

# Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

**CHAYEI SARAH** OCTOBER 26, 2013

## Honoring the Dead

By Rabbi Helaine Ettinger



Artifact:

Yahrzeit calendar, Pearl and Aaron Zelicovitch, 1934

# Honoring the Dead

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## Sacred Stories CHAYEI SARAH

When people we love die, how do we maintain our connection to them? In Jewish tradition one of the ways we sustain these ties is by marking the anniversary of the death through prayer and ritual. The anniversary is called a *Yahrzeit* from the German *Jahr* – year and *Zeit* – time. The term originated in the late 14th century and although it is Yiddish, a Judeo-German language used by Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, the term is often found in religious texts of Sephardi Jews who trace their ancestors to the Iberian Peninsula. Today on the *Yahrzeit* of immediate family members, many Jews light a special memorial candle that burns for 24 hours in their homes. Additionally they stand with other mourners and recite the special Mourner's *Kaddish* prayer in their honor during daily worship. In private and in public, we remember the people we loved.

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In the 19th and 20th centuries, it became common practice to create a printed *Yahrzeit* calendar on which were written the next 25 or even 50 Gregorian calendar dates that correspond to the annual Hebrew calendar date of death (the two calendars are not identical). These documents were often illustrated with scenes of *Kever Rahel*, the burial site of the matriarch Rachel or other symbols of mourning. Blank calendars were available for purchase and families could customize them not only with the future dates of the *yahrzeit*, but also with photos or other mementos. They were precious reminders of the annual observance in a person's honor. The museum has one such calendar on view. This calendar is hanging on the wall of a large case in a gallery devoted to early 20th century tenement life. The calendar prominently hangs as it would have in the home of the family who owned it. This calendar has been customized to include the *yahrzeits* of the mother and father, Aaron and Pearl Zelicovitch. It includes their Hebrew names and date of death. These calendars are a form of folk art created to honor the dead.

In the ancient world, before the advent of printing presses and mass-produced calendars, the Jews of the Bible fostered the link between one generation and another through family burial caves. In this week's Torah portion, Chayei Sarah, Abraham elaborately negotiates to buy the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite in order to establish a permanent family burial site when his wife Sarah dies. Abraham and many of his descendants are buried there. So important is the ritual of being "gathered to his people," [Genesis 49:33] that their grandson, Jacob, and their great-grandson, Joseph, who both die in Egypt, insist that their bones be carried back to Canaan for burial in the family Cave of Machpelah.

In post-Biblical times, the continuous relocation of the Jewish people made it hard to maintain the custom of a single family burial site, or even to visit the graves of loved ones. Lighting memorial candles, reciting prayers, and creating beautiful *Yahrzeit* calendars enable a migrating people to maintain strong ties of love and remembrance.

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#### ARTIFACT:

Yahrzeit calendar, Pearl and Aaron Zelicovitch, 1934  
National Museum of American Jewish History  
Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana



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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.