

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

B'REISHIT SEPTEMBER 28, 2013

Separate Together:

Can we have both universality and distinctiveness?

By Rabbi Heidi Hoover



Artifact:

Just Married

Charlton Comics, May 1973

National Museum of American Jewish History

Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana

Located in the right side of the large case in the back of the American Mosaic, Jewish Mosaic gallery at the end of the second floor

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Sacred Stories **B'REISHIT**

The story of Adam and Eve is about and for all of humanity, not just Jews. After all, they are not the first Jews but the first humans. Responding to the universality of this part of the creation story, ancient Jewish Sages said, "For this reason man was created alone, for the sake of peace between mankind, so that one man could not say to his fellow: 'My father was greater than yours!' [because they share a common ancestor]," [Mishnah Sanhedrin 37a]. In other words, because all of humanity descends from the first human, Adam, no one can say his or her ancestry is better than anyone else's. All humans are equal in value. Adam and Eve's story is found in this week's Torah portion, B'reishit, the first portion of the first book of the Torah.

"In Jewish history and tradition there has always been tension between universalism—Jewish integration with the surrounding cultures—and particularism—Jews' remaining separate from those around them."

Despite this universal element that seems to say we should all be united, there is also a strong theme of separation in B'reishit as God creates the world. God separates light from darkness, water from water (creating sky above and water below), dry land from water, and one human into two humans, male and female (a rabbinic interpretation says that the first human had two sides, a male side and a female side, and they were simply split to make man and woman).

In Jewish history and tradition there has always been tension between universalism—Jewish integration with the surrounding cultures—and particularism—Jews' remaining separate from those around them. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the concern in the Jewish world about marriage between Jews and non-Jews. While intermarriage has happened throughout Jewish history, the increasing acceptance of Jews in American society in the latter half of the 20th century through today has lowered societal

barriers to intermarriage. While 13 percent of Jews intermarried before 1970, that rate began to rise precipitously in the 1970s, so that today nearly half of all Jews marry a partner who is not Jewish.

An edition of the comic book *Just Married* from 1973, in the Museum's exhibition, tackles the issue with "Too Many In-laws," asking, "Should a Jewish boy and an Irish girl fall in love?" and concluding "love always finds a way!" A mainstream comic that did not focus primarily on Jews, *Just Married* reflects both the increasing visibility of Jews in America and the difficulties families experienced when members intermarried.

Since 1973, the level of acceptance of intermarriage has increased, though among many in Jewish leadership, it remains a great source of anxiety about the Jewish future. One challenge for the Jews of America today is how to balance our universalism and particularism, taking advantage of the wonderful opportunities and inclusion that American society and culture offer us, while also maintaining our distinct tradition and heritage. The tension between assimilation, integration, and separation is an old one, and so far love of Judaism has always found a way, and we are still here. As the Jewish community continues to evolve, may it always be so.

Rabbi Heidi Hoover, of Temple Beth Emeth in Brooklyn, NY, is a proud alumna of the Academy for Jewish Religion and Gratz College; she received smicha (ordination) and her Master's degree in Jewish Studies in May of 2011. Her undergraduate degree is from Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, PA.

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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.