

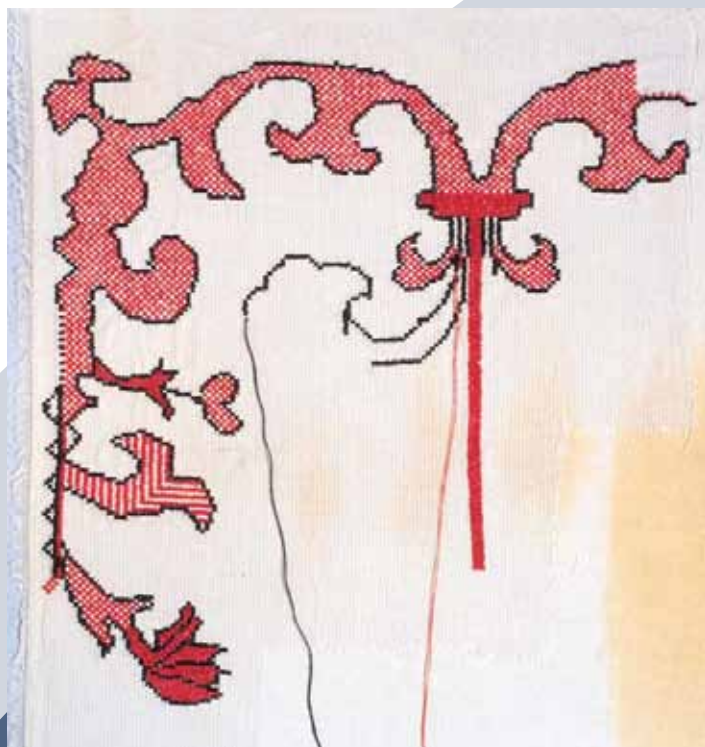
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

YOM KIPPUR SEPTEMBER 14, 2013

Leaving It Half Finished

By Rabbi James Q. Kahn



Artifact:

Table runner stitched by Eva Baen
National Museum of American Jewish History
Gift of Clara K. Braslow in memory of her parents

Leaving It Half Finished

Sacred Stories **YOM KIPPUR**

Ordinary items can often capture great meaning. In 1913, Eva Baen joined more than 2 million primarily Eastern European Jews who came to America between 1880-1924. Unlike some, Eva did not leave a difficult life. On the contrary, her family was financially comfortable, her parents loving, yet she longed for something more.

At the age of 17, Eva left the life she knew in her native Russia on a ship bound for Philadelphia to pursue an education. When she arrived, her uncle took her in and she was also met by her two brothers who had already settled in America. While she knew where she was headed and why, the journey must have been filled both with loss and hope—loss at leaving her parents and home behind, and hope for a better life in America. The runner you see here was born on that voyage; the product of a kit Eva purchased to pass time at sea. Woven amongst its threads is the tale of her journey to a new life.

“On Yom Kippur, we look back at the past and that which is unfinished, broken, or a reminder of loss even as we look forward to the future.”

Eva left the embroidered runner unfinished—mirroring the life she left behind in Russia. She could have returned to it; her talents with needle and thread were well honed during her job stitching blouses at a Philadelphia shirtwaist factory. It would seem that Eva found the runner completed its purpose.

Can you relate? Are there objects in your life that represent challenges faced, dreams realized, or journeys taken? Often, these items find themselves in crowded drawers and mysterious basement boxes. They rest there, patiently waiting to be re-discovered and to remind you of your own life.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, captures a similar tale. According to Rabbinic tradition, the holiday commemorates the day Moses descended Mt. Sinai carrying tablets inscribed with Ten Commandments. But, it was not Moses' first trip down the mountain, nor the first set of tablets inscribed with Ten Commandments. Another set had existed—one now in pieces, smashed in rage when Moses returned from atop Mt. Sinai to find Israel engaged in idolatry, worshipping a Golden Calf.

God forgave the Israelites' act of betrayal, and in doing so, inspired Yom Kippur, a holiday dedicated to the repairing of relationships. Tradition holds that the shards of the broken tablets were kept. They journeyed with the Israelites, eventually finding a home in the Great Temple in Jerusalem, alongside the whole tablets.

The broken pieces symbolized God's hurt and betrayal. Yet, the Israelites treasured them as eternal reminders of what can be overcome. They represented the journey the Israelites took, the physical 40-year wandering through the desert as well as the spiritual and emotional journey from slavery to freedom. Eva went on to have a full life in the United States, but her runner remained a reminder of her voyage and emotions frozen in time. While people grow and change, even forget, objects remain. They yearn to share their story, to spark memories of who we once were, and inspire reflection as to where we wish to be. On Yom Kippur, we look back at the past and that which is unfinished, broken, or a reminder of loss even as we look forward to the future.

Rabbi James Kahn is the Director of Jewish Engagement and Chaplaincy at Jewish Social Services Agency, where with years of experience in the field of Jewish education and engagement, most recently serving as Senior Jewish Educator at University of Maryland Hillel. In addition to his work with Rabbis Without Borders, Rabbi Kahn was one of ten innovative rabbinic-educators hired by Hillel's Schusterman International Center and funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation to rethink the field of informal Jewish education in a college setting. Rabbi Kahn was ordained at Boston's Hebrew College Rabbinical School, where he also earned a master's in Jewish studies. He completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Florida with a bachelor's in religious studies, specializing in comparative mysticism.

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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.