

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

VA'YERA OCTOBER 19, 2013

Recognizing Need

By Rabbi James Q. Kahn



Artifact:

Poster, Jewish War Sufferers
Illustrated by Lou Mayer

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"Our Boys FREED Them Won't You FEED Them," asks this 1917 Jewish War Sufferers poster. For Jews of the World War I era, the question may have seemed redundant. They would help... as Jews have done since the days of Abraham, more than 4000 years ago.

The story begins in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. There in this week's Torah portion, Va'yera which translates to "And he saw," we discover Abraham, the world's first Jew, sitting at the opening of his tent.

"[Abraham] was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, 'My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves.'" [Genesis 18: 1-5]

"Abraham's story becomes a teaching on how we respond to the needs of others."

Some Jews consider the Hebrew Bible the blueprint of the world and their guide to living in it. Here, Abraham's story becomes a teaching on how one responds to the needs of others. Abraham ran to greet the strangers despite oppressive desert heat, advanced age, and physical pain. So too would American Jews rush to care for Jewish war sufferers.

The requests arrived quickly. In August 1914, less than a month after the start of WWI, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, cabled New York philanthropist Jacob Schiff requesting \$50,000 be sent to aid Palestine's Jews. The war had cut Palestine off from Europe, leaving communities isolated and at risk of starvation. Within two days of the cable, money was en route. It was only a beginning.

WWI endangered the lives of nearly 1.5 Eastern European Jews. Seemingly overnight, American Jewry erected a sophisticated network of relief organizations bringing unprecedented funds and goods to those in need.

The American Jewish Relief Committee, the Central Committee for the Relief of Jews Suffering through the War, and the People's Relief Committee joined forces to form the Joint Distribution Committee of American Funds for the Relief of Jewish War Sufferers (commonly known as the Joint). In November 1918, WWI ended, but Abraham's legacy lives on as the Joint and other Jewish relief organizations continue to serve Jewish communities in America and around the world.

These stories, spanning 4000 years... united by the same message: recognize need and respond! As Abraham opened his tent to the strangers, early 20th century American Jews opened their wallets and hearts to Jewish war sufferers. It is an ancient narrative brought to life in every generation. It will happen again! How will you respond?

Rabbi James Kahn is the Director of Jewish Engagement and Chaplaincy at Jewish Social Services Agency. He most recently served 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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Poster, Jewish War Sufferers
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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.