi Heidi Hoover



Artifact:

**Uniform jacket of Myer Solis-Cohen
National Museum of American Jewish History
Gift of Kathe Teschner Solis-Cohen Jacoby**

Located in the World War I gallery on the third floor

Called to Serve

Sacred Stories **MATOT-MASE'EI**

In the double Torah portion Matot-Mase'ei—"matot" means "tribes," and "mase'ei" means "marches"—we read about Israelites drafted for military action. For a campaign against the Midianites, "Moses spoke to the people, saying, 'Let men be picked out from among you for a campaign,'" [Num. 31:3]. There is no sense here that the men are volunteers, though there is a sense that any man called will serve.

In the Museum, there is a uniform jacket worn by Philadelphian Myer Solis-Cohen in World War I. A doctor, he was drafted and served as a Captain in a base hospital, a field hospital, and with the 78th Artillery Regiment in France. He was called, and he served. A generation earlier, Myer's father, Jacob Da Silva Solis-Cohen, served as well, as an assistant surgeon in the Union Army and Navy in the Civil War.

"American Jews embrace the universalistic ideals of opportunity and freedom in this country. And they fight for it."

There have historically been questions of Jewish loyalty—will Jews hold themselves separate from the lands in which they live, reserving their allegiance for the Jewish people? Jewish Americans are no more or less war-like than non-Jewish Americans, but they are just as loyal. The example of the Solis-Cohen father and son, like so many other Jews in so many places, shows that Jews, like other citizens, are ready to serve their country when they are needed.

In Matot-Mase'ei, the Israelites called to battle go willingly because they are bound to their nation by tribal affiliation, by shared experience, and by common dreams and goals. American Jews are bound to their country by national affiliation, by shared experience, and by common dreams and goals as well. The difference is that in the United States, the Jews are a tiny minority, while the Israelite nation was, well, mostly Israelites (though not all—the Bible repeatedly speaks of "the foreigner

in your midst” and how that foreigner is to be treated, indicating that there were non-Israelites who lived and traveled with them). American Jews took their prayer books, their Bibles, and their connection to Judaism and marched off to war beside their non-Jewish fellow citizens.

There is a young man who grew up attending my Reform synagogue in Brooklyn, NY. After his bar mitzvah, he found a connection to Judaism through the Hebrew language and volunteering as an assistant in one of our religious school classes. A few months ago, this 19-year-old chose to enlist in the Marines. At the beginning of boot camp, he and his fellow recruits were kept awake for 32 hours, and were given a box of food to eat: a hard-boiled egg and a ham sandwich. He refused to eat the sandwich because of the biblical prohibition on eating pork. He is an American, a Jew, and proud Marine, carrying on the tradition of families like the Solis-Cohens, and of the Israelites in this week’s Torah portion.

American Jews embrace the universal ideals of opportunity and freedom in this country. And they fight for it.

Rabbi Heidi Hoover, of Temple Beth Emeth in Brooklyn, NY, is a proud alumna of the Academy for Jewish Religion and Gratz College; she received smicha (ordination) and her Master’s degree in Jewish Studies in May of 2011. Her undergraduate degree is from Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, PA.

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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.