

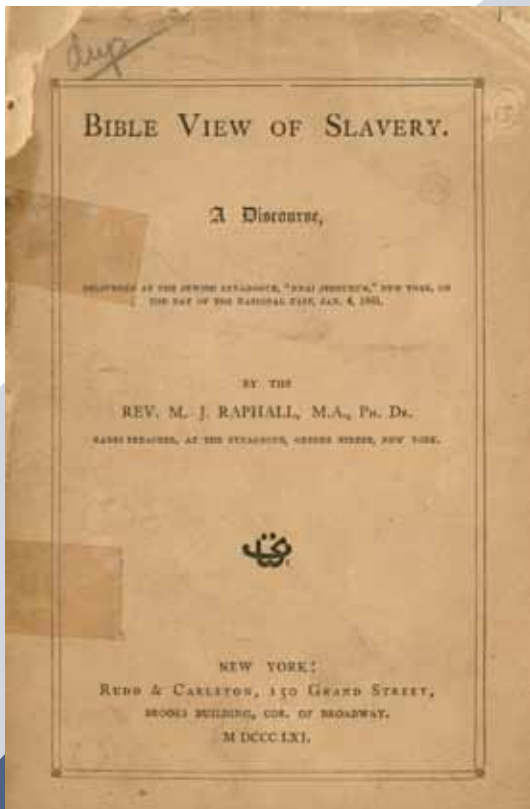
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

MEMORIAL DAY MAY 27, 2013

Choosing to Remember

By Rabbi Irwin Kula



Artifact:

Bible View of Slavery

Reverend M. J. Raphall, New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1861

National Museum of American Jewish History

Choosing to Remember

Sacred Stories **MEMORIAL DAY**

Memorial Day is a day of remembering the men and women who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces. It originated after the American Civil War to commemorate the Union and Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. By the 20th century, Memorial Day had been extended to honor all Americans who have died in all wars.

“Our collective memory is a filtered past, often markedly different from the objective truth of events as they happened.”

Remembering is not a neutral act. As we tell and retell the stories of the past, we as individuals and communities choose what to remember and what to forget. We don't faithfully record the past, rather we reconstruct our past with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – shaping and manipulating the past in order to mold the present. Our collective memory is a filtered past, often markedly different from the objective truth of events as they happened. We tend to forget what we once knew and are embarrassed by, instead remembering how we want to see ourselves. In other words, the past is always more complicated than our community's collective memory, as the significance of our collective memory lies not in the accuracy of the memory but in the meaning we make.

So for example, no contemporary religious or ethnic community would like to remember that some of its members opposed the abolition of slavery. But the power of a serious history museum is to afford people an opportunity to revisit events and see things as they happened. A powerful example of this is the juxtaposition of two Civil War artifacts; a pamphlet titled *Bible View of Slavery*

by Reverend M.J. Raphall and an image of Rabbi David Einhorn. Rabbi Einhorn, an abolitionist, railed against slavery while Rev. Raphall condemned radical abolitionists for dividing the country. As uncomfortable as it may, these artifacts **remind** us that Jews, like their neighbors, were deeply divided about slavery and their religious leaders, like those in all religious communities, used their religions to support and legitimate their positions. These two seemingly simple artifacts – an image and a pamphlet – remind us that while we would like to believe that our religions with their calls for justice and righteousness are always on the right side of history, the truth is more complicated. Religions, like all systems, can help us do good or bad, they can romanticize the past and help us forget what embarrasses us, or can help us confront our past and encourage us to **remember** so that we do not repeat the injustices of the past.

Rabbi Irwin Kula, the President of Clal, a sought after speaker, and blogger for The Huffington Post and the Washington Post's "On Faith," has been a guest on FoxNews.com, NBC's Today Show, The Oprah Winfrey Show, The O'Reilly Factor (Fox), Frontline (PBS), and PoliticsDaily.com, among others. He is a graduate of Columbia University and received his ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. An eighth-generation rabbi, he has headed congregations in St. Louis, MO; Queens, NY; and Jerusalem, Israel and cofounded the Aitz Hayim Center for Jewish Living in Chicago.

ARTIFACT

Bible View of Slavery

Reverend M. J. Raphall, New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1861
National Museum of American Jewish History

Reverend Raphall delivered this sermon in which he explained that the Bible contains no outright proscription against slavery.

As a Blue Star Museum, we offer free admission to up to 5 immediate family members (spouse or children) of active military personnel from Memorial Day through Labor Day.



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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.