

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

DEVARIM JULY 13, 2013

The Strength of Comfort, and the Comfort of Strength

By Rabbi Geoffrey A. Mitelman



Artifact:

Pajamas of Helga Weiss, Vienna

National Museum of American Jewish History

Gift of Helga E. Milberg in memory of Rosa and Emil Weiss

The Strength of Comfort, and the Comfort of Strength

Sacred Stories **DEVARIM**

Anyone who strove to immigrate to America saw this country as a place where, through a combination hard work and good luck, their children would have a better life than they themselves had. That was one of the defining aspects of the American Jewish immigration experience, as well—a strong desire for parents to offer greater opportunities to the next generation.

So while Jewish immigration from Europe to America certainly had an element of “push” to it, as Jews escaped pogroms and antisemitism, there was an even stronger “pull” element. Immigrants might not have known what America would be, but they all came to these shores with a vision of courage and faith. Indeed, courage and faith go hand in hand—we don’t know what may come down the road, but our strength of heart is what allows us to build for the future.

“Ultimately, courage comes from a hope that the future will be better than the present.”

Helga Weiss’ parents lived this idea. As conditions in Nazi-occupied Europe worsened, many anxious Jewish parents searched for ways to send their children to safety. In 1939, eight-year-old Helga was one of the 50 lucky Viennese children to obtain visas to America through the assistance of Eleanor and Gilbert Kraus. The American couple had secured the support of the State Department after assuring them that there was a temporary place of residence for the refugees at a summer camp owned by the fraternal organization Brith Shalom, of which the Krauses were prominent members. Helga’s parents, learning of the Kraus’s mission in a Vienna newspaper, brought their child to meet the Krauses and to undergo the examinations to determine if she was mentally and physically able to travel to America. Before sending her to America, her parents bartered with a seamstress to transform one of her mother’s dresses into a set of floral pajamas. It would be a talisman—a reminder of home as she braved a new and unfamiliar world. We can only imagine how scared she must have been to have left her home, her parents and her world behind, and how much courage she must have had in order to overcome those fears to strive to find a better place.

That message is also one that appears in parashat Devarim. Devarim begins the book of Deuteronomy, the book-long recapitulation of the Israelites' journey, and several

times in the portion, God tells the Israelites to have courage. Moses recalls how scared the Israelites were when they heard the reports from the scouts, and how difficult it would be to conquer the land of Canaan. But he reminds them, "I said to you, 'Have no dread or fear of them... where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son...'" [Deuteronomy 1:29-31]



In other words, in order for the Israelites to discover their own courage, they needed some parental reassurance from God. And we can easily hear the resonance in these words in what Helga Weiss' parents might have said to her, "Do not be terrified, and do not be afraid, and know how much we care for you."

Ultimately, courage comes from a hope that the future will be better than the present. And sometimes, to find that strength, we need some gentleness and comfort.

Perhaps something as simple as floral pajamas.

Rabbi Geoffrey A. Mitelman is the Associate Rabbi of Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester, blogger for the Huffington Post, and the creator of the blog "Sinai and Synapses—Judaism and a Closer Look at Human Nature." He was in the initial group to hold the Balfour Brickner Fellowship, a joint program with CLAL and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism aiming to integrate Jewish textual tradition with modern social and political issues. Additionally, he represented Hebrew Union College at the international conference, "Building Towards the Future: Jewish-Christian Relations in Cultural Context."

ARTIFACTS:

Pajamas of Helga Weiss, Vienna (Cover)
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Helga Weiss, 1939
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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.