

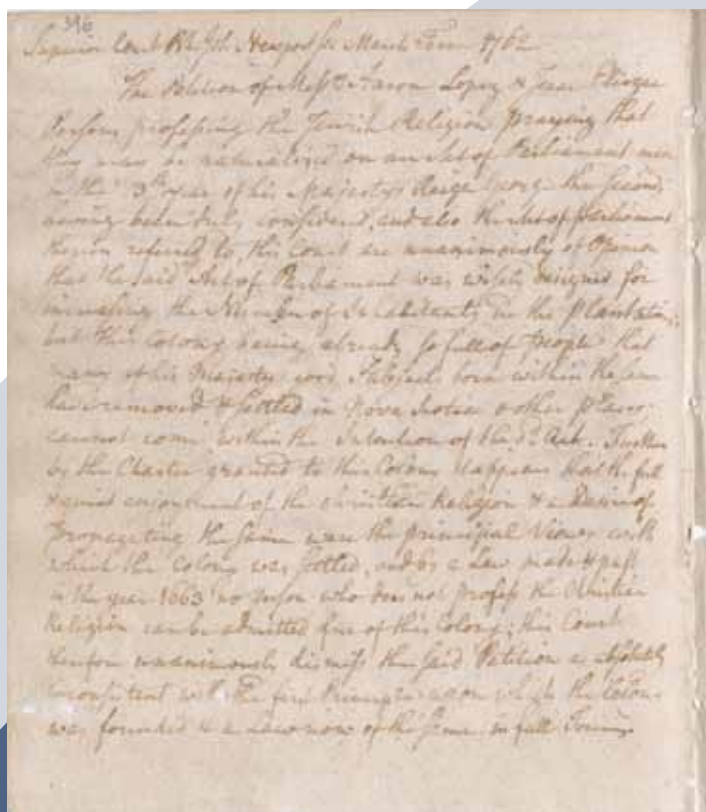
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

KI TAVO AUGUST 24, 2013

Stepping Towards Freedom

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD



Artifact:

Notes of Ezra Stiles, Rhode Island, 1762

Yale University, Beinecke Library, Ezra Stiles papers

Stepping Towards Freedom

Sacred Stories **KI TAVO**

“When you enter the land ... you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land... put it in a basket... The priest shall take the basket from your hand... You shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God: ‘My father was a fugitive Aramean...’” [Deuteronomy 26: 1-5]

“Freedom for all—to be fully oneself—has proven to be a work in progress.”

The Torah portion, *Ki Tavo*, opens with Moses instructing the people of Israel on what to do upon entering the Land of Israel. In addition to giving gifts of thanksgiving to the priest, they are to declare the origins of their faith, beginning with the story of Abraham’s fugitive escape. The abilities to share gifts, tell one’s story without inhibitions, and declare one’s faith are definitive signs freedom.

At the time of Aaron Lopez’s birth in 1731, Judaism was outlawed in his native Portugal. He and his family, like many others, hid their Judaism with fear of death and practiced Catholicism in public. Lopez arrived in Newport, Rhode Island in 1752 and hoped that this new community would allow for the freedoms mentioned in *Ki Tavo*.

But freedom and homecoming are not simply achieved. The British colony of Rhode Island allowed Jewish settlers to practice their religion. Lopez did not have to hide his Judaism, even undergoing circumcision as a declaration of his faith. He thrived as a merchant, soon becoming one of the leading merchants in the colony, shipping rum, sugar, dry goods, lumber, and slaves between North America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. Aaron Lopez petitioned for citizenship in Rhode Island under the British Parliamentary Act of 1740 that allowed Jews living in the colonies to become citizens after seven years of residency. In March 1762 his petition went before the high

priests of his day, the Rhode Island Supreme Court. There, Lopez publically professed the Jewish religion and requested that this place be formally made his home by granting him full rights as a citizen. This request was rejected, but in October of the same year, Lopez applied for and was granted citizenship in Massachusetts. Even as Lopez petitioned for his rights, he continued to trade slaves as part of his growing shipping business. The lawful perpetuation of slavery continued as individual demands of equality turned into larger protests, war, and the eventual establishment of the United States of America.

Arriving in the colonies meant access to more freedom and opportunity for many of the small number of Jews who settled in the years before the Revolution. But the process was not automatic, nor was it universal even after the War of Independence and the ratification of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The Constitution outlawed a religion test for citizens to hold federal office, but individual states could still limit political office to Christians. New Hampshire was the last state to eliminate religious oaths for holding office; only doing so in 1877. Even though the United States was a land of possibility for Jewish immigrants, it still proved imperfect for many. Slavery continued for another century. Women did not gain the right to vote until the 20th century. Civil rights are still large part of the national political conversation. Freedom for all—to be fully oneself—has proven to be a work in progress.

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.

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Ezra Stiles, future president of Yale College and friend of Aaron Lopez, took notes during the Rhode Island Supreme Court's proceedings regarding Lopez's petition for citizenship.



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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.