

Sacred Stories

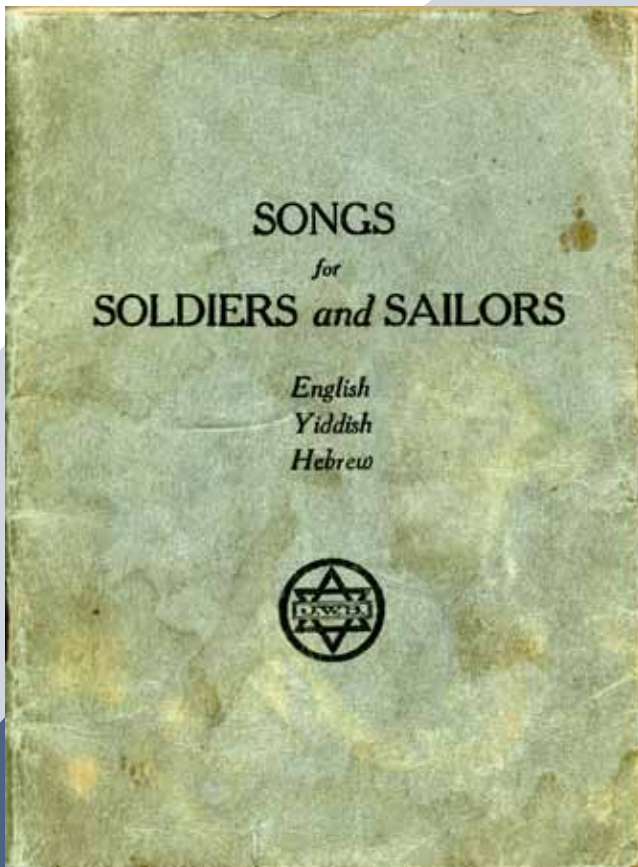
A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

AHAREI MOT-KEDOSHIM

APRIL 20, 2013

Comfort in a Time of Need

By Rabbi Richard Hirsh



Artifact:

**Songs for Soldiers and Sailors, New York: Jewish Welfare Board, 1918
located in the World War I case on the 3rd floor**

Comfort in a Time of Need

Sacred Stories **AHAREI MOT-KEDOSHIM**

How do we memorialize those who have died? How does a culture, a nation, a people create meaning out of loss and sanctification out of sacrifice? When are we served by silence, and when are we moved to speak?

The Torah portion Aharei Mot (“After the death...”) picks up a narrative that began in Leviticus 10 which recounts how the two sons of Aaron, the High Priest and Moses’ brother, perished upon trying to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*, the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the Sanctuary. Though the Sanctuary was a temporary construction while the Israelites’ were in the desert, entrance into this chamber was restricted to only the High Priest once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Upon learning of his sons’ death the Torah tells us only: “and Aaron was silent” [Leviticus 10:3].

As military chaplains...these clergymen were serving soldiers of all faiths and of none...using words to bring comfort and wrest meaning from the brutality of war.

But death and loss, whether individual or communal, more often calls forth speech, not silence. And in the context of war, the words spoken take on a special urgency as well as poignancy.

Throughout the Museum we find reference to rabbis serving as chaplains in the military. Although Jews served in the army beginning with the Revolutionary War, the first Jewish chaplains were commissioned and served during the Civil War. Starting in 1917, the Jewish Welfare Board became responsible for enlisting Jewish chaplains and meeting the religious needs of Jewish soldiers stationed without a chaplain. The JWB published prayer books, Jewish calendars, and song books for soldiers, arranged for kosher food, and organized recreational activities for soldiers stationed at home and abroad.

Rabbinic chaplains brought the comfort of familiar rituals to Jewish soldiers with the words of liturgy and prayer. Sabbath services with candles and familiar melodies, Passover seders with matzah and haggadahs, and High Holiday shofar blowings helped to overcome the inevitable loneliness of holidays spent far from family and home.

As military chaplains are called upon to do, these clergymen were serving soldiers of all faiths and of none – ministering, consoling and praying, using words to bring comfort and wrest meaning from the brutality of war. Chaplains often had the sad task of writing to families to tell them of the death of their loved ones.

The Torah story of the silence of Aaron appears thus to be the exception, not the rule. Death and loss, especially as a consequence of service to the nation, calls for words of memorialization and prayer. Throughout the Museum, we see the stories of chaplains who, like their biblical ancestors, sought to make meaning. The words they spoke sanctified the lives of those whose personal stories are knit together with living in, and sometimes dying for, this new homeland that promised freedom such as Jews had never known.

Rabbi Richard Hirsh is the Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and teaches at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He currently serves as co-chair of the Clergy Task Force on Domestic Violence of JWI (Jewish Women International), on the editorial board of Sh'ma magazine, and on the boards of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, the Religious Leaders Council of Greater Philadelphia, and the National Council of Synagogues.

ARTIFACT

Songs for Soldiers and Sailors
New York: Jewish Welfare Board, 1918
National Museum of American Jewish History

Visit www.nmajh.org to access our blog and to learn more about Jewish soldiers' Passover experiences during World War II.



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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.