

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

NOAH OCTOBER 5, 2013

Signs of Hope

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder



Artifact:

**Mezuzah, Harry Klinghoffer Fine Carpets, Philadelphia
National Museum of American Jewish History**

The story that gives this week's Torah portion its name, Noah, is one that speaks to a positive vision of the future despite past difficulties. One of the best known narratives in the Bible, it tells of a divine flood that destroyed the whole world. Only Noah, his immediate family, and two of each species of animal were saved. Eventually, the waters receded. Despite his difficult experiences, Noah was not without hope. Immediately, he set up an altar and brought an offering of thanksgiving. He affirmed a covenant with God. Instead of dwelling on the past, he chose to believe that the future would be better.

“Starting a business is a leap of faith—faith and hope in customers who have yet to come.”

In the late 1800s, the poverty and persecution experienced by Jews in Eastern Europe was so pervasive and grinding that many Jews felt compelled to leave. There was a mass migration to the United States. The emotions many immigrants felt upon seeing America on the horizon for the first time surely mirrored Noah's emotions upon receiving an olive branch from the dove he released to find a sign of dry land. Arriving in the New World, each immigrant had to decide whether to look back with dread to the past or forward with hope.

Once arriving in America, some immigrants took to peddling and eventually establishing stores to sell their wares. Starting a business is a leap of faith—faith and hope in customers who have yet to come. It is to believe, that the money invested will be returned and will grow, that the future will be good and sustaining.

Within the streetscape on the third floor, there are many artifacts from Jewish businesses like hangers, pill boxes, postcards, bottles, and more. Particularly notable is the *mezuzah* that hung at the entrance to Klinghoffer's carpet store in South Philly. Inside the casing is a scroll, which like Noah's offering, affirms a relationship with God and looks to the future. The passages written on the scroll contains biblical instructions for marking doors of Jewish dwellings as well verses that speak of God's oneness and of the responsibility to teach children Jewish tradition. Like starting a business, teaching our children shows a belief that there will be a future worthy of investment. Throughout South Philly, Jewish immigrants and their children opened businesses and placed *mezuzot* on doorposts, affirming—in contrast to their historical experience in Eastern Europe—a vision for a positive future in the United States.

Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD is the Rabbi-in-Residence at Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue), an organization advocating for ethnic and cultural diversity in the global Jewish community. A graduate of Barnard College holding a doctorate from Yale University, Rabbi Ruth is the editor of Tzeh U'llimad: A Blog of Jewish Learning.

ARTIFACT:

Mezuzah, Harry Klinghoffer Fine Carpets, Philadelphia
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In loving memory of Harry and Hendella Klinghoffer Bronstein, Joseph and Mary Blumstein Bronstein, Harry and Esther Uram Klinghoffer, from their children and grandchildren.



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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.