

# Sacred Stories

*A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible*

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## HANUKKAH

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### *The Quintessential American Jewish Holiday*

By Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD



**Artifact:**

**Manfred Anson (1922-2012), Hanukkah menorah, Statue of Liberty Centennial, cast 2011**

# The Quintessential American Jewish Holiday

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## Sacred Stories **HANUKKAH**

Hanukkah is an ancient Jewish holiday that has truly come into its own in the context of America. The historic victory of the ancient Maccabees and the miracle of oil postdate the biblical era, so while the events were marked through the generations with lighting of lights and eating special foods, it remained a lesser holiday.

Freedom of religious expression in the United States has played a key role in helping Hanukkah flourish in this country. The timing of the holiday is usually close to that of Christmas. In America, Jews felt at home enough to share in a communal season of celebration along side their Christian neighbors. And as businesses increasingly engaged with the Christmas spirit, Hanukkah came along for the ride. In 1955, Barton's Candy Company got in on the holiday magic, issuing a brightly colored menorah promoting tradition and sweets with a beautiful modern take on the traditional candelabra. It was a fun take on a classic ritual object at a time when Jews were looking for ways to make their Judaism part of mainstream culture. While undoubtedly some mourn the consumerification of Hanukkah, offerings such as these allow Jews to participate in the spirit of the season as well as keep the holiday vibrant, current, and American.

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*“Just as the lights of the menorah signal renewal, Lady Liberty, with her torch, represents new opportunities and possibilities for those who come to her shores.”*

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So comfortable were Jews with seeing Hanukkah as a vehicle for participation in the mainstream of American life, that Jews began to expect if not equal time for their holiday, tokens of respect. In 1962, when segregation still dominated in large portions of the country, a young Debbie Katchko of Connecticut wrote to her Saks Fifth Avenue to request that a Hanukkah display be placed along side the beautiful Christmas tree. Growing up in an atmosphere of religious equality, she loved the display but thought Jewish symbols ought to be included as well.

Elements of the Hanukkah story also resonated strongly with the American narrative. Take for example, Manfred Anson's beautiful Lady Liberty Hanukkah menorah. The lighting of the menorah by the ancient Maccabees in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem is hailed in Jewish tradition as the triumph of religious freedom in the face of oppression. A Holocaust survivor from Germany, Anson designed this menorah in honor of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty in 1986. Just as the lights of the menorah signal renewal, Lady Liberty, with



her torch, represents new opportunities and possibilities for those who come to her shores. The Hanukkah story is in many ways, the American story.

Hanukkah has come to epitomize Jewish life in America. Not only does the classical story of the holiday and its rituals resonate with values central to American life,

but its observance as a holiday provides a bridge between the particularism of Jewish life and the general American culture. As you wander through the Museum, consider the many Hanukkah menorahs on display. Each is part of a timeless story, as well as a marker of a particular moment in the American Jewish experience. It is no wonder that Hanukkah is a major holiday for today's American Jews.

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#### ARTIFACTS:

Cover: Manfred Anson (1922-2012), *Hanukkah menorah, Statue of Liberty Centennial*, cast 2011  
National Museum of American Jewish History  
Donated by Dr. Aaron Feingold in honor of Zara Feingold and Rachel Feingold

Interior: Letter, Michael Weinberg to Deborah Katchko, 1962  
National Museum of American Jewish History  
Gift of Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray



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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.