

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

VEYESHEV NOVEMBER 23, 2013

Live Your Own Story

By Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard PhD



Artifact:

Exemption certificate of George Helfand, Russia, 1916

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Sacred Stories **VEYESHEV**

The beginning of a story does not often reveal its end. There are so many contingencies, so many chances to beat the odds or be defeated by them. For Jewish boys living in 20th century Russia, the future could look bleak. You might scrape by or end up in the Czarist or later the Communist army. So you dream of going to America. But there were so many unknowns there as well. Will you succeed in America or end up incapacitated by a work accident?

In this week's Torah portion, Vayeshev, Joseph did not leave a difficult Canaan to try and make it big in Egypt. Quite the opposite, he was a favored son who became a slave. But he was also a slave who became second to Pharaoh. The son of Jacob's old age and of his beloved wife Rachel, Joseph appeared a narcissistic dreamer whose sense of superiority and entitlement only incited his brothers' rage. Rabbinic literature sometimes saw Joseph as an annoying adolescent with exaggerated concerns about his physical beauty expecting to attain great power over others, including his own father and brothers.

“The beginning of a story does not often reveal its end.”

Here too, there were dangers along the way. Your brothers scheme to kill you, you are sold into slavery, your master's wife gets you thrown into prison, and despite your success as a dream interpreter to a powerful court figure you won't be immediately released. And, while the reader knows how Joseph's story will turn out, Joseph does not.

How about the Russian Jewish boy, George Helfand? Would his Jewish identity be changed by attending a modern Hebrew school or a Russian school? Would he be “lucky” and notice the small article that lead to his exemption from Czarist military service? Would he escape Communist conscription as well? His was one story of perhaps, the most successful

Jewish movement in the late nineteenth early twentieth century—immigration to America. Like Joseph, he did not know how the difficult and unsure steps along the way would turn out. For him, as for all of us, the only way to see how the story will turn out was to live it to the end.

Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard is the Director of Organizational Development at Clal, an ordained Orthodox rabbi, and a practicing clinical and organizational psychologist in New York, holding PhDs in Psychology and Philosophy. Rabbi Blanchard has taught at Washington, Northwestern, and Loyola Universities, as well as the Drisha Institute for Women, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Wexner Heritage Foundation, and Fordham Law School. A guest of both Oprah Winfrey and Pope Benedict XVI, Rabbi Blanchard continues to be an active voice for Clal's mission of religious pluralism and diversity, as a participant of the Center for Christian–Jewish Understanding.

ARTIFACT:

Exemption certificate of George Helfand, Russia, 1916
National Museum of American Jewish History
Gift of Trudy and Philon Helfand in loving memory of our parents Ruth and George E. Helfand

George Helfand, knowing his exemptions from army service were only temporary, left Russia with his wife, Ruth, first to Poland and later to America. Upon arrival, Helfand settled in Portland, Maine and eventually moved to Philadelphia.



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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.