

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

ROSH HASHANAH

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Returning to the Land of Your Soul

By Rabbi Michael Ross and Rabbi Brad Hirschfield



Artifact:

**Film, Sinai Temple, Los Angeles, California
National Museum of American Jewish History**

Returning to the Land of Your Soul

Sacred Stories **ROSH HASHANAH**

A fresh start. A second chance. Who doesn't want that? Those are the promises of Rosh Hashanah, and those are the promises that brought most of our ancestors to these shores.

For most of those who came to the United States from Europe in the late 1800's and early 1900's, their travels ended when they arrived on the East Coast, or possibly in the Midwest. But for some, the journey continued to California—slowly at first, and then in increasing numbers over time.

“Whether it was the journey to Los Angeles, the building of synagogues in that city, or Rosh Hashanah itself—all are stories of the human capacity for reinvention and renewal.”

The children of Eastern European immigrants built a Conservative synagogue, Sinai Temple, in 1906. Relocating to its permanent home in Westwood in 1956, the solid grand architecture signaled that this was a community that had “arrived.” These Jews were here to stay, and very much on par with their non-Jewish neighbors who were building their own houses of worship that looked very much like the one you see in the film.

Sinai Temple, along with Wilshire Boulevard Temple, established some decades earlier, were the spiritual homes of many Los Angeles Jews. Many of the most well-known Jewish entertainers, writers, and musicians in Los Angeles were members and found themselves in the pews of those intuitions every Rosh Hashanah.

Just as they and their parents had come to L.A. seeking new lives, lives in which they could re-invent themselves, they came on the High Holidays for its spirit of spiritual reinvention and reconnection.

On Rosh Hashanah, the congregants at Sinai Temple, Wilshire Boulevard Temple, and the many other synagogues that were built and then re-built would gather and hear the *shofar* (ram's horn) blast. Like a spiritual alarm clock,

it woke them to the possibilities of taking the second chances promised to all people by the holiday of *teshuvah*—return.

The Jewish recipe for *teshuvah*, for returning to our best selves, is simple and direct. Feel a measure of remorse for that which has gone wrong, see how we want it to change, commit to making the change, and moving in that direction. The rabbis of the Talmud (compilation of Jewish law) teach that if we take the first steps in each of those directions, God will come the rest of the way to help us.

Whether it was the journey to Los Angeles, the building of synagogues in that city, or Rosh Hashanah itself—all are stories of the human capacity for reinvention and renewal. They are not always simple or short journeys, but they are always there for us to take, if we are at least willing to take the first step, lay the first brick, or really hear the call of the *shofar* which invites us to begin the process.

Rabbi Michael Ross is a Reconstructionist rabbi, educator, and editor living in suburban Philadelphia. He is the Education Director at Am Haskalah in Bethlehem, PA and Hayom in Phoenixville, PA, an independent Jewish learning center dedicated to the study of "Present-Tense Judaism." He leads scholar-in-residence weekends and High Holiday services at Chavurah B'Yachad in Salt Lake City and is a member of the founding cohort of "Rabbis Without Borders." He recently co-edited the children's prayer-book, "Kol HaNo'ar: The Voice of Children."

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, President of CLAL, has been ranked several years in a row in Newsweek as one of America's "50 Most Influential Rabbis," and recognized as one of our nation's top "Preachers & Teachers," by Beliefnet.com.

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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.