

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

TOLDOT NOVEMBER 2, 2013

Departures

By Rabbi Darby Leigh and
Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD



Artifact:

Muffin tin of Eva Baen, Russia

Located in the right-side large case in the Era of Mass Migration gallery on the third floor.

Departures

Sacred Stories **TOLDOT**

Sometimes a simple object can be quite magical. Take Eva Baen's muffin tin. Six strong simple metal cups. Yet, put a little wet batter into these cups, pop them in the oven and in no time you have half a dozen little warm inviting cakes. Clean the tin and the potential for magic returns.

The human story is largely a story of departure and transition. Individuals, whole communities, tribes, villages, and nations are often in transition, leaving their homes in search of greater resources or greater personal safety. The Jewish story, in particular, is often about departure, exile, and journey. Jews are often referred to as a "wandering" people, an entirely accurate description, seen through the broad scope of Jewish stories and history. For example, in this week's Torah portion, Toldot, we read of Isaac journeying from Gerar to Rehoboth to Beer-Sheva and of Jacob journeying to Paddan-aram and on and on.

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Almost every significant period in Jewish history is defined by the Jewish people's transition from one place to another, marked by departures and arrivals. Jews carried their possessions in sacks, satchels, suitcases, and trunks. These carrying cases have themselves become powerful symbols of the journey. As you journey through this museum, see how many carrying sacks, suitcases, or trunks you can find. Notice the saddle bags and peddlers' wagons of the 1800s; the bags in the photo marked 1880–1924; the suitcases piled at the entrance to the exhibition on the 3rd floor; and the suitcases within the galleries, as well as the trunk from the *MS St. Louis*.

In their journeying in Toldot, what did Isaac and Jacob carry with them? What was important enough to pack; what did they leave behind; and how did they decide? The Torah doesn't tell us.

In 1913, when 17 year old Eva Baen left her affluent family home in Russia for the uncertainty of the United States she put this muffin tin into her bag. Why? We can only guess. Baen made a good life in the United States. Working by day, she fulfilled her dream of getting an education in the evenings. She married and together with her husband ran a successful grocery store. She raised children, living to see grandchildren attend college. Her daughter Clara recalled her mother using "tenacity and optimism to get ahead." It seems the muffin tin with its sturdy potential for magic and renewal was the perfect piece for Baen to pack.

A life-long "truth seeker," Rabbi Darby Jared Leigh is a native New Yorker who loves mountains. Rabbi Leigh is a fire-juggling Generation Xer who toured as a leading actor with the Tony award-winning National Theater of the Deaf and has educated others on deafness through his work with organizations such as the New York City Fire Department, the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, and the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. Rabbi Leigh earned his bachelor of arts in religion, summa cum laude, from the University of Rochester—where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa—and a master of arts in religion from Columbia University before attending the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He currently serves as Associate Rabbi at Congregation Bnai Keshet.

Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD is the Rabbi-in-Residence at Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue), an organization advocating for ethnic and cultural diversity in the global Jewish community. A graduate of Barnard College holding a doctorate from Yale University, Rabbi Ruth is the editor of Tzeh U'llimid: A Blog of Jewish Learning.

ARTIFACT:

Muffin tin of Eva Baen, Russia
National Museum of American Jewish History
Gift of Clara K. Braslow



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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.